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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

**Blurred lines between good and evil: Identity
transformation through Gothic seduction in *Christabel* by
Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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June 2025

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Valentina Abrigó Ciarrocca', written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's narrative poem *Christabel* (1797-1800) interrogates Enlightenment binaries such as good and evil, reason and emotion, through a Gothic lens that emphasises psychological ambiguity, repressed desires, and moral uncertainty. Therefore, this dissertation explores how the poem's central relationship between Christabel and the enigmatic Geraldine destabilises fixed notions of identity and agency. Adopting a transdisciplinary approach that integrates feminist theory, Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, and romantic literary criticism, the study examines Geraldine as both a Gothic intruder and a projection of Christabel's unconscious anxieties. This paper analyses key scenes, most notably the bedroom episode, which functions as a symbolic ritual of transformation, blurring the boundaries between seduction and violation, self and Other. Hence, Christabel's subsequent silence and fragmentation are read as manifestations of transformation, enchantment, and ethical disorientation, rather than passive victimhood.

Christabel is not a tale of moral resolution but of epistemological rupture. Its open structure, emotional ambivalence, and refusal to clarify Geraldine's nature point to a Romantic critique of Enlightenment dualities. Instead of moral clarity, the poem offers a space in which identity is fluid, desire is unspeakable, and language fails to contain the depth of experience. By situating *Christabel* alongside works such as Keats' *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, this research highlights a broader Gothic-Romantic discourse that subverts patriarchal narratives and anticipates modern explorations of subjectivity, repression, and the unconscious.

Keywords: Christabel, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, seduction, good and evil, Romanticism, literature

0. Introduction

0.1. Romanticism as a response to the Enlightenment: Its historical and philosophical background

“Romanticism was more than merely an alternative to a sterile classicism; romanticism made possible, especially in art, a great expansion of the human consciousness.”

- Edward Abbey

By the end of the eighteenth century, Europe was experiencing a significant cultural and intellectual shift that gave rise to Romanticism. Those Romantic thinkers, as M. H. Abrams suggests, reoriented the quest for truth inward, privileging the subjective landscape of the mind over the objective certainty sought by their Enlightenment predecessors (Abrams). This marked a turn away from the Enlightenment's belief in the authority of reason and the stability of moral absolutes. Thinkers like John Locke argued that morality, like knowledge, could be grounded in rational inquiry. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke claimed that “morality is capable of demonstration, as well as mathematics” (Locke 507), affirming his conviction that right and wrong could be deduced through reason as clearly as geometric proofs. Additionally, Immanuel Kant later offered a more formalized system in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, asserting that moral law is rooted in the categorical imperative, a universal principle derived from reason, binding for all rational beings. For Kant, an action is morally right only if it can be willed as a universal law, a formulation that reinforces Enlightenment binaries between duty and inclination, right and wrong, reason and emotion (Kant). Therefore, against reason, scientific inquiry, and universal truths, Romantic authors embraced the emotional, the irrational, and the mysterious. Literature, thus, became a site for investigating more debatable concepts such as the limits of identity, the instability of morality, and the haunting presence of repressed desire. Within this context, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's

Christabel (1797-1800, published in 1816) exemplifies those Romantic interests and the collapse of Enlightenment binaries by blurring its dividing lines.

0.2. *Christabel* as a liminal tale between light and shadow

In *Christabel*, Coleridge tells the eerie tale of a young woman called Christabel who discovers the mysterious and seemingly helpless Geraldine in the woods, only to bring her home and naively invite a sinister, possibly supernatural being into her life. Nonetheless, this is a simplistic overview of what the story truly conveys. To add different layers of understanding, Coleridge engages with Gothic tropes to narrate the poem, not merely for sensational effect but to probe deeper anxieties about identity, sexuality, the boundaries of the self, and the intense scrutiny of psychological states. This works in contrast to the Enlightenment's binary approach to good and evil, since *Christabel* dwells in plenty of different areas of liminality. Nevertheless, as Harold Bloom proposes in “*Anxiety of Influence*”, poets, including Romantics, inevitably carry the weight of the literary works of those who came before them, but each one of them must assert their individuality by establishing a unique poetic voice (Bloom). In this sense, Coleridge was deeply conscious of the poetic tradition he inherited, particularly from canonical figures like Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Still, rather than imitating them directly, he engages in a kind of creative struggle, drawing on their motifs while reshaping them to serve his Romantic vision.

This is clear in his treatment of female figures, especially through the enigmatic character of Geraldine. She embodies paradoxes, at once prey and predator, seductive but terrifying. This duality reflects Coleridge's broader poetic conflicts, where he draws on Gothic conventions with Medieval echoes to create a collective imagery of what she represents, yet he resists portraying neat moral binaries. For this reason, the poem destabilises clear categories of

virtue and vice, by aligning her with Gothic motifs to gain insight into repressed feelings and examining Romantic fundamental themes.

Similarly, Christabel, who appears at first glance to embody the innocent and passive female, is not a fixed moral individual either. Rather, her behavioural responses towards Geraldine unveil an internal conflict that complicates the reader's perception of her victimhood. As Anne Williams notes in her analysis of Gothic femininity:

These objections all take it for granted that passivity and dependence on others are invariably bad things, a sign of weakness. But perhaps they seem so only to a culture assuming that independence and conquest are the supreme signs of accomplishment. If the Female Gothic plot in fact presents an alternative to the Oedipal crisis in the formation of the speaking subject, then it portrays a subject with different desires, who sees the world with a different eye/I. (Williams 139)

Aligning this statement with these characters, they often inhabit a liminal space caught between compliance and resistance, silence and articulation. Accordingly, these tensions raise critical questions: Is Geraldine merely an evil figure, or does she symbolise a deeper, perhaps repressed form of female desire and agency? To what extent is Christabel a passive subject of seduction, or an active participant in a transformation of identity?

