

The dangers of innocence: an examination of austen, blake, and coleridge



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The history of literature is arguably a cycle of repetition. It is the nature of the mind to return to subjects of perpetual interest, and to exorcise the eternal concerns of the human condition via artistic labor. The subjects upon which creative invention is founded have remained constant through evolution of temporal change. As a result, the compositions of the giants of the profession mimic each other in topic and tone. The inclination of modern society to neatly categorize has produced epochs by which literary heritages are mapped. These movements include affiliations of authors noted for their similarity. But, as the works of the Romantics scribes Jane Austen, William Blake, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge show, a wealth of variety exists even among these families. All three writers explored innocence during their careers, and each of the consequent works show both a surprising association with their contemporaries and a distinctive individuality. With charming wit, the novels of Jane Austen scrutinize the rigid culture of England in the early nineteenth century. The books sparkle in their realism, the humanly flawed protagonists crafted from elegant prose. *Northanger Abbey* is the oldest testament to Austen's genius, an entertaining freshman effort that blends humor with sagacity. A charting of the maturation of a young woman over the course of a vacation season, the tome is an unforgettable exercise on the universal experience of coming of age. In the optimistic comedy, the narrator follows the adventures of an improbable heroine as she meets the reality of society for the first time. Catherine Moreland, the reader is informed, is completely unexceptional in every respect save for her distasteful proclivity for reading gothic literature. The action is peppered with ironic commentaries that send up the conventions of this sort of writing. The talent for reading texts, however, is only a metaphor

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

for the ability to read people. Both are skills gained through experience, and it is this obtainment of capabilities that will define Catherine's tenure at Bath and at the titular estate. As she departs for the former in the second chapter, the young woman is the epitome of the neophyte: Her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind; her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl; Her person pleasing, and, when in good looks, pretty; and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is. This unfamiliarity with the harshness of nature is shown by an unflappable enthusiasm in the central goodness of others. She resists change, admitting of negativity and flaws only after catalysts. Indeed, the extremity of Miss Moreland's convictions in the virtuousness of her relations verges on parody. She agonizes over the juvenile tantrums of her brother and the Thorpes when she is unable to go on a weekend jaunt because of prior arrangements. So unsure is she of the propriety of her decision that she requires the moral support of Mr. Allen. Similarly, she holds Captain Tilney entirely culpable for a flirtation with Isabella, steadfastly defending Isabella's conduct until the dissolution of her engagement with Catherine's brother. In the part of the novel dedicated to the plot at the Abbey, Catherine persists in her fantasies of murder and suspense until she has offended the object of her affection. The heroine stubbornly preserves her ideals, unwilling to consider actualities other than those she perceives. However, the sum of the climaxes in the later portion of the book proves sufficient to alter the girl's aspect. Once she has become aware of the truths of the people with whom she has spent the last several months and has mastered the art of insight, she is bettered by her cognizance of the cynical potentialities of the humanity. The tale ends

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

optimistically, but biting appraisals are issued of those who have contributed to the progress on which the story is founded. Isabella, no longer the enchanting and vivid personality of previous chapters is degraded to a pejorative appearance: “ She was ashamed of Isabella, and ashamed of having ever loved her.” Catherine formulates a comparable opinion of the Tilney patriarch: “ In suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty.” Although she retains the appealing kindness of her adolescence, the adult Catherine is well prepared for the injustices of life with the ability to see things perfectly. A product of the typical Austen structure, *Northanger Abbey* is distinguished from contemporary works by the verve of its satire and the hopeful conclusion to which it directs its audience. It is the most individual of the three works, though it keenly observes the dangers of innocence and inexperience in much the same way as the poetry of William Blake. In his own lifetime, William Blake’s humble resulted chiefly from his moderate success as a painter. He is the forgotten member of a beloved sestet in modern years. Despite the impact of his contributions to literature, the specter of Blake garners respect but not affection, the unexceptional milestones of his biography paling in comparison to the vibrant legends of his five contemporaries. As the earliest Romantic, the poet endured the limitations of circumstance, contenting himself with private candor as violent change engulfed the kingdom of the British Isles. He was the oldest constituent of a movement associated with youth and boasts none of the marketable glamour of his brotherhood: the grand drama of Byron; Shelley’s fiery rebellion; the rich tragedy of Keats; vague scandal of Coleridge; or even Wordsworth’s inexplicable dissipation.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

