

‘A Sightless Eye’: Synaesthesia and the Unseen in Coleridge’s “Christabel”

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Abstract

The Literary value and significance of synaesthesia and synaesthetic imagination has been variously appraised. In the opinion of Irving Babbitt, “It is a symptom of general confusion of the arts, originally fathered upon the world, with other monstrous progeny, by Rousseauist Romanticism”. (Babbitt 185). Coleridge reaps a richer harvest through the senses than Wordsworth. They (his senses) invest his impression with an extraordinary freshness and splendor and at the same time with a shrewd, minute passion, which reveals his analytical mind. The object of synaesthetic imagination is achieved through analogies, similes and metaphor. In Coleridge, this object is achieved also through a combination of the poet’s heart and intellect. The sensory system developed in Coleridge’s poetry is not uneven like that of Shelley, but like Keats, Coleridge possessed an evenly-developed sensory system. Coleridge’s poetry is rich not only in line, colour, light and shade and sound, but also in images of the intimately physical sensations of taste, touch, smell, temperature and pressure and in images of organic sensations, such as hunger and thirst, the most elementary but the most powerful of sensations. His synaesthesia is both comprehensive and vivid. Synaesthesia and synaesthetic imagination, as It has been attempted to exhibit in this study, was an important ingredient of the Romantic poets, including Coleridge. They wrote of the sensuous aspect of nature. Coleridge, for one, can aptly be called a precursor of Poe and other modern poets who explored this technique further.

Keywords: Imagery; Psychological phenomenon; Poetic technique; Sensory experiences; Synaesthesia.

Introduction

Synaesthetic imagination literally means the intermingling of the senses; it is an imaginative device and it is used by many Romantic poets and symbolists. The name of John Keats is frequently associated with synaesthetic

imagery and expression. This device enables the poets to present their imaginative perceptions and emotions through the medium of senses. A poet can make use of vivid sensory images and expressions. He can slip from one order of sensation to another when it suits his poetic purpose. Strong sensation is reinforced by his unusually powerful faculty of association. With imaginative power, a poet can transform an odor – image into an image of weight or a sound image takes on the added sense of touch.

Synaesthesia has been defined in different ways. “As a literary device Synaesthesia has been used in certain type of poetry of 19th and 20th century especially that of the symbolists and their fore-runners and disciples to present imagery with vividness to express intense and unusual experience. Poe, Rimbaud and Hart Crane used Synaesthesia in their poetry. Rimbaud’s Sonnet of the vowels, expresses the sound of the common vowels in terms of colours, is an excellent example of this device.” (152)

A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue, vowels; some day I shall reveal your birth: A black velvet sworn of flies that over earth Buzz to the foulest stench, abyss of hue Sombre; E frank with smoke and fierce intents, spears of proud glaciers, white kings, blossom – dips..... (Bennet 981)

A.F. Scott describes Synaesthesia as:

The close association of an image perceived by one of the senses with an image perceived by another. The sensory impressions belonging to sight, sound and smell are intimately connected. (Scott 284)

Dr. Johnson once commented on the discovery made by a blind man that scarlet delineated nothing so much as the ‘clangour of a trumpet’. The example which A.F. Scott quotes for synaesthetic imagination is that of Baudelaire’s sonnet *Correspondences*, where he describes certain perfumes, ‘soft as oboes, green as meadows’.

Cuddon and Shipley have also defined synaesthesia in the same manner.

In *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Cuddon comments:

But there was nothing new about synaesthesia except that it had not been theorised over so intensely before or so consciously used. Homer Aeschylus, Horace, Donne, Crashaw, Shelley and dozens

of other poets had used synaesthetic effects. We use them in everyday speech when we talk of a 'cold eye', 'a soft wind', 'a heavy silence', 'a hard voice', a slack look and so forth. (Cuddon 675)

In the late 18th century and in the 19th century, there is much interest in synaesthesia and many attempts to the effects of various acts are made. Edith Sitwell employs the free utilization of this device and marks in *Aubade* :

Jane, Jane

Tall as a crane

The morning light creaks down again. (18)

Here she suggests that the fitful uncertain quality of morning light makes a creaking sound.