0.3 Research questions, objectives, methodology, and theoretical framework: Unveiling the unseen

Given the nature of these uncertainties, this dissertation investigates these questions by examining *Christabel* through the lens of Romantic aesthetic principles and the poem's dense web of symbolism. It will explore how Geraldine's seduction is read both as a transgressive intrusion and a catalyst for psychological metamorphosis, interrogating how her presence unsettles Christabel's ethical compass and may stir unconscious elements of her identity. In parallel, Christabel's reactions will be examined to assess whether she remains a passive recipient of otherworldly power, or asserts herself as an autonomous subject who displays profound complexities that were buried beneath.

Therefore, to undertake this analysis, the study adopts a transdisciplinary methodology combining literary theory, gender studies, and psychological criticism. It draws upon key models, which include Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly the theory of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) and repression, as well as feminist interpretations of the Gothic, including Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstrous-feminine," and Romantic subjectivity with many other critics. In addition, this research will contextualise *Christabel* within broader Romantic literary trends by tracing parallels with figures like John Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Lamia*. Additionally, Coleridge's use of Gothic tropes, medieval settings, and fragmentary narration will also be considered as aesthetic strategies that intensify the poem's moral and psychological ambiguity.

This approach allows for a nuanced reading of Geraldine's role not just as an external antagonist, but as a projection of internal unrest, what Hélène Cixous would call *écriture féminine*, a disruption of patriarchal coherence through bodily and effective language. Within this framework, Christabel's fragmentation: her silence, her trance, and her physical unease, reflects an identity in rupture, a process of becoming that cannot be contained within binary logic. Ultimately, this study aims to reveal *Christabel* not only as a tale of good and evil but as a profound exploration of desire, fear, and identity, an exemplar of Romantic literature's capacity to illuminate the shadow of the self. Its refusal to provide narrative closure or moral resolution is not a weakness of storytelling but an intentional gesture, one that compels the reader to confront the unresolved tensions between binaries and how not everything can be easily classified in one category or another. In doing so, *Christabel* emerges as a uniquely disturbing and illuminating work that anticipates psychoanalytic and feminist concerns long before their formal articulation.

1. Geraldine as a tool of identity transformation through seduction

First, the analysis will explore how Geraldine functions as a catalyst for identity transformation through her seductive presence and tactics, which trigger moral discord. Since she is positioned at the intersection of beauty and monstrosity, Geraldine destabilises conventional boundaries between self and Other, human and supernatural. Her arrival initiates a journey into Christabel's inner world, where desire, fear, and identity blur. Therefore, through this lens, Geraldine becomes more than a character; she is a Gothic device through which Coleridge interrogates gender, power, and the mysterious, compelling both protagonist and reader to confront what is repressed and the transgressive.

1.1. The Gothic feminine: Geraldine as monstrous, seductive, and the Other figure

In *Christabel*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge conjures a female figure whose presence defies the Enlightenment impulse to classify individuals as purely virtuous or corrupt, self or Other. Geraldine, with her strange beauty, unexplained origins, and ambiguous moral characteristics, stands as a deeply archetypal yet subversive figure within the Gothic tradition, at once captivating and unsettling, existing on the frontier between woman and monster. She personifies the uncanny in its purest form, since she looks human, but her aura is unsettling; she radiates a feeling that is both familiar and disturbingly alien, challenging Enlightenment ideals of moral clarity and rational order. As a result, this character invites not only narrative tension but also a deeper inquiry into cultural anxieties surrounding female power, sexuality, and the instability of identity itself.

What is particularly significant in the Gothic tradition is that it thrives on the collapse of boundaries and positions itself in-between spaces where certainty dissolves and raw emotion surges, where reason and passion, order and chaos, light and shadow mingle until they are no

longer distinguished. According to Angela Carter, the Gothic is characterised by “its ghosts, its concentration on inner life, its rhetorical and conventionalized prose style, (...) It deals directly with the imagery of the unconscious—mirrors, the externalized self, the world under the moon, automata, haunted forests, forbidden sexual objects. Character and events exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions (Carter 133-134). It is precisely because it exposes what culture represses, fear, desire, and the monstrous feminine, that it provokes such unease. This theoretical framework finds immediate resonance in *Christabel*, where the poem opens with a carefully constructed Gothic atmosphere that lays the foundation for its engagement with otherness and the transgression. The opening line “’tis the middle of night, by the castle clock” (I 1), situates the narrative in a liminal space, midnight, often associated with the transition from the rational to the irrational, and thereby evokes a sense of mystery and ambiguity. This temporal setting is further intensified in the following verse: “And the owls have awaken'd the crowing cock” (I 2). The juxtaposition of the owl, a nocturnal creature, with the cock, traditionally a herald of dawn, introduces a symbolic clash between night and day. Besides, this disruption of natural order may prefigure the intrusion of Geraldine into Christabel's life, suggesting a future disturbance of personal and moral boundaries. Besides, the mention of the full moon, “The moon is behind, and at the full” (I 14), reinforces the supernatural undercurrent of the poem, since in folklore, this element is frequently linked to the emergence of mythical beings. Hence, its appearance here subtly prepares the reader for the unfolding of otherworldly events. Finally, the line “And stole to the other side of the oak” (I 58), just before Christabel encounters Geraldine, carries significant symbolic weight. In medieval literature, the forest frequently represents a bridge to the magical or unknown; thus, Christabel's movement “to the other side” can be read not only as a physical transition but also as a metaphor, a passage into the realm where the boundaries between reality and the supernatural begin to blur.