His words stand alone, detached from any myths except those that they depict. For the typical complaint against Blake concerns the intimidating complexity of his personalized epics, demanding histories that reward only the diligent, as *The Book of Thel* demonstrates. An unusual parable, *Thel* has been interpreted as a portrayal of the toilsome progression from imagination to invention, as an abstraction of Christian dogma, and as a commentary on the political upheaval that swept across England during the collapse of the Stuart dynasty. Although the diversity of these postulations is intriguing, the text becomes, under close inspection, a daring and original study of the relationship between sex and religion. The poem recounts the attempt of an eponymous heroine (whose name notably comes from the Latin root for “will”) to satisfy her curiosity about the identity of the woman in an ephemeral setting. The search commences in a veritable Eden, the picturesque landscapes of preexistence. The reader learns that *Thel* is one of “the daughters of Mne Seraphim.” Unlike her blissful sisters, “the youngest in paleness sought the secret air.” *Thel*’s wan disposition is not surprising. As a function of the allegory, she is symbolic of the common human experience. Adolescence is often a period of hyperbole, emotions exaggeratedly theatrical. The first soliloquy that *Thel* delivers is a masterpiece of melodrama: O life of this our spring! why fades the lotus of the water? Why fade these children of the spring? born but to smile and fall. Ah! *Thel* is like a watry bow, and like a parting cloud, Like a reflection in a glass. Like shadows in the water. Like dreams of infants. like a smile upon an infant’s face, Like the doves voice, like transient day, like music in the air; Ah! gentle may I lay me down, and gentle rest my head. In this grandness of her melancholia, she recalls the stereotype of the teenage girl indulging her sorrows in *The*

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

Collected Works of Sylvia Plath. Plate I, however, does much more than solidify the representative nature of the background and the characters. The transience of the idyllic meadows that precede birth is underscored, for the irretrievable joy of childhood has already been lost. Thel will be plagued by question until they are answered. Ignorance, once lost, cannot be regained. The opening section also introduces the Lilly of the Valley, one of three entities with whom Thel will converse in her pursuit of truths. In the interview, the angelic youth is unconvinced by the arguments of the flower. The Lilly responds to the aforementioned wonderings of the protagonist, reveling in the responsibility that has been bestowed upon her by God. The flower is of a fragile composition, alluding to the traditional view of the woman the physically diminutive Eve, the cause of original sin. A skeptical Thel proceeds to the Cloud. In a speech identical to that of the Lilly, the Cloud conveys the glory of his surrender to the environment. The self-sacrifice of which he is a part even involves marriage with the dew. Into his body the “ fair eyed” substance evaporates, consumed until released by rain. Thel maintains disdain for the cycle of life, refusing a destiny of servitude only to be requited with a grave full of worms. The Cloud does not hesitate to reply. In a decidedly condescending tone, he echoes the Lilly, emphasizing the gratitude with which Thel should perform her appointed task: Then if thou art the food of worm. O virgin of the skies, How great thy use, how great thy blessing; everything that lives Lives not alone, nor for itself: fear not and I will call The weak work from its lowly bed, and thou shalt hear its voice. The degradation of the femininity is further illustrated by the contrast between the heavenly maiden and the subterranean worm, obviously the embodiment of the connection between nature and death, but

