

Exploring Gothic Imagery and Psychological Complexity in Selected Romantic Poetry

¹**Seona James**

Postgraduate Student, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune

²**Dr Avneet Kaur**

Assistant Professor, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune

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Abstract

The Romantic era is usually celebrated for its focus on nature, individual experience, and imagination. However, it also incorporated Gothic themes and elements to explore fear, mystery, and the darker aspects of the human mind. This study examines the use of supernatural elements and otherworldly encounters, Gothic atmosphere and dark landscapes, Gothic imagery, Gothic characterisation and archetypal figures, and psychological terror and mental breakdown in selected Romantic poetry. These elements reveal the interplay between external settings and internal psychological states, creating tension, suspense, and ambiguity. This study will also employ psychoanalytic theory to explore the psychological depth of Romantic poetry. Concepts such as the uncanny (the psychological experience of something that is unsettling or eerie because it feels strangely familiar, rather than merely mysterious or unknown), the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego (three parts of the personality), and defence mechanisms (projection and repression) will be used to analyse the internal conflicts, fears, and repressed desires of characters. By applying these ideas, the research aims to uncover how Gothic elements and narrative strategies reflect the divided self, unconscious drives, and emotional struggles, providing a deeper understanding of the psychological complexity found in Romantic literature.

Keywords: Romantic poetry, Gothic elements, Psychoanalytical lens, supernatural

Introduction

The Romantic era or Romanticism, spanning the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, was a movement that rejected the ideas of order, calm, balance, harmony, ideal beauty, and reason that defined Classicism and late 18th-century Neoclassicism. It also reacted against the Enlightenment's focus on logic and materialism. Instead, Romanticism celebrated individuality, imagination, emotion, spontaneity, personal experience, and the spiritual side

of life (“Romanticism | Definition, Art, Era, Traits, Literature, Paintings, Artists, and Facts”). However, beneath its lyrical beauty, Romantic poetry often carries undertones of darkness, anxiety, the sublime, the grotesque, the uncanny, and the supernatural. These elements align with the aesthetics of Gothic literature. Although Gothic literature began in the 18th century as a reaction to the Age of Enlightenment, it truly flourished in the early Victorian era. During this time, it challenged moral and rational ideas with daring and often shocking novels that explored the darker side of human nature (Carlick). However, many elements of Gothic literature had already begun to appear during the Romantic era itself.

Common features included haunted settings (like castles, ruins, or dark landscapes), supernatural beings or events, themes of madness and death, and emotional extremes such as terror and obsession. In poetry, these traits often appear as eerie imagery, dreamlike sequences, or inner psychological torment, blurring the line between reality and imagination. The Romantic period, known for its focus on individualism, emotion, and a deep connection to nature, was a lively and creative time in literary history. The Gothic, however, brought a darker and more mysterious side to Romanticism. With eerie settings, supernatural events, and explorations of the human mind, Gothic elements blended with Romantic ideals to create a fascinating mix that continues to captivate readers and scholars today (Bagthaliya 2).

In many European countries, psychoanalysis was developing at the same time in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Started by Freud and others, it suggested that people are driven by strong instincts, mainly aggressive and sexual ones, and that trying to deny or repress these instincts could lead to mental problems or neuroses. Society’s first reaction to psychoanalysis was very negative because it challenged the idea of creating a completely “civilised” person. However, Gothic fiction allowed readers to explore these ideas safely, to think about them and be curious, without having to openly accept the disturbing theories of psychoanalysis (Sotskova).

While the Gothic tradition has been extensively examined in novels and prose, its role and significance in Romantic poetry remain relatively underexplored. This study seeks to re-evaluate Romantic poetry through the lens of Gothic imagery and psychological complexity, highlighting how poets used Gothic motifs to express deep emotional and existential concerns.