As the narrative progresses, Geraldine emerges not merely as a seductress but as a clearly “Other” figure, one whose nature defies ordinary human classification. In a marginal annotation added in 1824, Coleridge wrote: “The Strange Lady cannot rise, without the touch of Christabel's Hand: and now she blesses her Stars. She will not praise the Creator of the Heavens, or name the Saints” (165). This observation explicitly signals Geraldine's supernatural origin, suggesting she draws power from Christabel's touch and deliberately withholds reverence from divine or saintly figures, an action traditionally associated with unholy entities. What is more, this dependency on Christabel is not isolated because when both women reach the threshold of the castle, Geraldine appears physically incapacitated: “The lady sank, belike thro' pain” (I 124). However, once inside, she abruptly recovers, “Then the lady rose again, / And mov'd, as she were not in pain.” (I 129) The quick shift implies the pain was symbolic, a barrier that only Christabel's invitation could dissolve. Coleridge himself annotated in 1824 in the margins of lines 124-129 that “the strange Lady may not pass the threshold without Christabel's help and will,” (166), which refers to a folkloric belief that an evil being cannot enter private places without human consent. Morgan affirms that “here is given the first indication of Geraldine's supernatural character” (qtd. in Coleridge's Poetry and Prose 166). Besides, additional folkloric elements reinforce this mysterious presence, such as the old mastiff's unusual reaction: “The mastiff old did not awake, / Yet she an angry moan did make!” (I 142-143). This response aligns with the common trope that animals can sense supernatural forces; hence, Christabel wonders why the dog barks: “For what can ail the mastiff bitch?” (I. 148). Still, her innocence and trust prevent her from dwelling further on the moment's darker implications. Nevertheless, Clara A. MacIlravy Cañas discerned that:

When the fears of female sexuality and desire are represented by a monstrous creature in horror literature and film, it becomes easier to justify the violent destruction of the threat. The monster is linked to forbidden desires and practices to normalize and enforce the cultural fears it represents. While the creature repels and violates the natural order, it also attracts. (...) As much as society attempts to repress the personified monster, like feminist movements, they will always return and remind society of the fears and anxieties they embody. (Cañas 78)

Romantic poets approached the monster figure not as a figure of pure evil, but as a deeply symbolic presence, often embodying the tensions between the self and society, or the conflict between reason and emotion. In *Christabel*, Geraldine's monstrosity is not defined by fangs or claws but by her ability to command, to enchant, and to destabilise. Likewise, from another feminist Gothic perspective, Geraldine fits into the archetype of the "monstrous-feminine" as theorised by Barbara Creed. She argues that horror often represents female sexuality as deviant, contaminating, and dangerously seductive (Creed). Therefore, this reading suggests that Geraldine's power stems from her erotic control, particularly in her encounter with Christabel, which is charged with sensuality that blurs the lines between manipulation and seduction. In other words, her power lies in her very elusiveness, neither angel nor demon, but something in between. This ambiguity connects Geraldine to Freud's concept of *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, offering a useful lens for interpreting her character. According to Freud, the uncanny is that which was once familiar but has become estranged through repression. In that regard, Geraldine is unsettling not because she is entirely other, but because she reflects a part of Christabel herself, an inner, repressed potentiality. As a result, this interplay of attraction and estrangement reaches its narrative and symbolic peak in the bedroom scene, where seduction, power, and identity converge in ritualistic ambiguity.

1.2. The power of seduction: The ritual in the bedroom scene

The exchange between Christabel and Geraldine in Christabel's chamber constitutes the poem's most symbolically and enigmatically charged episode. Set under the veil of night, marked by unsaid feelings and bodily gestures, this scene functions as a ritual of initiation to the point of no return for Christabel, since she will be dragged into an atmosphere filled with a mystical, erotic, and disturbing tone. The main driver of the function will be seduction; notwithstanding,

it is not presented in overtly sexual terms, but rather, it is constructed through suggestion, meaningful quiet moments, and symbolic gestures. The scene's power lies in its refusal to clarify whether the exchange is one of domination or mutual attraction, thereby blurring the traditional binaries of victim and seducer.

The scene begins when Christabel welcomes Geraldine into her room with the words: "And you to-night must sleep with me" (I 117), her Christian kindness from the beginning of the poem begins to blur into something more emotionally and erotically charged. Shortly afterwards, this tension deepens when Christabel instructs: "Fair maide, to requite you well . / But now unrobe yourself; for I / Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie." (I 126-128). These lines are loaded with intimate suggestion, subtly shifting the encounter from one of compassion to one tinged with anticipation and vulnerability. Hence, as Geraldine begins to undress, Christabel's internal state becomes uneasy: "But thro' her brain of weal and woe / So many thoughts mov'd to and fro, / That vain it were her lids to close; / So half-way from the bed she rose, / And on her elbow did recline / To look at the lady Geraldine." (I 233-238) Even though she is initially hesitant, she watches Geraldine attentively, propping on her elbow, a posture one could argue suggests fascination that surpasses mere hospitality and dwells on the verge of erotic curiosity.

Beyond that, language here becomes an instrument of power, operating not only to obscure meaning but to create affect. Christabel, initially active in her decision to aid the mysterious woman, becomes increasingly silent and disoriented, as if under a spell cast. This emotional intensity peaks when Geraldine starts to disrobe herself: "Like one that shudder'd, she unbound / The cinture from beneath her breast: / Her silken robe, and inner vest, / Dropt to her feet, and full in view," (I 242-245). This moment has a double meaning, in which Geraldine mirrors Christabel's inner conflict, since she is not only shuddering physically but also internally, as she hesitates before revealing herself entirely. Then, it follows with: "Behold! her bosom and half her side — / A sight to dream of, not to tell! / And she is to sleep by Christabel."