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

a connotation of the phallus as well. The previously apprehensive Thel cannot contain her disbelief when presented with the image of the insect: “Art thou a worm? Image of weakness. Art thou but a worm?” Amazed by the harmlessness of the creature, the heroine reacts with maternal instinct. What was terrifying in concept turns out to be merely needy in safety. Motherhood requires loving confidence, a quality that finds exemplification in the Clod. The Clay accepts the task of fostering the earthworm even though it means her own destruction. She is faithful to her Creator, obsequious and dependent. Her dark bosom reflects the end that will success fertility, but she once again points to the esteem in which such magnanimous acts should be held. In this vision of perfection, mediation in the union of the sexes is impossible. One (ideally the woman) must give completely to the other (ideally the man) for the sustenance of balance and harmony. The female does not die in this subjugation, however, for she fulfills her purpose and never really dies. Humanity is perpetuated, the globe continues to revolve, all because of the proper equilibrium of society. Plate 6 extends this theory, offering a portrait of a lawless chasm in which the battle between male and female threatens to tear apart the cosmos. Thel’s entrance into the pit is an anatomical impossibility, as the insertion of a cylindrical form into a circular void mirrors the physics of intercourse. As she uses the female Clod to her advantage, it can be deduced that she has undergone an alteration of genders and beholds the damnation of the sexual conflicts with a male psyche. Women, manipulative and worldly, wield the weapons of “the poison of a smile,” “an Eye of gifts and graces, show’ing fruits and coined gold,” “a Tongue impress’d with honey.” Confronted with the consequence of her yearnings, Thel ostensibly submits to the status quo, returning to the <https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

docility of the unborn. The actuality, however, is that she is alone, a solitary prophet in a defiled existence. She is separated by her knowledge, and it is consequently unreasonable to think of her conforming to the restrictions of an unattainable Garden. With “Christabel,” an ambitious experiment in form and expression, Samuel Taylor Coleridge presents a vision remarkably similar to Blake’s. The peers are otherwise a dichotomy of features. Critical praise is scarcest for Coleridge among the six major British Romantic poets, but his position in the sphere of public recognition is secure, in large part because of the accessibility of his inimitable style and the flair of an equally distinctive memory. The popularity of “Kubla Khan” and “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is likely incumbent upon their singsong cadence and dazzling emotional impression. “Christabel” is the third and most universal lyric in this sequence of supernaturally themed pieces. On the surface, the stanzas comprise a technically conventional, if slightly bizarre, fairy tale, the occasional strangeness of which can be attributed to the debilitating maturity of its author. Countless readers have denounced the poem incomprehensible, but the ornate facade of the work contains an exploration of spirituality as intricate as any ever endeavored. Submersion into the ethereality of Part I is immediate. From the first mention of her name, the titular maiden is already at the midpoint of the only bodily journey for which the text will provide a primary account. The two verses that precede this datum are devoted entirely to the achievement of propinquity. Distance from the events at hand is impossible, and the reader walks beside the heroine on her nocturnal path. One identifies with her and fears for her safety. That the young woman is almost totally one-dimensional is a non-issue since details are irrelevant in the dreamland of the page. Absent from this beguiling

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

region are the systematized oppositions of the human realm, the vacillation between one extremity and another by which contradictions are formed. All of creation hovers in perpetual transition. “Is the night chilly and dark?” asks the narrator. The answer is, “the night is chilly but not dark,” upon which the ensuing lines elaborate in the same indirect fashion. The moon is full but concealed by a gray cloud, dulled to a compromise between luminescence and blackness. Time is also treated in this manner, for it is said that, “‘Tis a month before the month of May, / And the Spring comes slowly up that way.” April is an appropriate backdrop as the middle month of the season in which life meets death, the lingering frosts delaying the summery warmth of May. The population of this idyllic setting provide additional testimony to Coleridge’s fidelity to the format of the fairy tale. The parallels between Christabel and the maidens of other stories are numerous and unmistakable. She is fundamentally isolated, her mother dead, her father unhelpful, and her lover distant. Personal facts are withheld in the tradition of the generic protagonist, the importance of whom is an effect of a symbolic function. Like the allegorical Thel, the damsel stands for something larger than herself. Motivation is not mentioned; rather, it is the audience who colors the stock inhabitants of the hypothetical wood. Although the witnesses of Christabel’s venture into the forest are explicitly informed of the dreams that she has of late been having, it is they who infer distress from her actions. The alluring reality into which one is led is beyond the normalcy of ordinary earth. Communion with the heavens, however, is fleeting, and it is with this cognizance that this cannot last, that one comes to the most enigmatic figure in a perplexing and innovative effort. Geraldine has bewildered generations of analysts, the consensus of whom has unfortunately been to <https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