Chapter 1: Psychological Terror and Mental Breakdown in the Works of William Wordsworth

Psychological depth is a key feature of the Gothic novel, where characters struggle with strong emotions, inner conflicts, and moral choices. Unlike stories that focus mainly on external events, Gothic fiction looks closely at the minds of its characters, revealing their fears, desires, and hidden motives. By focusing on what happens inside the mind rather than outside, Gothic novels explore themes like madness, guilt, and the divided nature of human beings in a way that feels both powerful and disturbing.

The main characters in these novels are often deeply flawed and haunted by their own inner darkness. Their psychological struggles are central to the story, shaping the plot and creating a strong sense of tension, mystery, and unease throughout the narrative (Prasantham 115). Romantic poets also recognised that true horror often lies in the breakdown of reason and the loss of control over one's own thoughts. Their works express early understandings of mental illness, emotional trauma, and the fragile nature of the human psyche.

In some of William Wordsworth's poetry, terror does not come from ghosts or external horrors but from the mind itself. Wordsworth often explores how imagination, though a source of beauty and creativity, can also become a source of fear and mental disturbance. His poems suggest that the human mind has the power to both create and destroy, blurring the line between perception and reality.

This kind of psychological terror arises when the mind becomes overwhelmed by its own thoughts, memories, or guilt. Wordsworth's fascination with intense emotion and the workings of the inner self shows how easily imagination can slip from wonder into anxiety. In Wordsworth's poem *The Thorn*, psychological disturbance is a central theme. The story focuses on Martha Ray, a woman deeply scarred by personal tragedy, hinting toward the death of a child, leaving her isolated and socially shunned. Her grief and guilt create a psychological burden that shapes her actions and perceptions.

The poem shows how trauma and social judgment can distort the mind. Martha's sorrow increases due to the gossip of the villagers, which deepens her sense of alienation and inner torment. Her mental state manifests in her obsessive behaviour and heightened sensitivity, reflecting a mind haunted by loss, shame, and resentment.

Wordsworth uses *The Thorn* to explore how internal suffering can be as powerful and destructive as any external threat. The poem emphasises the fragility of the human psyche when subjected to personal tragedy, societal pressure, and unresolved grief, highlighting a Gothic-like focus on the mind's dark and disturbed corners.

Although it seems like a simple poem, *We Are Seven* explores deep psychological ideas, especially how children understand and cope with death and loss. The little girl in the poem insists that her deceased siblings are still "seven," showing that her mind is trying to keep them alive through memory. She does not see death as final in the same way adults do; instead, she blends emotional truth with her imagination.

This reflects a child's way of processing grief; through attachment, memory, and emotional connection, rather than logic or reason. Her insistence challenges the adult speaker's rational view, highlighting a conflict between adult understanding of reality and

childhood perception shaped by love and memory (“We Are Seven Poem Summary and Analysis”).

Wordsworth uses this tension to show that grief is a deeply internal, psychological process. The poem emphasises that humans, especially children, can hold onto the presence of lost loved ones in their minds and hearts, even when reason tells them otherwise.

In poems like *Extract from the Prelude: Boat Stealing*, Wordsworth describes moments when the natural world seems alive with threatening power, reflecting the speaker’s inner turmoil. The fear is not of the landscape itself, but of what the mind projects onto it. While physically he is just taking a small boat, his mind transforms the experience into a powerful emotional journey, filled with terror, awe, and guilt. As he rows across the lake, the surrounding mountains seem to grow in size and presence, creating a feeling of overwhelming grandeur and fear. This is not just the natural world itself but his mind projecting emotional intensity onto the landscape, turning it into a reflection of his inner state.

Psychoanalytical Lens

Sigmund Freud suggested that people use defence mechanisms as part of his psychoanalytic theory. A defence mechanism is an unconscious way for the mind to protect the ego from thoughts or feelings that would cause anxiety if the person became fully aware of them (Vinney). One of these mechanisms is projection.