The practice of synaesthesia is popular with the Romantic poets also.

Shelley makes use of this phenomenon, also called "Sense Transference" or sense impression and expression. In his poem *The Sensitive Plant*, he says:

And the hyacinth purple, and white and blue, which flung from
its bells a sweet peal a new of music so delicate, soft and intense,
It was felt like an odor within the sense.

The varicolored, bell shaped flowers send out a peal of music which influences the sense as it were the fragrance of the hyacinths. This kind of symbolism can be found, in scattered illustrations, in writing since Homer. As of now expressed, it was particularly exploited by the French symbolists of the middle and later nineteenth century.

In Keats, synaesthesia and sense expression "is a natural concomitant of other qualities of his poetry. His verse is extra ordinarily rich in sense images, and his sense imagery is full and comprehensive". (Fogle 108) Keats has the power to play upon all sorts of pictures of the sensations of the tangible framework- sensations of hearing, touch, temperature, weight, taste, scent, engine sensations, starvation, thirst, desire etc. Keats' verse is additionally wealthy in pictures of the personally physical sensations of touch, temperature, weight, taste, scent and the inside sensations. In *Ode to Nightingale*, he calls for a 'draught of cool wine' -

Tasting of Flora and the country green Dance, and provencal song
and sunburnt mirth.

Tasting that is of sight, color, motion sound and heat. There is a synaesthetic mingling of touch, temperature, odor and sight in this description, of Hyperion's palace door, which is:

Like a rose in vermeil tint and shape,
In fragrance soft and coolness to the eye.
(Hyperion, I, 209-210)

Edgar Allan Poe, who followed Coleridge to some extent, adopted a style through which he made words those are appealing entirely or almost entirely through their sound. In doing so, he expects cutting edge endeavors to concoct a dialect of 'trans-sense'. A striking example of this is in Ulalume. According to Sir Maurice Bowra in *The Romantic Imagination*:

Poe sets the scene in a landscape of his own invention to which he gives names appropriate simply because of their sound. (Bowra 181)

Poe writes in Ulalume:

We accept his words inscribed on a tomb:- And I said, what is written, sweet sister, On the door of this legended tomb?

She replied: *Ulalume-Ulalume-*

Ulalume is the name of some dead person, the name that is presumably intends to reflect upon Poe's sense of loss, human emotions speak through sound. Hart Crane makes a quick mingling of different senses, in the poem C 33 written on Oscar Wilde (C 33-was his prison number)

O Materna; to enrich thy gold head

And wavering shoulders with a new light shed. From penitence must needs bring pain, And with it song of minor, broken strain.

But you who hear the lamp whisper thru night

Can trace pathy tear-wet and forget all blight. (32)

There is 'a gold head', the 'whisper of lamp in the night', the 'paths are tear wet', these are all sensory images.

Taking into account the definitions of synaesthesia, the examples of different poets we may say that Coleridge does not lack this device, though this aspect of his poetry has not attracted many critics. An intellectual study of Coleridge shows that he makes use of synaesthetic imagination and created sense imagery. This aspect of Coleridge's poems can make him stand on a higher pedestal as a Romantic poet, he may come close to Keats in sense imagery, if not equal him, in this respect.

Coleridge makes a frequent use of colours, light, sound, and illumination.

The poetry of Coleridge and Shelley is called well-ventilated poetry. Green Light is favourite with Coleridge. In his poem, *Dejection: An Ode*, we find that green light that lingers in the west is symbolically represented. The snakes in *The Ancient Mariner* move in tracks of shining white, making 'elfish illumination'. Coleridge talks of 'blood red sun', 'charmed water', 'golden fire'. The charmed water is said to burn a still and horrendous red. The life-in-death figure, is a 'garish whore with red lips', 'yellow hair', 'white leprosy skin'; The evil creatures are flamboyant and colorful; The supernatural seraphs are brilliant. The brilliant interplay of light and color speaks about Coleridge's power of poetic imagination to create colorful images involving different senses.