cast her in an unflattering light. The least challenging approach to the puzzle is to condemn the fair lady the epitome of evil in a fable about the Fall, but she is, in fact, the antithesis of this, a personification of the kind of benevolence that is neither regular nor pleasant but necessary. Only the risk of this interpretation shows the ballad-like narrative to be the penetrating and bittersweet pronouncement that it is. The sudden appearance of the character is alarming, an unexpected occurrence that troubles the engrossed reader. The narrator suggests that the graveness of imminent circumstances will require divine intervention with his call to Christian deities (" Jesu, Maria, shield her well!"). The implications of Geraldine's presence in the wilderness yield a multitude of sinister possibilities. However, Christabel herself is in the dark forest, and it is inconsistent to permit a practice in one person and think it suspicious in another. The prevailing school of thought discerns in the exclamation to Mary (" Mary mother, save me now!") the automatic reflex of goodness when faced with sin, but if the heroine is invoking the protection of the Virgin because she recognizes moral depravity in the guise of superficial beauty, her subsequent behavior is wholly implausible. That Christabel entertains the stranger's yarn of marauding criminals and assists in her flight indicates that she feels unthreatened by her new acquaintance. Intuition in an adolescent would invalidate the premise upon which the poem is founded, for the untainted purity of youth is frequently represented as naivete in the fictions of the sort that the fragment aspires to be. The oath is an affirmation of faith directed to an angelic countenance. Clothed in " a silken robe of white," with " gems entangled in her hair," the radiant Geraldine is an image of the crowned Madonna at a blessed shrine. Demons are capable of assuming pleasing shapes, but orthodox doctrine maintains that devils do

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

not operate in sanctuaries. Lucifer may tempt the vulnerable from the path of righteousness, but he cannot invade the holiness of altars. The difficulty with which Geraldine crosses the threshold of the castle is thought by some to be an enactment of this law, but there is no evidence to counter her claims of traumatic abduction. The kidnapping, one later discovers, is probably metaphorical, but the displaced lady has indeed suffered the strains of an inconceivably harrowing trek. The role that she embodies remains uncertain, but like all other elements of the work, the solution is visible in the customs of the fairy tale, the frame of which invariably involves an arduous quest. Obstacles delay the fulfillment of an objective, but are ultimately surmounted with providential aid. Although Christabel's task has yet to be disclosed, Geraldine, an otherworldly being, is apparently a beneficent helper. The scene in which the maidens prepare for repose seems to discount this, and the ambiguity of the mysterious refugee is only intensified by the androgyny that characterizes her relationship with the protagonist. For Geraldine is effectively a substitute for the far-away knight, controlling the interaction from beginning to end. When the couple retires, it is she who holds her companion in her arms, like a mother would a child, but also like a paramour would his mistress. However, the masculinity that permeates the marriage does not dominate either party. Geraldine is definitively female, Christabel even more so, but the latter displays stereotypically male aggression by asking the former to share her bed. In both, gender is rendered meaningless, and the conclusion to Part I is pertinent to every individual, for sexual awakening is merely a metaphor for the acquisition of knowledge. The pervasiveness of the information imparted to Christabel through the encounter is revealed in the imagery that initiates <https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