As Romantic poetry is deeply rooted in nature, we can see the narrator, speaker, or character projecting their inner feelings, most of which are related to turmoil, onto the surroundings or nature. For example, the landscape in *The Prelude* seems to grow larger and more imposing. This is not just a description of nature itself; it reflects his inner feelings of awe, guilt, and fear. The mountains towering over him mirror the overwhelming sense of moral consequence and personal insignificance he feels.

In *The Thorn*, the landscape also reflects internal emotion, but here it mirrors grief, shame, and social alienation. Martha Ray’s sorrow over her lost child and her isolation from the village community are projected onto the environment. The old thorn bush, near which the story unfolds, is not just a plant. It symbolises pain, memory, and persistent suffering. The bleakness of the surroundings emphasises Martha’s emotional barrenness and psychological torment, turning the landscape into a stage for her internal struggle. Nature embodies loss and mental disturbance, reinforcing the Gothic undertone of psychological suffering.

Similarly, we see a different defence mechanism at play in *We Are Seven*. Here, repression is seen in the little girl’s way of handling grief. She refuses to fully acknowledge that her deceased siblings are gone, keeping their presence alive in her mind. By focusing on

memory and emotional attachment, she pushes the painful reality of death out of her conscious awareness, showing a child's unconscious way of protecting herself from loss.

Chapter 2: Supernatural Elements and Otherworldly Encounters in the Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge

A common theme in Gothic stories is the uncanny, i.e., when something that seems normal and familiar turns out to be strange, mysterious, or even frightening. For example, a simple, ordinary house might hide a violent haunting or be home to a ghost. The ghost or the house itself may feel sad or eerie, but not always dangerous. Another frequent theme is the sublime; something extraordinary and awe-inspiring, standing on the border between the natural and the supernatural (Sotskova).

Supernatural themes are one of the strongest links between Romanticism and Gothic literature. Romantic poets often used ghosts, spirits, mysterious visions, and unexplainable forces to explore emotions that go beyond the rational world. These elements were not only meant to frighten but also to express inner truths and moral lessons.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry uses Gothic horror as an exploration of the human mind. Coleridge uses supernatural ideas to highlight psychological realities. Through visions, nightmares, and spectral presences, Coleridge uses the otherworldly to show the inner conflicts of his characters and narrators. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the supernatural manifests through the ghostly ship, the Life-in-Death figure, and the reanimated crew. These horrors mirror the Mariner's inner torment. The supernatural becomes a psychological landscape and a projection of conscience and divine retribution, which eventually culminates in his spiritual awakening and redemption.

In *Christabel*, the supernatural enters through Geraldine, a mysterious, supernatural woman whose charm and corruption blur moral boundaries. The poem's dreamlike and incomplete narrative amplifies its psychological Gothic, where the supernatural can be seen as a metaphor for repressed desire and fear. One study claims that Geraldine can be seen not as a real spirit or separate person, but as a projection of Christabel's own mind or a creation of her imagination. Christabel, a young woman whose sexuality is deeply repressed, imagines Geraldine as the embodiment of the desires and sensuality she herself longs to express (Ganguly 1).

Coleridge wrote *Kubla Khan* after taking a mix of opium and alcohol. His addiction to these substances damaged his health and made it hard for him to work during the following two decades. The poem was therefore created out of an opium dream or trance (Mambrol). It is a perfect example of the Romantic interest in the supernatural, especially in connection with imagination and dreams. The poem shows the power of the unconscious mind and how supernatural images can rise from deep within human creativity. Coleridge invites readers

into a dreamlike, otherworldly landscape where the boundary between reality and imagination disappears (Othman 120).

Psychoanalytical Lens

Freud's idea of the *uncanny* helps explain how Coleridge uses the supernatural to show hidden fears and desires. For Freud, the uncanny comes from finding something strange within the familiar. Building on this idea, psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan explained that the uncanny puts us in a state where we can't clearly tell good from bad or pleasure from discomfort, creating a deep sense of anxiety ("Uncanny").

