

The representation of gender and gendered roles in Lewis' 'the monk'



The Monk, published in 1796 by Matthew Lewis, holds the distinction of one of the most popular and most controversial Gothic novels of all times. Set in the backdrop of the Protestant Reformation in Spain, the novel addresses and challenges many sensitive, tabooed societal norms, and elements of seduction, blasphemy, incest and lust are central to the text. At the time that it was written, the gender ideologies in Europe were governed by the idea of males and females co-existing in Separate Spheres, where females 'naturally' embodied traits of moral superiority, compliance and virtue, making them the ideal mates for domestic life and simultaneously lacking sexual drive – those with sexual appetites were frowned upon. Conversely, men were the epitome of rationality and strength, and had fewer societal restrictions placed upon them. (Huges, 2014) However, monastic chastity was still mandated thus bringing to light how dominant a role the prevalent religion – Catholicism – played in defining the societal attitude towards gender and sexuality. With sexual transgression as one of its central elements, the text features characters who violate these ideals and the consequences they face become a reflection of the contemporary attitude towards such transgressions.

The novel centers around Ambrosio, a monk, who is led to indulging his carnal desire through the temptation of Matilda – previously disguised as Ambrosio's male admirer, Rosario. Upon procuring sexual favors from her, he grows weary of her and becomes overwhelmed with sexual attraction towards the virginal, virtuous Antonia. Matilda aids Ambrosio in his pursuit to satiate this desire, an act which causes him to commit a series of even more heinous crimes – including rape and murder – and eventually leads to his

downfall. At the heart of the novel is the transgression of gender ideals and the associated consequences, and through the devout monk Ambrosio's pursuit of fulfilling his sexual urges and subsequent punishment at the hands of the Devil, portraying the sexually driven female Matilda as the Demon, and innocent Antonia as the virtuous victim, it condemns the violation of prescribed norms of chastity. Simultaneously, through the contrastive language used in context of the characters of the lustful Matilda, the modest Antonia and the sinful Bleeding Nun – who shamelessly pursues her carnal desires and is subjected to eternal suffering – it deplores the exploration of female sexuality, connecting the consequences directly to sin and death. Themes of anti-Catholicism and sexual desire run parallel to these critiques and the ill-representation of male transgressive sexuality and its negative connotations is directly attributed to the religious upbringing of Ambrosio, thus connecting to the different, but not separate agenda of Lewis to mock institutionalized religion (Rosenthal, 2016). The Monk's condemnation of sexual transgression is primarily illustrated through its central villain, Ambrosio, a friar who was left at the Abbey door as an infant and has been brought up within the Church. His protected upbringing has limited his exposure to many worldly desires and given him an apparent set of virtues which leaves him drunk on an overwhelming sense of superiority. He is predominantly lauded for his sexual chastity and in the opening pages of the novel, Lorenzo describes him as 'so strict an observer of Chastity, that he knows not in what consists the difference of man and woman' (The Monk, page 15). This description capitalizes upon his ignorance of the reality of sexuality, accentuated by him taking pride in his seclusion, and though he is praised for his initial lack of awareness of sexual drive, it is the same

<https://assignbuster.com/the-representation-of-gender-and-gendered-roles-in-lewis-the-monk/>

