***Christabel*** is a long narrative ballad by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in two parts. The first part was reputedly written in 1797, and the second in 1800. Coleridge planned three additional parts, but these were never completed. Coleridge prepared for the first two parts to be published in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, but on the advice of William Wordsworth it was left out; the exclusion of the poem, coupled with his inability to finish it, left Coleridge in doubt about his poetical power. It was published in a pamphlet in 1816, alongside *Kubla Khan* and *The Pains of Sleep*.

Coleridge aimed to write *Christabel* using an accentual metrical system, based on the count of only accents: even though the number of syllables in each line can vary from four to twelve, the number of accents per line never deviates from four.

**Synopsis**

"So halfway from her bed she rose,
And on her elbow did recline
to look at the Lady Geraldine."

The story of *Christabel* concerns a central female character of the same name and her encounter with a stranger called Geraldine, who claims to have been abducted from her home by a band of rough men.

Christabel goes into the woods to pray by the large oak tree, where she hears a strange noise. Upon looking behind the tree, she finds Geraldine who says that she had been abducted from her home by men on horseback. Christabel pities her and takes her home with her; supernatural signs (a dog barking, a mysterious flame on a dead fire, Geraldine being unable to cross iron gate, denial of prayer) seem to indicate that all is not well. They spend the night together, but while Geraldine undresses, she shows a terrible but undefined mark: "Behold! her bosom and half her side— / A sight to dream of, not to tell! / And she is to sleep by Christabel" (246–48). Her father, Sir Leoline, becomes enchanted with Geraldine, ordering a grand procession to announce her rescue. The unfinished poem ends here.

**Composition and publication history**

It is unclear when Coleridge began writing the poem which would become *Christabel*. Presumably, he prepared it beginning in 1797.[1] During this time, he had been working on several poems for *Lyrical Ballads*, a book on which he collaborated with William Wordsworth. *Christabel* was not complete in time for the book's 1798 publication, though it did include *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.[2] The first part of the poem was likely completed that year, however.[1] He continued to work on Part II of the poem for the next three years and finished it at Greta Hall in Keswick, where he had moved in 1800. It was also at Keswick that he became addicted to opium.[3] A year later, he added a "Conclusion".[4] The poem is, nevertheless, considered unfinished.[5][6] He later noted that he was distracted by too many possible endings. He wrote, "I should have more nearly realized my ideal [had they been finished], than I would have done in my first attempt."[7][8]

The poem remained unpublished for several years. On his birthday in 1803, he wrote in his notebook that he intended "to finish Christabel" before the end of the year, though he would not meet his goal.[9] The poem was first published in the collection of three poems: *Christabel; Kubla Khan: A Vision; The Pains of Sleep*, by the John Murray Press on 25 May 1816.[10]

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Thematically the poem is one of Coleridge's most cohesive constructs, with the narrative plot more explicit than previous works such as the fragmented Kubla Khan which tend to transcend traditional composure. Indeed, in many respects the consistency of the poem – most apparent from the structural formality and rhythmic rigidity (four accentual beats to every line), when regarded alongside the unyielding mysticism of the account – creates the greatest juxtaposition in the poem. Parenthetically, Coleridge described such mysticism and vagueness in his notes to *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* as "mesmeric" in an attempt to justify his unconventional ideas as being profound in their stark originality.

While some modern critics focus upon lesbian and feminist readings of the poem, another interesting interpretation is the one that explores the demonic presence that underscores much of the action. Geraldine, who initially appears to be an almost mirror image of Christabel, is later revealed as being far more complex, both sexually and morally:

Like one that shuddered, she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:
Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropt to her feet, and in full view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side——[11]

— *lines 248-252*

Prof. Pinaki Roy has offered a revisionary reading of Coleridge's poem in his “*Reinterpreting Geraldine*: Wollstonecraft’s ‘New Woman’?”.[12] He reasons that Coleridge, who was initially deeply influenced by the feminist philosophy and avant-garde lifestyle of Mary Wollstonecraft, might have re-examined the validity and scope of employing Wollstonecraft's proposals in the daily-life of late-18th-century European women.

## Influence

*Christabel* was an influence on Edgar Allan Poe, particularly his poem "The Sleeper" (1831).[13] It has been argued that Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novel *Carmilla* is a homage or adaptation of *Christabel*.[14] Le Fanu's antagonist Carmilla has certain similarities with *Christabel'*s Geraldine; for instance, she cannot cross the threshold of a house, and seems to be stronger at night. Likewise, the heroines of the two works are similar, both Christabel and Laura are the children of deceased mothers currently in the charge of their widowed fathers. Geraldine's presence gives Christabel similar symptoms as Carmilla's does to Laura; both heroines experience troubled sleep and weakness in the morning after spending the night with their guest.

In 2002, US experimental filmmaker James Fotopoulos released a feature-length avant-garde cinematic adaptation of *Christabel*.[15]

The poem is the inspiration for the song "Cristabel", by Texan singer and songwriter Robert Earl Keen, which appeared on his 1984 album *No Kinda Dancer*.

*Christabel* also influenced the song "Beauty of the Beast" from Nightwish's album *Century Child* (2002).