(I 446-448). Firstly, these lines leave interpretation deliberately open-ended, which is characteristic in Romantic aesthetics, where the unspoken and the ineffable invite the reader's imagination to fill in what cannot be articulated. Despite this, it is not entirely sure what this reaction suggests: could it be shame, an erotic awe, or an act too transgressive to be named? This ambiguity is not merely aesthetic; it invites the reader to confront cultural discomfort with female agency in same-sex desire, creating a hollow space that, paradoxically, intensifies the erotically charged scene, because what is unseen becomes all the more striking. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in her work on queer desire and the Gothic, *Between Men*, the refusal to speak desire openly often heightens its emotional and psychological impact (Kosofsky). This concept illuminates the subtext of Geraldine's disrobing, where the absence of clear language and suspicious movements constructs a space of erotic charge.

Furthermore, the entire scene takes on a ritualistic quality. There is a transformation of the domestic space, the bedroom, into a site of spiritual confusion that signals a collapse of the familiar into the uncanny. Consequently, Freud's notion of *das Unheimliche* is again relevant here: what should be intimate and secure (the bed, the bedroom, the female body) becomes strange and threatening in a way. This change is not purely external; it also reflects the internal disorientation of Christabel herself. In which later she will state: "O Geraldine! since arms of thine / Have been the lovely lady's prison." (I 291-292). Although she finds comfort in her arms, she also feels trapped, evoking an image of lost autonomy and psychic confusion, in which later is announced, "Gathers herself from out her trance" (I 300). This suggests how Christabel has been under some kind of spell, and her awakening implies an awareness of her former condition, which could be read as the first sign of passive resistance. Although she does not attempt to change the fact that she has been charmed, she is aware that there is an external nature that controls her self-regulation.

It is also worth noting the power dynamics at the display. At the very beginning of the poem, Geraldine appears as a classic “damsel in distress,” someone who has been abducted and pleads for rescue: “Five warriors seiz'd me yesternorn, / Me, even me, a maid forlorn: / They chok'd my cries with force and fright, / And tied me on a palfrey white.” (I 79-82). This casts her as both violated and irresistible, enacting the Romantic fascination with sexual violence as a stimulant for forbidden passion. This evokes what Catherine Spooner calls “Gothic Eros,” a term that refers to an intersection of attraction and revulsion, an interaction that destabilises the Enlightenment's clear moral binaries and aligns the poem with Romantic explorations of desire as both attractive and repulsive (Spooner). Additionally, this fusion of terror and allure prefigures what Adriana Craciun identifies as the “femme fatale” strategy: deploying erotic opacity to subvert patriarchal constraints by making seduction itself a form of female empowerment (Craciun). Simply because she gradually assumes control of the situation by rendering Christabel the one confused and, at the same time, fascinated by her, making it a product of coercion.

This is reinforced as Geraldine gets dressed again: “Puts on her silken vestments white, / And tricks her hair in a lovely plight, / And nothing doubting of her spell” (II 352-354). The imagery here is ritualistic once more, and the line “nothing doubting of her spell” directly acknowledges the lingering magical influence Geraldine holds over Christabel. Subsequently, this sense of enchantment continues the next morning, when Geraldine says: “Sleep you, sweet lady Christabel / I trust that you have rested well” (II 356-357). The seemingly innocent line is laced with irony, as Christabel has in fact been disturbed by a mystical experience that leaves her altered. Nonetheless, that emotional disarray manifests physically in Christabel afterwards: “That (so it seem'd) her girded vests / Grew tight beneath her heaving breast. / “Sure I have sinn'd!” said Christabel, / “Now heaven be prais'd if all well!”” (II 367-370). Her confession, even in the absence of explicit wrongdoing, confirms the scene's effectiveness as a ritual of

internal transformation, since her body and soul both register an undefined but palpable violation. This is followed by the psychological aftermath: “With such perplexity of mind / As dreams too lively leave behind.” (II 373-374). Here, Coleridge evokes the lingering confusion typical of trauma or suppressed desire, which was complemented by religious overtones in the following lines, “That He, who on her cross did groan, / Might wash away her sins unknown,” (II 377-378), pointing to Christabel's sense of spiritual unease, and the word “unknown” is key; her sin remains unnamed, reinforcing how the poem cloaks queer desire and moral ambiguity in mystical language.

This culminates in the reveal of Geraldine's true nature sequence, where her eyes are transformed: “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 Christabel she look'd askance! / One moment—and the sight was fled!” (II 572-576). This ephemeral change serves as a supernatural revelation of Geraldine's true self in a Gothic visual, which ends up altering Christabel's state: “But Christabel in dizzy trance / Stumbling on the unsteady ground—” (II 577-578). This exact moment encapsulates the poem's central tension: the collapse of boundaries, enchantment and violation, innocence and desire, leaving Christabel physically and psychologically disassociated during an encounter that resists rational explanation, and refusing to assign the heroine a clear position within a conventional role, and her altered state marks the beginning of a deeper unraveling, in which identity, morality, and agency become increasingly unstable.

2. Christabel complexities between victimhood and transformation?

Following Geraldine's disruptive entrance into Christabel's inner world, the narrative shifts to portray the psychological and symbolic consequences of this encounter, revealing a progressive erosion of Christabel's subjectivity. As her inner fragmentation deepened, the poem's language, imagery, and narrative structure began to mirror the disorientation and

disempowerment she experienced. Through this deterioration, Coleridge explores the haunting aftermath of transgressive contact, where silence, ambiguity, and loss of agency come to dominate the protagonist's inner landscape.