the second half of the poem. The world to which she awakens is a bleak wasteland of death: Each matin bell, the Baron saith, Knells us back to a world of death. These words Sir Leoline first said, When he rose and found his lady dead; These words Sir Leoline will say Many a morn to his dying day! And hence the custom and law began That still at dawn the sacristan, Who duly pulls the heavy bell, Five and forty beads must tell Between each stroke (a warning knell, Which not a soul can choose but hear From Bratha Head to Wyndemere. The dolorous sounds remind the unwilling listener with every stroke of the inescapable doom that generalizes the human experience. The delicate paradise of the previous night is shattered with the specification of cities: “ Langdale Pike and Witche’s Lair, / And Dungeon-ghyll so foully rent.” The whimsical pretensions of the names only magnify the imperfection so blatant in the austerity of the morning. Slowly, the undeniable fact of mortality glares unflinchingly, merciless and permanent. Amidst the banality of this mundane existence, Geraldine’s function is illuminated. With a glittering veneer, the beauty is truly “ a lady of the far countree.” She is a messenger of God, dispatched to afford the favored Christabel a glimpse of Heaven. Geraldine is not being ironic when she tells her charge of the esteem in which she is held by celestial forces: All they who live in the upper sky, Do love you, holy Christabel! And you love them, and for their sake And for the good for me which befel, Even I in my degree will try, Fair maiden, to requite you well. The resident of utopia harbors no malicious intentions, but must complete the mission to which she has been assigned. The homosexual nature of the exchange is demanded thematically, because it is the truth of humanity, and thus self-knowledge, that Geraldine tries to communicate to her student. Christabel has gained

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

the goodwill of the spirits above, and shall be rewarded with the realization of the glory to which mankind can return. The caveat, of course, is that the innocent will also know of the current corruption in which the earth languishes. Geraldine's mark of shame and seal of sorrow symbolize this mortality of the fallen civilization. And it is one of the first conclusions at which Christabel arrives: "Sure I have sinned!" said Christabel. It is this disillusionment from which the biological mother struggles to shield guard her daughter. In terms of the fairy tale, the ghost is the "good" mother who would only protect her offspring. Yet a parent must sometimes betray the trust of their child in their best interests, as the things that behoove the young are not always things that are enjoyable. The "bad stepmother" certainly does not wish harm upon Christabel, and it is with a concerted effort that she steels herself to the burden: Yet Geraldine nor speaks nor stirs; Ah! What a stricken look was hers! Deep from within she seems half-way To lift some weight with sick assay. Geraldine is aware that the benefits of the epiphany outnumber the potential disadvantages. Tragically, however, Christabel succumbs to the harms of the condition. Initially, she is able to differentiate the debased mirages of an ephemeral life from the verities of her Maker, as the mixture of tears and smiles that follow her slumber signify a reconciliation between the contrasting visions. In the poem's final passages, this ability deteriorates, singularizing the heroine in a confusion of muddled sights. As her father greets Geraldine, "a thing divine," Christabel is seized by a terrible agitation, discovering that in the visage of her surrogate mother a serpentine aspect: 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, And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread, At <https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-of-innocence-an-examination-of-austen-blake-and-coleridge/>

Christabel she looked askance! Several moments afterward, Geraldine is restored to “Bright eyes divine.” The dread is the accurate reading of the lady’s look, for she undoubtedly sees the frustration with which Christabel works to resolve the terrestrial and the infinite. The narrator interjects, “She nothing sees-no sight but one!” This assessment is correct, for the maiden, as the alternating views of Geraldine exemplify, projects mortality onto everything that surrounds her. She is consumed by the wretchedness of the decay in which she finds herself, and the depths to which she will tumble as a result of this failure are underscored by her fateful moniker, a compound that becomes “Christ” and “Abel.” Like the men of Scriptures, Christabel is misunderstood by those around her, including her own father. She cannot relate the visions on what she has gazed except in symbolic fashion. The destroyed maiden will share with her namesakes, as well as Thel, the end of solitude and martyrdom. These three works exemplify the consistency of literature and of the human psyche. Although the similarities differ among each comparison, all three represent virtuosic accomplishments on the theme of innocence. They transcend the confines of their respective genres, effecting universal and profound statements.