In both *Christabel* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the strange and ghostly events are not just external horrors but reflections of the characters' inner conflicts. In *Christabel*, Geraldine's mysterious presence represents repressed sexual desire and the fear of forbidden emotions. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the ghost ship and the supernatural punishment reflect the Mariner's deep guilt and moral anxiety after killing the albatross. Freud's idea of the superego, the inner voice of conscience or moral authority, can also be seen in the Mariner's suffering. His endless punishment and need to retell his story show how guilt becomes a psychological burden, driven by an internal force that demands confession and repentance. In this way, Coleridge turns the supernatural into a mirror of the mind, where guilt, fear, and desire take on ghostly and otherworldly forms.

Chapter 3: Gothic Characterisation and Archetypal Figures in the Works of Lord Byron

In Gothic literature, characters often represent archetypes like the troubled hero, the persecuted maiden, or the sinister villain. Some stories use the "Gothic double" to show opposing sides of human nature, such as in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Characters frequently face internal conflicts and moral uncertainty, and their relationships often explore power struggles, obsession, and forbidden desires. These traits create tension and highlight the darker sides of human experience ("Gothic Themes and Narrative Techniques").

Similarly, the Byronic hero is a type of character first developed by the famous 19th-century Romantic poet Lord Byron. This figure is an extreme version of the Romantic hero, sharing some traits like rebellion against society and unconventional behaviour. However, Byronic heroes are usually more emotionally and psychologically complex than typical Romantic heroes. They are alienated, intelligent and cunning, capable of deep love and intense hatred, impulsive, passionate, moody, cynical, darkly humorous, and often drawn to morbid or gloomy thoughts. Unlike traditional heroes, they reject conventional virtues while showing a rich, often troubled inner life (Mahawar 448). They are usually haunted by some sort of guilt or a dark past.

In Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the main character, Childe Harold, shows the traits of a Byronic hero through his travels across Europe as he searches for peace and a deeper understanding of himself. A key feature of the Byronic hero is his sense of

alienation and distance from society. Childe Harold feels disillusioned with the world and tries to escape from its conventional rules. His isolation is both physical, as he wanders through foreign lands, and emotional, as he struggles with guilt and loss.

The Byronic hero is often a rebel who rejects social norms and expectations. Childe Harold's journey itself is an act of rebellion, as he looks for meaning through personal experience rather than following traditional ideas of virtue or duty. His travels represent a search for freedom and self-direction. Despite his outward pride, the Byronic hero also carries a deep sadness and tendency toward introspection. Childe Harold's reflections reveal his inner conflict, showing that his journey is as much about understanding himself as it is about exploring the world. This focus on personal emotion and experience reflects the core ideals of Romanticism ("The Concept of the Byronic Hero in Lord Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage").

Manfred is a dramatic poem filled with gothic and supernatural elements, and it reflects parts of Byron's own life. The story takes place in the majestic mountains of Alpine Switzerland and follows the troubled life of Manfred, a proud yet deeply tormented man. The poem presents a kind of spiritual and emotional struggle, where Manfred battles both his inner guilt and the mysterious powers of the supernatural world.

Manfred is a clear example of the Byronic hero. He is a complex, passionate figure who lives apart from society and is haunted by a painful secret. He is a nobleman with intelligence and eloquence, yet he feels isolated from humanity and burdened by the memory of his forbidden love, Astarte, whose tragic death weighs heavily on him. His sense of guilt and loss drives

His struggles reveal not only his rebellion against authority but also his deep desire for understanding and release. Through Manfred's suffering and defiance, Byron explores themes of guilt, pride, loneliness, and the limits of human power, making the poem a powerful expression of the Romantic and Gothic spirit ("Lord Byron's Manfred").