2.1. Identity in crisis: The damage has already been done

Human beings often define themselves through oppositions: known and unknown, familiar and strange, self and Other. Similarly, the Gothic genre exploits these tensions by staging figures who blur or violate every boundary they cross. As Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (de Beauvoir). This formulation highlights how women have been cast as the alien (other) counterpart to male-defined norms. In addition, this philosophical observation is not just sociological but deeply resonant within Gothic literature, where the feminine is persistently aligned with the irrational, the uncanny, and the monstrous. Thus, the Gothic becomes especially effective as a literary mode that explores the dark corners of human experience, desire, death, madness, and the supernatural. To support this idea, feminist critics such as Anne Williams have argued that the Gothic thrives on binary tensions, particularly male/female, rational/irrational, and civilised/monstrous, making it a highly effective genre for exploring the marginalisation of female experience (Williams). This means that women who deviate from socially sanctioned roles often appear as dangerous or unnatural, precisely the kind of figures the Gothic obsesses over to dramatise the instabilities of dichotomies. De Beauvoir's approach not only underpins the Gothic's genre dynamics but also helps explain its enduring preoccupation with figures who haunt the boundaries of identity itself.

In line with this investigation, the aftermath of Geraldine's encounter acts as the mechanism to start distorting binaries. Even so, it does not unfold through dramatic revelations

of external consequences; instead, it is internalised, manifested in Christabel as disorientation, guilt, and a sense of spiritual unease. The result is that she had absorbed the traumatic encounter into her psyche, embodying it: “And thus she stood, in dizzy trance, / Still picturing that look askance, / With forc'd unconscious sympathy” (II 595-597). Her trance reveals the depth of the spell, a symbolic echo of how seduction can creep into the self. Eventually, Christabel attempts to speak: “But when the trance was o'er, the maid / Paus'd awhile, and inly pray'd, / Then falling at her father's feet, / “By my mother's soul do I entreat / “That thou this woman send away!”” (II 601-605). Her desperate plea, invoking her dead mother, reveals the depth of fear and confusion. Although Geraldine has not physically harmed her, Christabel's terror suggests that something deeply unsettling has occurred, if not brutal, then psychological or emotional. However, the source of this fear remains elusive, highlighting the intangible nature of the violation. And yet, Christabel fails to articulate what she experienced: “She said; and more she could not say, / For what she knew she could not tell, / O'er-master'd by mighty spell” (II 606-608). The loss of language marks the culmination of Geraldine's seduction powers: not as physical domination, but as a silencing of identity and voice. From this point onward, she appears suspended in a liminal state; her once clear perception of self and the world is now clouded by an identity transformation at the deepest level. Her silence, her altered behaviour, and her growing detachment from her father, which is seen later, suggest that something has ruptured within her.

A psychological explanation may be that Geraldine might function as “Christabel's dream-self”, implying that this mysterious figure externalises the heroine's own neglected libido, since one of the first things known about Christabel is that: “She had dreams all yesternight / Of her own betrothed knight; / Dreams, that made her moan and leap, / As on her bed she lay in sleep; / And she in the midnight wood will pray / For the weal of her lover that's far away.” (I 27-32). These verses introduce Christabel as a young woman whose unmet

romantic and sexual longings preoccupy her mind and fill her nights with yearning. Thereafter, Christabel hears someone issuing a plaintive moan, “It moan'd as near, as near can be, / But what it is, she cannot tell, —” (I 41-42), in here, Geraldine echoes the same lament of the heroine, which may underscore Geraldine's ambiguity, since she is at once an external presence and the projection of Christabel's inner unrest. Later, the depth of this projection becomes clearer when Geraldine confronts Christabel's dead mother, who appears as a guardian spirit asserting that: “Though thou her guardian spirit be, / Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me.” (I 206-207). By usurping that maternal role, Geraldine not only displaces Christabel's emotional anchor but also takes possession of her most intimate psychic space.

Recapitulating, where before Christabel was portrayed as innocent, pure, and comfortably aligned with the patriarchal order, after the bedroom scene, her characterisation becomes confusing. She struggles to explain herself, to speak at all, and her body seems heavy with an unnamed burden. In addition, when Geraldine is getting to know Christabel's father, she reacts almost instinctively: “And drew in her breath with a hissing sound: / Whereat the Knight turn'd wildly round, / And nothing saw, but his own sweet maid / With eyes uprais'd, as one that pray'd” (II 447-450). In here it can be seen how Christabel is locked in a psychological paradox. She knows the truth, yet cannot articulate it, and this inability to speak is not due to choice but due to enchantment; it is a breakdown of communicative capacity, symptomatic of trauma, which the poem intensifies this sense of fragmentation through visual symbolism. Afterwards, when Leoline commands the bard to tell Geraldine's father that she is found in his castle, the bard states that he cannot obey because of a dream he had: “For in my sleep I saw that dove, / That gentle bird, whom thou dost love, / And call'st by thy own daughter's name—” (II 519-521). The dove, a traditional symbol of purity and the soul, becomes a metaphorical reflection of Christabel herself. Suddenly, the dream turns dark: “When lo! I saw a bright green snake / Coil'd around its wings and neck. / Green as the herbs

on which it couch'd; / close by the dove's it heaves and stirs," (II 537-541). This striking image conveys contamination, constriction, and corruption. It is seen how the snake entwined with the dove literalises Christabel's internal corruption by an external evil, reinforcing the irreversible nature of the transformation. Therefore, the maternal displacement, the dream logic, and the failure of speech, all signal that Christabel's experience is not merely external victimhood but a deep supernatural rupture that resists articulation.