Imagination for Coleridge was a 'co-adjunating faculty', and the 'shaping spirit of poetry' Coleridge mingled images with that synthetic and magical power, his imagination soared so higher that things came before him as images.

Lowes rightly says:

That small red water worms, which leap like fleas and fantastic shapes of slime which look like hats and roses and pumpkin and fountains and skipping exaltations from putrescent matter in graveyards and at sea, would not be regarded by most of us as promising material for poetry. But when they and their like are subjected to the potent alchemy of what Coleridge has called that synthetic and magical power, which blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, then the miracle may happen. (Lowes 89)

Coleridge also felt delighted in the portrayal of light and sound as inter

related phenomenon. According to Beer:

As soon as one looks at Coleridge's poems with this in mind, one is struck by the number of passages where this inter relations seems to be pre-supposed. It seems as though scenes and sounds which delighted him most were those where harmony of sight and the harmony of sound seemed in some way to fuse. (Beer 163)

In Eolian Harp there is a striking example:-

....the one life within us and abroad, which meets all motion and becomes its soul

A light in sound, O sound like power in light Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere.

In Dejection: An Ode, there is a synthesis of many senses. He mentions the joy:-

...flows all that charms or ear or sight, All melodies the Echoes of that voice, All colors a suffusion of that light.

In This Lime Tree Bower motion becomes synonymous with beauty and life and it is the redeeming feature of the gloomy dell, where the reeds:-

Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still Fann'd by the water-fall.

When Burns wrote:-

"O my love's like a red, red rose

Coleridge described the bride in The Ancient Mariner thus:

The bride hath paced into the hall, Red as a rose is she.

Of all Coleridge's poems, assuredly Christabel is the loveliest for the simple charm of inner and outer sweetness, it is unequalled either by The Ancient Mariner or Kubla Khan. Byron called this poem, the wildest and finest I ever heard in that kind of composition. The reading of the first part of Christabel is more an atmospheric acquaintance than the discernment of a poetic unity. This atmosphere is achieved partly through portrayal of the setting, partly by the mystery encompassed by Geraldine.

The poem began in 1997, more or less as a gothic romance within the tale of terror convention:-

It is the middle of night by the castle clock, And the owls have
awakened the crowing cock, Tu-whit-Tu-whoo:

And hark, again the crowing cock

How drowsily it crew. (Christabel 1-5)

The exquisite description of the setting, the atmosphere of moonlight and mystery are dealt with an aptitude and sensitivity in Christabel, which immediately places the poem above the common level of this genre. The poem has a dream-like landscape, into which Christabel is introduced as a 'vulnerable woman' who is typical of the tale of terror.

The visual and auditory imagery starts from the very outset of the poem. There's the hooting sound of owls and the spooky sound of the cock crowing at midnight, with its recommendation of innocence that is deceived. Coleridge was quite fond of introducing bird imagery in his poems. Night birds are found in Christabel and The Ancient Mariner, however with a distinction. Christabel contains dark owls in place of the melodic nightingales of earlier poems; in The Ancient Mariner and The Nightingale, Aeolian imagery supplies the poem's primary mellifluence; while in Tryermaine, the owls stand in for forces that are more difficult to organise. In the midnight hour that was Geraldine's: -

By tairn and rill

The night birds all that hour were still

But now they are jubilant anew,

From Cliff and lower-tu, whoo tu-whoo (306-09)

In the poem innocence and evil mingle with the imagery and are expressed through imagery. Coleridge suggests the innocence of Christabel in the imagery:-

And oft the while she seems to smile

As infants at a sudden light (317-18)

The innocence of Christabel is once again expressed through the imagery.

The lamp with twofold silver chain

Is fastened to an angel's feel (182-83)

Coleridge successfully, intermixed beauty, fear and darkness in Christabel.