obliviousness that later leads to his severe transgressions, for he never learns to exercise control over such base urges. Monastic chastity was central to the Catholic approach to Christianity and through highlighting Ambrosio's overwhelmingly pious nature, the author contrasts and consequently blames his overtly blasphemous transgressions on the 'feminine' position the Church put him in – protected and sheltered to save his virtue as a woman was at the time. The lack of self-awareness drilled into him by virtue of his religious upbringing is instrumental in him falling prey to the temptations of the Devil and thus his transgression and the resultant consequences he faces are attributed more to the failings of the Catholic Church – and its overt insistence on Monastic chastity – than to the sin of a man in losing his virtue in premarital sexual acts. He is described as being 'yet to learn, that to a heart unacquainted with her, vice is ever more dangerous when lurking behind the mask of virtue' (The Monk, page 87) when he learns that Matilda was the model for the portrait of the Virgin Mary that he admired so with longing. From the beginning, he is seen to be entranced by purity and virtue, and is resultantly attracted to Matilda, eventually succumbing to his sexual desire for her and sleeping with her. However, as Matilda becomes more forward in her sexual advances, he grows weary of her, and shifts his desire towards the innocent Antonia, thus highlighting a very disturbing sexual behavior for which the overtly Catholic nature of his value system is blamed. So protected and secluded has been his upbringing, reinforced and validated by his religious context, that he is aroused by the erotic nature of modesty and loses all forms of moral reasoning, giving himself over to his carnal desires and committing rape and murder to satiate them. He can thus be viewed as a tragic hero, and his

<https://assignbuster.com/the-representation-of-gender-and-gendered-roles-in-lewis-the-monk/>

transgressions an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of his limited exposure to reality. Consequently, the novel's take on his sexual transgressions, though overwhelmingly negative as portrayed through Ambrosio's ultimate fate – the realization that he raped his sister and murdered his mother before being victimized by the Devil – can be associated with Lewis' condemnation of religious extremism, more so than it can be linked to his critique of male sexual transgression. Premarital sex was common amongst the male nobility in the 18th century – men would visit brothels to avail to prostitutes – and though frowned upon, it was treated as an open secret and without the Catholic morals, the males were not shunned. Staying true to that context, through Ambrosio's rebellious transgression and how his overtly religious value system counterproductively leads to him commit crimes, the theme of religious hypocrisy and anti-catholicism are reinforced and the condemnation of male sexuality becomes secondary to that end. The females in the novel, however, are not favored to the same treatment, and Lewis openly condemns and demonizes those who transgress the prevalent ideals of chastity and praises those who conform. Transgressive female sexuality is epitomized through the character of Matilda, who is introduced as the male Rosario, admits to being a female, and is later revealed to be a Demon. She seduces Ambrosio through her initial, apparent modesty and later reprimands his values of chastity by telling him, 'unnatural were [his] vows of celibacy; man was not created for such a state; and were love a crime, God never would have made it so sweet, so irresistible!' (The Monk, page 238) and that he should 'banish those clouds from [his] brow' (The Monk, page 238). She directly belittles ideals central to Catholicism and blatantly deviates from the expectations of

<https://assignbuster.com/the-representation-of-gender-and-gendered-roles-in-lewis-the-monk/>

an 18th century female in her assertiveness and awareness of her sexuality (Huges, 2014). She demonstrates a keen sense of self-awareness and competence, as she knows what she wants and employs all means available to her to procure it – she successfully tempts Ambrosio into sleeping with her, and later aids his sexual predation of Antonia, both through contemptible means of manipulation and associations with the Devil. She thus becomes an embodiment of everything anti-religious and anti-female; her advances on Ambrosio are described in very gendered terms as she takes the lead in their sexual relationship, leaving Ambrosio ‘trembling and weak’ (The Monk, page 247) as she becomes more ‘masculine’ and the despoiler of Ambrosio’s previously ‘feminine’ virtue and sexual innocence. Allusions to the Devil are made consistently through her actions, one instance of which is her asking Ambrosio for a rose as a token for his affection which leads to a serpent biting him and he almost dies – allowing her to seduce him in his vulnerability. (The Monk, page 56) This indulgence to temptation can be associated with the Garden of Eden story in Genesis, where Eve, herself persuaded by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit, in turn tempts Adam to do the same, and they both face punishment from God for their transgression. This is strongly paralleled by Matilda, the woman, who tempts Ambrosio, the pious man, to go against God’s will – an act of defiance that ends disastrously for the latter. Through Matilda’s fluxing gender and demonic portrayal, Lewis makes his stance on female sexuality very evident, and the novel opposes female sexual transgression. It is implied that to assume roles of power – as Matilda does – women must corrupt their virtue, and such behavior of rejecting the gendered ideals does is almost demonic and not conducive to anyone’s long-term happiness. This

