

Alliance of Literary Societies Event:

*Dipping Your Toes: A Three Minute talk on S.T. Coleridge* by Diana Barsham

Coleridge was a famously long-winded talker so this talk represents a kind of anti-Coleridge, a short cut and deep dive into his literary DNA through a book which represents his collected works in very condensed form. It's called after its title poem, *The Pains of Sleep* and it contains only three poems; the other two are *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*. The poems are linked together by one theme, the idea of fall; especially falling asleep. For those who like reading in bed, it's an insomniac's dream.

All three poems carry the imprint both of Coleridge's psyche and his life story: no biographer can ignore them. Why is this? In the first place they are all rejects, all connected with rejection, rejection especially by the great friend, enemy and collaborator of his life, William Wordsworth. None of them made the cut into *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's rejection of *Christabel*, a poem that gave Dorothy Wordsworth such peculiar pleasure, has been held responsible for Coleridge's descent into mental collapse and unmanageable drug addiction. He lost the self-recuperating power of poetry that, once regained, made his disaster-strewn life such an extraordinary success. The poems had all been written by 1803, but weren't published until 1816. By that time, Coleridge had come off the rails so often there was no way forward. The volume owed its publication - and Coleridge his own salvation - to the *mad, bad and dangerous to know* Lord Byron who gave Col £100 to cover their publication costs. Lord Byron, aristocratic enemy of the Lake Poets, whose name Wordsworth could hardly bear to hear: that's what one might call a turn up for the books!

As any of you who are getting to that dread stage of life known as "downsizing" will know, it usually means getting rid of some of your books. Out will go many of the novels, much of the prose but the poems will stay for poetry at its best possesses that rarest of pleasures, permanence. So why do these three matter? Wordsworth and Coleridge were both deeply concerned with the possibility of what we now call *civilisation erasure*. In Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude*, that over-powering epic of friendship dedicated to Coleridge, he claimed that, if human civilisation was destroyed, as they both feared it might be, two things in particular were needed to bring it to life again: the constitutive ingredients of all human creativity: geometry and poetry. Singing the joy of life, rehousing it anew. *Kubla Khan* is all about such singing and building; just as it is about war and destruction too. The poem is a crossword puzzle of music and sound; down or across it spells out the history of the world. Too much pleasure destroys us.

Where *Kubla Khan*, composed in a dream, is all about the joy of sleep, *The Pains of Sleep* offers us three nights of torment and despair. Falling asleep each night via his ritual of recollecting Christian love, Coleridge is assailed instead by horrific dreams which convey a sense of impotence and *intolerable wrong; of desire with loathing strangely mixed/ On wild and hateful objects fixed*.

But it is in *Christabel* that Coleridge really gets to grips with his subject. A gothic castle; a sick old man; his lovely daughter unable to sleep and wandering the woods at night to pray for her lover who's away at the crusades. Kneeling at the foot of a giant oak tree, her prayer receives an unexpected answer. Strange moaning from the other side reveals a beautiful stranger in deep distress, the damaged victim of abduction and possible gang rape, pleading for help. Christabel smuggles Geraldine back into her father's castle, gives her wild flower wine to drink and spends the night wrapt in her arms. But there is something very strange indeed about Geraldine, something repellent only revealed as she undresses in the moonlight; a weird deformity which, as Christabel falls asleep, takes possession of her spirit.

This book went through three editions in a trice; its publication was transformative! The homeless and broken Coleridge sought help for his opium addiction at last. In the attic room of Dr. Gilman's house he spend the last nineteen years of his life, quickly becoming recognised as the great Wisdom figure of his age. But the poem *Christabel* remained unfinished. It tells of how - easily, without even realising it, we can invite into our lives, something both appealing and appalling, something addictive we can't control. Geraldine's is an artificial intelligence. And it is ours, to write the end of the story.