We find a sinister hint that evil can come in the guise of beauty and grace:-

I guess, 'twas frightful there to see

A lady so richly clad as she- Beautifully exceedingly! (66-68)

A later notebook entry describing a thunder storm in Sicily in 1804 shows how Coleridge linked beauty with fear and darkness.

Vivid flashes in midday, the Terror without the beauty. –A ghost by day time/Geraldine.

Coleridge's synaesthesia used eye-imagery as a method to achieve the end. In *The Ancient Mariner*, he speaks of the 'glittering eye' and 'bright eyed mariner' in *Christabel*, eyes are compared to small, snake-like eyes. In a moment of dramatic climax, Geraldine kissed by Sir Leoline, and the vitality of Bracy's dream is oblivious to and in jest by the knight, then Geraldine looks at Christabel:-

A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy,

And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head,

Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye...

One moment and the sight was fled (583-85)

Sir Leoline welcomes Geraldine, and she meets his grasp like a lover's drawing out it with euphoric see. Before long the baron's state of mind to her appears less avuncular than charmed- 'His eyes made up of wonder and love', like some young gallant, he addressed her and receptive to the change of attitude, she responds. The emotion and feigned feeling are expressed through eyes:

... in maiden wise

Casting down her large bright eyes

With blushing cheek and courtesy fine (573-75)

H.M. Fogle discusses the closeness of Lamia to serpent like Geraldine. Ac-

cording to him, Keats Lamia invites a comparison with Christabel. Keats wrote:-

The bald-headed philosopher
Had fix'd his eye, without a twinkle or stir
Full on the alarmed beauty of the bride,

Brow-beating her fair form, and troubling her

Sweet pride (Lamia II, 245-48)

H.M. Fogle points out that one may interpret the deathly trance of Lamia as a physical response to a physical property of the eye, so powerful that all self-possession is quelled by it. It is comparable to lines in Christabel:

So deeply has she drunken in that look, those shrunken serpent
eyes, That all her features were resigned To this Sole image in
her mind:

And passively did imitate

That look of dull and treacherous hate: And thus she stood, in
dizzy trance,

still picturing that look askance with farced unconscious sympathy.
(601-609)

The touches in Christabel are made to work indirectly, contrasted with the directness of method employed by poets like Keats. In Christabel it is the element of distortion, not of revelation, which dominates the imagery pertaining to the moon: -

The thin grey cloud is spread on high,

It covers but not hides the sky.

The moon is behind, and at the full;

And yet she looks both small and dull. (16-19)

Charles Tomlinson discussed the moon and clouds of the poem in these words:

Everything hangs in this state of precarious uncertainty of incipient disease. The cloud threatens the sky, but the sky still shows through and to counterpoint this, the moon has achieved its most

fruitful phase yet remains without the bright appearance of a full moon. Coleridge thus reinforces the idea of potentialities in Nature which are never finally to be realized in the story. (Tomlinson 108)

It illumines an advance image of decay, the toothless mastiff. In Christabel's room, not a moon beam enters here; and she incidentally feels secure sufficed.

The colour of the sky isn't blue amid the activity taking place in the poem: it is to mention here that 'the sphere no longer operates upon that of the world below although, covered but not hidden, one can see it'. Its presence undoubtedly inculcates our appreciation of Christabel's growing feelings of helplessness and isolation. In the synaesthetic imagery, the poet creates 'diseased moon' to prepare us for the transition from a condition of 'organic innocence' to one of complete division. Coleridge's Mariner also had the feeling of loneliness and isolation but inhospitably 'kills the bird', while Christabel epitomizes hospitality even offering her bed to her unexpected guest. She has natural qualities, which makes it clear that the forces of nature speak for her good qualities, "Christabel has neighed Kubla Khan's sensuality" says Yarlott, "nor the mariner's spiritual blindness, but seems possessed of every attitude required for joy. " Why should this innocent suffer, as she does?" (Yarlott 1978)

In Christabel, we find a Juxtaposition of loneliness with the image of the one red leaf, the last of its clan:

That dances as often as dance it can

Hanging so light, and hanging so high,

On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky (50-52)

According to J.B. Beer, "The one red last leaf, the last of its clan is a part of a favourite coleridgean image for that mockery of life which is really death" (Beer 128). Isolated as this leaf, Christabel finds the Lady Geraldine, who according to her own story, was abducted by some person, who after a long ride had left her there in the forest.