<https://assignbuster.com/the-representation-of-gender-and-gendered-roles-in-lewis-the-monk/>

view is reinforced through the portrayal of Beatrice – the Bleeding Nun – furthering the associations between women who go against the status quo with sin and death. A prostitute when she was alive, Beatrice ‘abandoned herself freely to the impulse of her passions, and seized the first opportunity to procure their gratification’ (The Monk, page 180) thus becoming a blatant rebel to the prevalent prescriptions for docile, virtuous female behavior. Unlike the guilty Ambrosio, she reveled in her transgression, and though forced into the covenant by her parents, ‘professed herself an atheist’ (The Monk, page 180) and ‘took every opportunity to scoff at her monastic vows, and loaded with ridicule the most sacred ceremonies of religion’ (The Monk, page 180). Her breaking of her vows of chastity and plotting the murders in order to pursue her sexual desires are analogous to Ambrosio doing the same for Antonia, and her atheism furthers the dissociation of religious faith from sexual liberation – an element common to the narratives of many of the novel’s characters. Beatrice, eventually murdered by her lover, is condemned to haunt the Earth as the Bleeding Nun, and her fate illustrates the eternal suffering female transgression results in. In the 18th century, women were expected to lack all forms of sexual desire; even if they were to desire marriage it was to be out of a desire to become mothers than to achieve sexual gratification, and like in the novel, those who failed to conform were shunned. While the characters of Beatrice and Matilda, are condemned for their sexual desire, Antonia is lauded for her lack of thereof. A virtuous, sexually innocent young girl, she is revealed to us when she is non-consensually unveiled by Lorenzo and Lenolla (The Monk, page 10), foreshadowing her eventual rape and death in the novel. Unveiling is seen as a violation of modesty, which leads to death and misery, making its

<https://assignbuster.com/the-representation-of-gender-and-gendered-roles-in-lewis-the-monk/>

reappearance when Raymond unveils the innocent Agnes to find the Bleeding Nun (The Monk, page 109), the symbol of death and suffering, in her stead. The polar opposite of Beatrice, Antonia is absent of sexual desires and her 'delicacy and elegance of figure' (The Monk, page 9) leads to Ambrosio lusting after her. She maintains her sexual indifference towards the monk, however, has her virtue stolen from her and is killed in her attempt to escape from him. Though she loses her virtue, Antonia is never depicted in negative light – rather the reader is encouraged to sympathize with her plight as she acts 'with timidity' and 'respectfully withdraws' till her death (The Monk, page 295). Through the associating positivity to her character but subjecting her to a cruel ending, Lewis reinforces the idea that even nonconsensual transgression of sexual expectations leads to suffering for women, contrasted by happy ending given to Virginia Villa de Franca who maintains her sexual innocence throughout. The Anti Catholic sentiments in the novel are capitalized by the sympathy evoked by Antonia's fate, as had it not been for Ambrosio's initial overtness to sexual desire, he would not have plagued the life of an innocent girl.

The novel is a strong advocate for the prescribed roles for females when it comes to the exploration of sexuality, and through its usage of unflattering diction and evoking negative atmospheres around transgressive women, reinforces the contemporary ideals. Through its more ambiguous stance on male transgression, the ill consequences of which are attributed to the failings of institutionalized religion, it underlines the prevalent misogyny of 18th century Europe. Thus, the representation of male and female gender ideologies in the Monk are quite in line with ideals of its contemporary

audience, and tell present day readers a great deal about the value systems of the time it was written.

Works cited Hughes, Kathryn. Gender roles in the 19th century. The British Library, 13 Feb. 2014. Web. 13 Oct. 2016 Lewis, Matthew Gregory. The Monk. New York, NY, United States: Dover Publications, 2003. Print Rosenthal, Jamie. Class Lecture. Gothic Literature. UNC-Chapel Hill, NC. 10 Oct. 2016.