Nevertheless, this breakdown in Christabel's ability to communicate unfolds within a domestic setting already fractured by prior grief and unresolved trauma. This can be seen in Sir Leoline's initial appearance: "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," (I 320-326). This memory ritual shows a man already caught in grief and trauma, therefore failing to recognise new forms of suffering when they appear before him. Consequently, when Christabel's crisis begins, it is in a household already shaped by loss, where expressions of love and protection are mediated through past wounds. Further proof of this unstable family structure appears in Sir Leoline's perception upon hearing Geraldine's tale, in which the poem says: "But when he heard the lady's tale, / And when she told her father's name, / Why wax'd Sir Leoline so pale, / Murmuring o'er the name again, / Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine?" (II 391-395). His reaction is visceral and emotional; something in Geraldine's story triggers an unresolved past, which now overlays and distorts his judgment. Therefore, when Christabel pleads with his father to get rid of Geraldine, she is no longer viewed clearly by him when he states: "Dishonour'd by his only child, / And all his hospitality / To th'insulted daughter of his friend / By more than woman's jealousy," (II 631-634). Leoline interprets Christabel's rejection of Geraldine not as intuitive insight because she is dangerous, but as irrational jealousy, thus rewriting his daughter's identity through the lens of social

disgrace, which is underpinned before by the line: “Within the Baron's heart and brain / If thoughts, like these, had any share, / They only swell'd his rage and pain, / And did but work confusion there. / His heart was cleft with pain and rage,” (II 624-628). His emotional reaction, steeped in confusion, demonstrates that he cannot comprehend the altered nature of his daughter's reception. Ultimately, this paternal blindness finalises Christabel's isolation.

Furthermore, Geraldine's hint of seduction of Sir Leoline's, can be read through the Electra Complex which Carl Jung describes as a girl who has a psychosexual competition with her mother for possession of her father. In *Christabel*, Geraldine's interactions with Sir Leoline can be seen as an embodiment of this dynamic, where she seeks to supplant Christabel in her father's affections, thereby disrupting the father-daughter bond. Consequently, Geraldine's power can be read as operating not only through sexual mystique but also through emotional mimicry and displacement, taking on the persona of the daughter to rewrite the emotional code of the household. In addition, Christabel's own vulnerability is emphasised in the line: “And oft the while she seems to smile / As infant at a sudden light!” (I 305-306). Here, Christabel is portrayed with childlike innocence and passivity, reinforcing her role as the daughter, emotionally pure, receptive, and unaware. However, even though Geraldine tries to mimic this personality, she approaches Sir Leoline with calculated sorrow cloaked in grace, and this meticulously strategic positioning is revealed when Sir Leoline, emotionally captivated, sees in Geraldine “such sorrow with such grace” (II 464). In this hypothetical case scenario, Geraldine would show how forbidden desires for the father figure resurface in displaced fantasies. Susan Eilenberg defends in her essay “*Michael,*” “*Christabel,*” and the Poetry of Possession that “Geraldine is a thief of identity and voice. She injures Christabel by imitating her so neatly as to make the girl herself seem inauthentic” (Eilenberg 218). Thus, she is reinforcing the poem's interrogation of selfhood, repression, feminine rivalry, and displacement.

Therefore, the reader is left with what the real function of Geraldine is. However, Coleridge wrote in the margins of lines 439-44 that: "Christabel then recollects the whole and knows that it was not a Dream; but yet cannot disclose the fact, that the strange Lady is a supernatural Being with the stamp of the Evil Ones on her" (174). Therefore, once the nature of the character is clarified, what is left is the purpose of being in the novel, what her function is. While some critics interpret this shift as demonic possession, this reading risks flattening the complexity of the text. In *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano, they state the different goals many critics had of the evil figure:

While some of Coleridge's revisions and accounts of the poem suggest that Geraldine was struggling against demonic possession, others suggest that Geraldine was simply an evil being. James Gillman (*The Life of Coleridge* [1838], 238) reported that the moral of the tale was "The virtuous save the wicked. The pious and good Christabel suffers and prays for 'The weal of her lover that is far away,' exposed to various temptations in a foreign land," and she "defeats the power of evil represented in the person of Geraldine." An unpublished defense of "Christabel," probably by John Morgan, with whom Coleridge frequently stayed from 1810 or 1816, described Geraldine as a "supernatural and malignant being" (Earl Leslie Griggs, "An Early Defense of Christabel," *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs [Princeton, 1939], 176) (qtd. *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, 160).

Still, rather than depict demonic possession in strictly supernatural terms, many psychoanalytic critics read Geraldine as the embodiment of Christabel's unconscious anxieties for forbidden or unfulfilled desires, which then return in distorted form through the Other figure. A more compelling view sees Christabel as caught between two selves: the compliant daughter of patriarchal virtue, and the newly awakened subject with an unambiguous desire for the Other, in which the physicality of this shift is crucial. The body, in *Christabel*, becomes a site of ambiguity and meaning. The heroine's reaction after spending the night with Geraldine (her trembling, her silence, her erratic behaviour) is a manifestation that Hélène Cixous has analysed, in her theory of *écriture féminine*, in which she speaks of the female body as a space of repressed expression and urges a writing that comes "from the body" (Cixous). Christabel's

body becomes a text of its own, a text of confusion, unspeakable experience, and unacknowledged desire.

Therefore, her ability to articulate what has occurred does not mean anything happened; it means that what happened resists the forms of discourse available to her, and the truth itself is unstable. Is she a victim or an accomplice? Is her experience one of trauma or an awakening? Her ambiguous state reflects a larger Gothic concern: the unreliability of consciousness and the fragility of moral categories. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, women in Gothic and romantic literature often bear the burden of cultural contradictions, expected to be both virtuous and silent, yet punished when they express emotion or desire (Gilbert; Gubar). After the interaction, Christabel experiences Geraldine as a kind of uncanny presence, as something foreign that is nonetheless intimate, something she cannot cast out, and this is why she remains haunted, why her sense of self becomes fragile. As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, the Gothic often externalizes women's conflict, particularly those of repression of agency, emotion, and sexuality. Either way, she has crossed a bridge, and the Christabel of the opening stanzas no longer exists.

