Christabel is a long narrative poem, most of which is written in tetrameter couplets. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself pointed out in the original preface to the work, although the meter is standard, the number of syllables is somewhat irregular, varying from seven to twelve. The simple title emphasizes the fact that the story told by the poet is indeed Christabel’s story, the story of her struggle against possession by a demonic force.

From the scenic description in part 2 of Christabel, critics have deduced that the geographical setting Coleridge chose for his poem was the Lake District of England, where he had lived for some time near his friend and fellow poet William Wordsworth. The historical setting is the Middle Ages and, appropriately, the physical milieu is the castle of a baron, Sir Leoline.

Christabel begins in the forest outside the castle. Although it is a chilly night in early spring, the protagonist, Christabel, has sought the solitude of the woods to pray for her absent lover. Suddenly a mysterious lady emerges from the darkness. After introducing herself as “Geraldine,” she says that she was abducted from her own home by five knights, who deposited her in the woods but will return for her. Taking pity upon Geraldine, Christabel helps her into the castle, ignoring such warnings of evil as the lady’s seeming inability to walk across the threshold, which had been blessed against evil spirits, and the growls of the usually good-natured old mastiff as the guest passes.

When they reach her room, Christabel speaks of her dead mother, who she believes still guards her from evil. The statement calls forth a strange, defiant exclamation from Geraldine, but Christabel attributes it to her guest’s frightening experience, and the two settle down to sleep. While she holds the sleeping Christabel in her arms, Geraldine puts a spell on her, so that although she will be able to recognize evil, Christabel will not be able to speak about it.

When Christabel awakens the next morning, she has a confused sense of having sinned, perhaps in a dream. It is difficult for her to believe that Geraldine is evil, however, especially after Sir Leoline discovers that their guest is the daughter of his former friend, Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine, from whom he has long been estranged. Resolving to heal the breach between them, Lord Roland commands the bard Bracy to take word to Lord Roland that his daughter is safe.

Bracy asks for a day’s grace, so that he can expel from the woods the evil which he senses is lurking there. He tells the Baron of a troubling dream, in which he saw a snake devour a dove. Unfortunately, Sir Leoline assumes that the dove is not Christabel but Geraldine. When Christabel begs him to expel the guest, he accuses her of jealousy and, in a fury, sends Bracy on his mission. The poem ends with a few lines about the relationship between a father and a child.

Although Coleridge published the poem unfinished, he left an account of his intentions for two or three more parts, which would bring it to a conclusion. Geraldine would vanish, to reappear in the guise of Christabel’s lover, and Sir Leoline would insist on proceeding with a wedding. The real lover would appear just in time and prove his identity. The evil spirit would disappear forever and all would end happily.

Christabel Themes

The Pervasive Nature of Loneliness

Christabel, the poem's protagonist, has lost her loved ones. Her mother has been long dead, and her bridegroom has gone on a long journey. Her dreams help us to understand the life of her inner self. Her perception of the outward world becomes illusory. We first find her retiring to the nearby woods at night to pray. Coleridge creates a mystical atmosphere of the Gothic in the poem, which intensifies the sense of the abandonment that Christabel experiences. Even the beautiful Geraldine, whom the lonely Christabel meets in the woods and sympathizes with, turns out to be an evil monster. Christabel's loneliness is seen all the more clearly at the poem's end, when she, bound by the evil spell, is unable to communicate her anxiety to her father, the baron.

The Archetype of Wicked Womanhood

The evil character of the poem's antagonist, Geraldine, has its roots in folklore. She can be compared to a vampire, a witch, or Melusine (a female spirit who is a snake or a fish from her waist down). The good Christabel gives shelter to the snake-like woman. Geraldine creeps into the quiet abode of piety, courtesy, and love. Evil enters this innocent and naive world, this stylized and even medieval idyll. When Geraldine enters the castle, all sorts of disorder and confusion begin. She casts a spell on Christabel herself and enchants Christabel's father, the baron. Christabel loses the ability to explain in what way Geraldine's presence has affected her, and her words are lost on her father, who is totally fascinated with this mysterious woman. The reader can guess that, in the end, Geraldine becomes the real owner and ruler of the castle.

Links Between Evil and Women's Sexuality

Coleridge explicitly links Geraldine's evil actions to her eroticism. Sexuality permeates the descriptions of her physical beauty from the very first scene of the meeting in the woods. Christabel carries Geraldine in her own hands over the moat into the castle because Geraldine suddenly feels weak, which suggests that Christabel plays the part that a knight would play in relation to the feminine Geraldine. As Geraldine undresses in the bedroom, Christabel observes the perfection of her body. Coleridge emphasizes both the extraordinary beauty of the guest and its deadly character:

Behold! her bosom and half her side—

A sight to dream of, not to tell!

O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!

Finally, Geraldine lies down beside Christabel and embraces her. Geraldine's beauty turns out to be an instrument of her evil, which destroys the idealized world of piety, faithfulness, and nobility in the castle.