The Exegesis on the Soul (NHC II,6) is a short account of the Gnostic myth of Psyche, from her fall into a body and the world to her return to her heavenly father's place. Hence two main themes developed in this tractate are prostitution (πορνεία) and repentance (μετάνοια). Prostitution portrays the earthly life of the Soul—once virgin and androgynous in her Father's house—running from one lover to another. Treated as a whore, she becomes their sexual slave, then she is left alone. The only gift she gets from them is their polluted seed by which she gives birth to unhealthy children. The time of πορνεία is characterized by deception, illusion and loneliness.

Then comes, little by little, the time when the Soul begins to perceive her condition of captivity: this self-awareness opens to her the way to repentance. In a poignant way she asks help from her Father, and he has mercy. His response consists in turning inward her womb—which was turned outward as male genitalia because of her prostitution—and in sending her a bridegroom, the Spirit, the first-born of the Father's house. Renewed and purified as a beautiful bride, the Soul adorns spiritually herself in the νυμφῶν, waiting for her fiancé. When this one enters the bridal chamber and decorates it, they love each other passionately and give birth to good and healthy children. At the end, the Soul regenerates herself and returns—virgin again, as she was in the beginning—to her first dwelling.

The story of the Soul—which clearly recalls the features of the Valentinian myth of Sophia—is counted in attractive and novelistic adaptation, which has some common features with Hellenistic romance literature. In these pagan writings we can distinguish the myth of Psyche under the veil of the tragic adventures of two fiancés and of the dangers encountered most often by the bride in the hands of wicked brigands. However the author of ExSoul has been very much influenced by Jewish stories of female sinners,
like Rahab, Tamar, Ruth or Bathsheba. All these women symbolize the soul going from prostitution to virginity through repentance, so that they may gain salvation.

Moreover, a series of biblical quotations from Old and New Testament as well as two references to *Odyssey* are cleverly inserted in the narrative with the aim to illustrate the itinerary of the Soul. Some are grouped together, pointing out the three moments of her existence: prostitution, repentance and return to Father. These quotations were not gathered by the author himself but have been taken from a manual or an anthology. The same groups of quotations are found in the works of Clement of Alexandria, Didymos and Origen. These groups of quotations have given these writers the basis for building their argument on a precise theme.

Relying on his rich cultural and religious heritage, the author of *ExSoul* offers his readers an attractive text, enriched by references to biblical and pagan lore. In this way, the Gnostic myth of the soul was expounded in an intelligible way both to Christian, Jewish, or pagan readers—a skillful strategy of propaganda which shows that this tractate had not been written for an esoteric purpose but to gain new adepts to Gnostic doctrine. The milieu where *ExSoul* was probably composed, in its original Greek version, is Alexandria, at the beginning of the 3rd century—a variegated, syncretistic milieu where various religious and philosophical doctrines encountered each other.

It seems to me that the main purpose of the author of *ExSoul* is to take from the story of the Soul an example for his readers. From prostitution to repentance, she recovers her former, divine dimension. It is the theme of μετάνοια that the author chooses to stress, with the intent to lead his readers to repent and to submit themselves to a deep change, so that they may become again what they were before their earthly experience. In fact *ExSoul* is not only a beautiful allegorical tale on the Soul—like other Greco-Roman symbolic tales, for example, Apuleius’ *Love and Psyche* in *Metamorphoseis*—but a Gnostic tractate which, taking its departure from the story of the Soul, contains a precise teaching on repentance and gives instructions how to practice it.

The goal is here to obtain “salvation”—the word of “Gnosis” is not pronounced in the tractate—that is, the restoration of the Soul in her Father’s house as a virgin. This signifies the re-appropriation of knowledge.