2.2. Beyond Enlightenment dualities: The collapse of moral certainty

In the second part of Christabel, Coleridge threatens Enlightenment binaries such as good versus evil, reason versus emotion, and virtue versus vice. What emerges instead is a moral grey zone, where both truth and judgment are obscured. What is more, the enigmatic influence of Geraldine, coupled with Christabel's psychological turmoil and Sir Leoline's fragile authority, breaks down any certainty about who is right or wrong, innocent or guilty. In this sense, the poem reflects a world in which binary categories crumble, since Geraldine has not been punished, Christabel has not been redeemed, and the moral clarity that typically resolves in stories never arrives. Instead, the text suspends its characters, and its readers, in a state of

unresolved tension, only this refusal of closure is not a failure of narrative, but a deliberate subversion of Enlightenment paradigms, in which the binary of good versus evil, traditionally used to interpret moral conflict, collapses under the weight of internal ambivalence and psychological complexity. Accordingly, Christabel's transformation is not a fall from virtue into corruption, but a shift from certainty into ambiguity, and in that ambiguity lies the Romantic challenge to Enlightenment reason.

One of the clearest markers of this collapse is Geraldine's performative display of sorrow, yet it is effective to allure Leoline and confuse him, failing to see her manipulative intent. Therefore, his sense of justice then escalates to excessive moral violence: "That they, who thus had wrong'd the dame, / Were base as spotted infamy!" (II 424-425). Here, without proper investigation, he condemns the alleged offenders in exaggerated terms, further reinforcing the loss of rational judgment. Later, when he declares, "'I may dislodge their reptiles souls / 'From the bodies and forms of men!'" (II 430-431), his language becomes hostile, revealing a psyche overwhelmed by the Gothic spectacle rather than guided by logic or moderation. Later, Geraldine's performance, which combines sorrow and grace, disarms him: "Yet he, who saw this Geraldine, / Had deem'd her sure a thing divine, / Such sorrow with such grace she blended, / As if she fear'd, she had offended / Sweet Christabel, that gentle maid!" (II 463-467). Since he is clouded by his own emotions, he cannot see through her tactics of charm; thus, this passage demonstrates the danger of appearances. Additionally, the failure of Enlightenment clarity is painfully visible in Sir Leoline's response when Christabel begs him to send Geraldine away, but her plea is met not with concern: "Think thou no evil of thy child!" (II 615). Sir Leoline does not side with his daughter, and his judgment is already distorted by pride and hospitality. Meanwhile, Christabel's is being threatened by Geraldine, in which the Gothic tension peaks in the odd exchange of glances: "At Christabel she look'd askance!" (II 575). That look becomes the pivot upon which Christabel's psyche spirals: "To this sole image

in her mind: And passively did imitate” (II 592-593). This unconscious mimicry underscores how Geraldine's presence is not simply external evil, but internalised, repressed desires now haunting Christabel's being. This psychological entrapment reaches its culmination as Christabel stands: “And thus she stood, in dizzy trance, / Still picturing that look askance, / With forc'd unconscious sympathy” (II 595-597). Her trance is more than magical paralysis; it is ethical disorientation, and Christabel can no longer distinguish between guilt and innocence, self and Other, desire and violation.

This psychological suspension gestures towards a broader Gothic critique of Enlightenment reason. Another distinctive episode is the bedroom scene and its aftermath, which can be understood as a Gothic exposure of what Enlightenment thought seeks to repress: affect, instability, and contradiction. The Enlightenment's moral schema depends on visibility, transparency, and the categorisation of experience into stable moral terms, whereas in *Christabel*, the most significant experiences are those that cannot be seen or named, for instance, when Christabel cannot articulate the feelings she has when Geraldine is unrobing herself. These types of moments are not just gaps in narrative, they are moments of resistance to the demand for moral clarity. Through Michel Foucault's works on *The History of Sexuality*, this is particularly resonant here, specifically in Volume I, Foucault argues that modern power does not repress sexuality outright but regulates it through discourse, while naming, explaining, or categorising (Foucault). In this light, what *Christabel* withholds is precisely that: the power to name. Therefore, Geraldine's nature is never fully explained, and Christabel's transformation is never diagnosed. In this sense, the poem operates as a space of unspeakable intensities, an area where meaning breaks down, and repression becomes visible through silence and disorientation.

In a similar manner, Terry Castle has explored how the Gothic genre often dramatises the return of the repressed, particularly in the context of women's desires and fears. In

Christabel, this return takes the form of Geraldine, whose very presence disrupts psychic order because her ambiguous sexuality, her maternal-turned-erotic gestures, and her intrusion into the domestic space all signal the eruption of what society attempts to contain. As a result, the binary of good and evil is not erased, but exposed as an inadequate category. However, what replaces it is not moral relativism, but a more complex account of subjectivity: one that includes desire, repression, fear, and ambiguity as constitutive elements of the self. In this light, Geraldine is not an opposing force to Christabel, but a mirror that reflects hidden aspects of the subconscious. Since she awakens, she demands such things as the capacity to desire and to move beyond innocence, and in doing so, she becomes both a figure of danger and of potential transformation. But it will not give any resolution on which to incline because the romantics refuse to simplify the human condition. Instead, it illuminates what is repressed, disavowed, or left unnamed, making it visible through symbols, atmosphere, and behaviour.