Different objects of nature like the moon, sun, sky and birds work together having their impact on one another. The cloud debilitates the sky, but the sky still appears through, and, to counter point this, the moon has accomplished its most productive stage, however remains without the shining appearance of a full moon.

It is evident through the snake-imagery that dominates the portrayal of Geraldine, the evil of Geraldine is daemonic evil, Christabel's 'involuntary imitation of Geraldine's snake-like behaviour deceives even her own father.'

Snake-imagery is found in *The Ancient Mariner* too, the redemption of the mariner, takes place through the colour of snakes. *Zapolya* a full-length verse play by Coleridge abounds in this kind of snake and Dove imagery. The soldier who wishes to crush the venomous wind, his adversary, falls flat; the triumph is won by Sarolya, who is having a dove like capacity to identify fiendish, in spite of her claim blameless nature, and Glycine, child of nature, who succeeds in murdering the genuine backstabber and is eulogized at the conclusion of the play as:

Thou sword that leap'd'st forth from a bed of roses: Thou falcon hearted dove.

E.L. Griggs relates the use of snake-image to that of the poetic activity and moreover the lines on Hartley do give a circular motion to the poem, for their subject is the relationship between parent and child which is an important theme in *Christabel* and had been emphasised in the imagery of the conclusion to part I:-

What if her guardian spirit't were,
What if she knew her mother near? (327-28)

In conclusion to part II, again snake appears with its tail in the mouth, critics refer it to the wholeness and shape of poetry. Griggs points out that "the common end of all narrative, nay of all poems, is to convert a series into a whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a straight line, assume to our Understandings, a circular motion- The snake with its tail in its mouth."

In *Christabel*, the Dove and serpent imagery has another function to perform. The movement and sound are also represented through the bird and serpent imagery. Their struggle, in this poem is not violent but gentle, insidious; Christabel is not a hawk or vulture, but dove. The serpent isn't to be pulverized, but charmed by the control of music. Here comes Coleridge, the harmonist, speaking, when a murmuring sound is made:

But Christabel in dizzy trance stumbling on the unsteady ground
shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound. (589-91)

There is a contrast of Dove image with serpent image, presented through

Bracy's dream, describing Christabel's sufferings. It only adds to Sir Leoline's misunderstanding of the position. Bracy's dream is a central statement of the poem's imagery:

--- in my sleep I saw that dove,
That gentle bird, whom thou dost love, And call'st by thy own
daughter's name-
Sir Leoline I saw the same,
Fluttering and uttering fearful moan, Among the green herbs in
the forest alone....
I stooped, me though, the dove to take, When lo, I saw a bright
green snake Coiled around its wings and neck.
Green as the herb on which it couched, And with the dove it
heaves and stirs, Swelling its neck as she swelled hers.

The image of snake struggling with the bird occurs at other places also. It earlier appeared in the description of desolation through which Cain passed. In *The Wanderings of Cain*, he says:

Never morning lark had poised himself over this desert; but the
huge serpent often hissed there beneath the talons of the vulture,
and the vulture screamed, his wings imprisoned within the coils
of the serpent. (289-90)

The obvious difference, of course, is that their struggle in *Christabel* is not violent, but gentle, the serpent, here, is not to be crushed but charmed by the power of music.

Conclusion

The fusion of different senses is one of the characteristics of Coleridge's poetry. Critics may not have given it appellation, Synaesthetic imagery, but it is not even less than that. The Synaesthetic imagination or the creative power of Coleridge to give colourful imagery in his poems is one of the cinderellas of literary criticism, hence this study.

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