Byronic heroes are often present as the main heroic figures in Byron's longer poems, especially in works like *The Corsair*, one of his most popular verse tales. *The Corsair* tells the story of Conrad, a strong, fearless, and rebellious man. Through this poem, Byron skillfully blends his personal ideas and cultural views into the character of the Byronic hero, who is a figure marked by independence, passion, and defiance.

By looking at the many examples of the Byronic hero across Byron's works, we see that this character is both idealised and flawed. On the outside, the Byronic hero is known for traits such as rebellion, intense emotion, great talent, and a disregard for social rank and

rules. He often carries a dark or shameful secret, shows pride and overconfidence, and sometimes acts in self-destructive ways.

Beneath these traits, the Byronic hero also reveals a deep love for life, a strong desire for freedom, and the courage to challenge authority and injustice. He seeks romance and meaning, often standing against corruption. This mix of strength, passion, and inner conflict makes the Byronic hero one of the most memorable and complex figures in Romantic literature (Madhusudana).

Psychoanalytical Lens

The theme of the Gothic self, someone who is torn by internal conflicts and is struggling with guilt, paranoia, or obsession (“Gothic Themes and Narrative Techniques”), is key to understanding the Byronic hero. These characters are attractive and powerful, but they are also haunted by guilt, regret, or a dark past. This makes them both fascinating and tragic.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, we can understand the Byronic hero through Freud’s theory of the divided self, which separates the mind into parts like the ego (our conscious sense of self and control) and the superego (our values and rules and strife for the ideal self). The Byronic hero shows this division clearly.

On the surface, he appears proud, strong, and independent. This is his ego, or the part that wants control and stability. But deep inside, he carries guilt, shame, and forbidden desires. Freud’s superego is the part of the personality that rewards or punishes us mentally for our actions. It contains the moral values and ideals we learn from our parents and society. The superego makes us feel pride and satisfaction when we do something right, and shame or guilt when we go against these internalised moral standards (Cherry). The tension between these two sides creates his inner torment.

For example, characters like Manfred or Childe Harold seem confident and rebellious, but they are also deeply troubled by feelings of loss and guilt. This conflict makes them divided souls. They are proud yet suffering, defiant yet self-destructive.

In short, the Byronic hero represents a split self: one part noble and conscious, the other dark and unconscious. This division gives him depth and makes him a symbol of the Romantic struggle between reason and passion.

Chapter 4: Gothic Atmosphere and Dark Landscapes in the Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley

The atmosphere of Gothic poetry is often built through its vivid and haunting landscapes. Gothic settings usually take place in dark and frightening locations that create feelings of fear and suspense. These places are often dangerous, filled with threats from people, nature, or supernatural forces. There is always a strong sense of mystery and unease in the atmosphere (Valenzuela et al.).

Romantic poets used dark, mysterious settings to reflect human emotions and mental states. Descriptions of stormy skies, ruined castles, shadowy forests, and lonely mountains are not just physical places; they mirror the poet's or character's inner turmoil.

The Gothic atmosphere also brings a sense of isolation and mystery. The lonely wanderer surrounded by dark scenery became a common Romantic image. Such settings emphasise emotions like fear, melancholy, and awe, making the landscape a reflection of the human soul rather than a mere backdrop.

Percy Bysshe Shelley often uses nature as a mirror of the human mind, turning natural landscapes into powerful symbols of emotion, imagination, the sublime, and inner conflict. Shelley's use of the Gothic atmosphere and dark landscapes shows how nature can reflect both human greatness and human despair.

In *Mont Blanc*, Shelley explores the sublime power of nature, i.e., its beauty and its terror. The poem creates a Gothic atmosphere of awe and fear, showing how the landscape reflects the poet's sense of insignificance and wonder. The power of *Mont Blanc* lies both in its massive physical presence and in the spiritual or metaphysical influence it has on those who look at it (Towler).

In *The Ode to the West Wind*, the wind is both a destroyer and a creator, showing nature's double power to bring death and renewal. Shelley uses the stormy wind as a metaphor for his own imagination. The violent natural imagery gives the poem a Gothic aspect, where destruction becomes a path to rebirth.