Likewise, the destabilization of binary morality in *Christabel* echoes a broader Romantic concern with ambiguity and seduction, which can be seen in contemporaneous texts like John Keats's *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Comparable to *Christabel*, these poems dramatise the encounter between a seductive female figure and a susceptible protagonist, whose identity and reality are unmade through the intensity of the contact. These women (Lamia, Belle Dame, and Geraldine) are all liminal, operating at the margins of humanity and otherness, since they are all beautiful but terrifying, and nurturing but destructive, and they resist the reductive frameworks that Enlightenment moral logic seeks to impose. Firstly, Keats represents in *Lamia* a serpent-woman who temporarily assumes human form to pursue love, only to be unmasked by rational inquiry. Therefore, her demise, brought about by the philosopher Apollonius, is interpreted by the scholar Marjorie Levinson as a conflict between the imaginative and sensual realm, and the rationalist demands of logic and philosophical inquiry, suggesting that the poem stages this opposition as a tragic tension central

to its meaning (Levinson). This resembles *Christabel's* own tension: Geraldine's ambiguous seduction is not undone by rational investigation, but it similarly reveals how unstable and threatened the boundaries of identity become when desire interrupts moral order.

Similarly, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* offers a dreamlike vision of seduction and abandonment, where the knight's loss of agency and vitality mimics psychic fragmentation. Both figures are marked by a haunting passivity after their exchange, reduced to silence or paralysis by a force they cannot name. In that sense, critics such as Anne K. Mellor have noted that "We never hear la belle dame's side of the story, what she thought or felt. This poem thus becomes, in Swann's memorable phrase, a case of "harassing the muse," a sexual and verbal assault upon a female whose response is neither listened to nor recorded" (Mellor 223). The same could be said of *Christabel*, since she is not merely a victim but a figure whose internal response to Geraldine's seduction reveals her desire as much as her vulnerability, but without uttering any explicit words about it. Subsequently, these intertextual echoes point to a broader Gothic-romantic discourse in which enlightenment binaries collapse. In Coleridge and Keats alike, moral certainty gives way to emotional complexity, since seduction is not merely a threat to virtue; it is a challenge to identity itself. Therefore, both poets refuse the comfort of resolution and instead illuminate the spaces where language breaks down, where desire cannot be named, and where subjectivity is shaped as much by what is repressed as by what is expressed.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

In *Christabel*, Coleridge creates a poetic space where good and evil blur in unsettling ways. Geraldine. As explored throughout this study, Geraldine embodies a nexus of seduction and otherness that disrupts the moral and psychological certainties of those around her. In particular, her encounter with *Christabel* unfolds as an inner transgression that shatters the

Enlightenment belief in an ordered, transparent universe, specifically those governing femininity and innocence.

From a feminist perspective, Geraldine can be read as a version of the “monstrous feminine,” but instead of presenting monstrosity through horror or physical deformity, Coleridge constructs Geraldine as an emotionally invasive and psychologically ambiguous presence. This figure demonstrates not only perpetuating anxieties about female sexuality, in the mode described by Barbara Creed, but also subverts the traditional trope of the passive victim. In other words, Geraldine channels the cultural fear of a femininity that refuses patriarchal constraints and instead undermines it through ambiguous theatricality: her beauty exerts a spell that cannot be easily labelled and forces every character to question their moral compasses. In this way, Coleridge reveals how porous the barrier between power and submission truly is: Geraldine applies a silent dominion over Christabel's inner world, redefining female agency not solely as a space of projection and displaced desire. Therefore, viewed through this lens, Geraldine's symbolic “transgression of gender” underscores the disruptive potential of non-normative sexuality for Romantic-era imaginations. Since she is not merely an erotic object, her presence breaks Christabel's psychological anchors, creating a “mirror effect” in which the once-innocent character discovers a fissure in her own identity. In short, the Gothic in Coleridge becomes a vehicle for strong feminism that calls into question the cultural construction of “female innocence” and exposes the mechanisms that sustain its repression.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the bedroom episode functions as an initiation, in which the unconscious manifests through Christabel's bodily distress: her trembling, her trance, and her loss of speech symbolise a trauma whose source is a psychic penetration. In this regard, it has been observed how the uncanny serves as the catalyst so that Christabel's attempts to expel Geraldine, both literally and metaphorically, become an expulsion of a repressed drive.

Meanwhile, Sir Leoline's collapse of moral reason, evident when he accepts Geraldine's deceitful tale and treats his own daughter as the offender, reveals that his rationality can no longer function as an impartial ethical guide. This occurs because of the baron's daily ritual of grief to a fatalistic repetition of pain, demonstrating that a mind wounded by past loss is ill-equipped to judge a new threat. Thus, the poem illustrates the Romantic critique of Enlightenment pretensions: once wounded, the subject can no longer fit experience neatly into stable categories of right and wrong. Additionally, by uniting Gothic tropes with psychological insight, Coleridge anticipates ideas that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud would theorise in different terms. Geraldine consequently becomes more than a supernatural being, and she is the visible embodiment of repressed psychic forces that exceed reason and dismantle the grammar of consciousness.

Lastly, the poem's unfinished status reinforces its atmosphere of suspension; there is neither moral absolution nor a tidy revelation of Geraldine's origins. However, this lack of closure is not a mere historical accident, but a deliberate expressive gesture, which Coleridge seems to suggest that in the space where desire and repression collide, no easy ending is possible. Ambiguity thus becomes an ethical strategy: readers must dwell with unresolved tension, acknowledging that an aesthetic experience often cultivates more questions than it answers. In addition, by refusing to deliver a clear moral conclusion, as an Enlightenment moral tale might, Coleridge interrogates the very foundations of interpretation. How does one analyse a text that consciously resists closure? To what extent does this refusal compel the reader to play an active role in constructing meaning? In *Christabel*, the "moral conclusion" is not a fixed message but an open invitation: to recognise that deep drives cannot be contained within facile, two-sided judgements. Furthermore, embracing ambiguity, not only resists moral closure but also demands a new ethics of interpretation, one attuned to the unspeakable.

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