In *A Cold World Slept Below*, Shelley creates a haunting and frozen landscape that captures both the terror and beauty of nature (the sublime), which is a key feature of Gothic writing. The poem describes a world of ice, silence, and death-like stillness, where the natural world seems both magnificent and terrifying. The imagery of coldness and darkness suggests a sense of isolation and emptiness, giving the landscape a Gothic mood.

Chapter 5: Death, Decay, and Macabre Imagery in the Works of John Keats

Gothic stories often explore decay, death, and the grotesque, showing characters who must face the reality of mortality and the breakdown of both body and mind. These ideas are usually mirrored in the settings through crumbling castles, dark graveyards, and decaying bodies, becoming physical signs of the characters' inner fear and despair. The focus on death and decay shows the Gothic genre's deep interest in the dark and unsettling sides of human life ("The Gothic and the Romantic Movement").

These ideas can also be symbolic. They may represent not just physical death but also emotional collapse and moral corruption. John Keats explores this idea of mortality and death in many of his poems.

In *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, death and decay are shown through the image of the pale, dying knight who has been enchanted and abandoned by a mysterious woman. The “cold hill side,” the “withered sedge,” and the ghostly “pale kings and warriors” can also be seen as metaphors for death and decay.

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats contrasts the immortality of the nightingale’s song with human mortality and decay. The speaker wishes to join the nightingale’s eternal world by dying, seeing death as a peaceful escape. In the end, he realises that this escape is not real, and the nightingale’s immortality exists only in imagination.

In *Ode on Melancholy*, Keats accepts that death and sorrow are part of beauty and joy. However, he also states that death should not be the ultimate answer. He uses death imagery to point against it. The reader is warned not to seek escape in death. They should not take poisons like wolf ’s-bane or nightshade, and not touch yew-berries, beetles, death-moths, or owls - all symbols of death. These things only simplify true feeling. Instead, when feeling melancholy, a person should embrace life and its beauty by noticing roses, rainbows, and peonies.

In American Gothic literature, the idea of decay often represents the breakdown of social and psychological stability. This theme appears clearly in works like Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, where decay takes physical, social, and mental forms. Gothic stories often express fears about shifting cultural values and scientific progress, using decay as a symbol for the loss of tradition and the emotional distress brought on by rapid change (“Gothic Literature”).

Romantic poetry also explores decay as a reflection of social and emotional decline, though often through a more personal and natural lens. Poets like John Keats use images of fading beauty, ageing, and the transience of nature to express anxiety about change and loss.

Conclusion

Romantic poetry, while often celebrated for its emphasis on nature, individual emotion, and imagination, reveals a use of Gothic themes and psychological complexity. The study shows that Romantic poets like Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, and Shelley used supernatural elements, dark and decaying landscapes, death, macabre imagery, and characters not merely for dramatic effect but as tools to explore the depths of human consciousness. These Gothic elements allow for the externalisation of inner fears, guilt, and moral dilemmas, creating a strong interplay between environment and psyche, where the external world reflects and intensifies internal emotional states.

Applying a psychoanalytic lens further clarifies how Gothic imagery functions as a medium to express unconscious desires, anxieties, and internal conflict. The uncanny, for instance, demonstrates how familiarity and strangeness coexist to produce unease, while

defence mechanisms reveal the ways characters cope with trauma, repression, and guilt. This approach highlights the relevance of Romantic poetry as a study of human emotion and the subconscious, showing that the Gothic is as much about psychological experience as it is about external terror.

Ultimately, the study concludes that Romantic poetry is not limited to depictions of nature or individual sentiment; it also explores the darker dimensions of human experience, blending Gothic imagery with psychological insight. Romantic poets thus use Gothic and psychological strategies to probe the complexity, fragility, and depth of human consciousness, making their work both emotionally and intellectually rich.

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