

# Criticism of the fetishization of purity found in the monk



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* takes its era's heightened anti-Catholicism to heart, and uses it to critique social norms. Lewis tackles the problem of the fetishization of purity that the Catholic Church, and society outside the Church hold so highly. Lewis presents the idea that despite the Church's intentions, this fetishization of purity, which causes dangerous seclusion from society, actually leads to depravity in both the religious and secular world. Though Lewis includes both men and women as examples in this critique, regarding the characters Ambrosio and Antonia, his work echoes arguments being made at the time for better education for women. Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had presented a foundation on which proto feminists could build an argument for women to be educated, instead of remaining innocent and "pure". It seems that Lewis took this to heart, but applied it more generally across society than his female counterparts. He sees this fetishization of innocence and purity as societal flaws brought upon by the Catholic Church's authority within society. *The Monk* criticizes the Catholic Church and the faulty social ideals it brings forth by presenting the fetishization of purity and innocence as a blaring cause of the depraved downfall of once-innocence characters.

The character Ambrosio is one of the main cautionary examples in Lewis's work. He is idealized by the Church because of his intense innocence and purity from the sin of the secular world. Lewis writes, "He is now thirty years old, every hour of which period has been passed in study, total seclusion from the world, and mortification of flesh... His knowledge is said to be the most profound, his eloquence the most persuasive. In the whole course of his life He has never been known to transgress a single rule of his order; The

smallest stain is not to be discovered upon his character; and He is reported to be so strict an observer of Chastity, that He knows not in what consists the difference of Man and Woman" (15). Lewis criticizes this idea of purity in an echoing of John Milton's argument for the moral value of liberal reading. Milton writes, " He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd vertue, u nexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race" (Milton). Like this argument for the value of a real-world testing and trial of one's moral purity, Lewis uses Ambrosio to argue for the testing of the durability of morality, instead of the glorification of chaste innocence. Ambrosio grew up outside of the secular world, never experiencing temptation of sin before he is too old to learn differently. This is eventually the reason for his downfall into sin. Ambrosio himself anticipates this when he says to Rosario, " Man was born for society. However little He may be attached to the World, He can never wholly forget it, or bear to be wholly forgotten by it... No longer sustained by the violence of his passions, He feels all the monotony of his way of living, and his heart becomes the prey of Ennui" (Lewis 43). This seclusion Ambrosio has been living in to foster the kind of purity that the Church wants him to have causes his heart to become " prey" to the secular world, instead of a master of it. This troubled upbringing of a boy and the destruction that follows is, according to Lewis, the work of the Catholic Church.

Lewis introduces us to Ambrosio by first describing his congregation, which is acting more like a performance audience than a religious gathering. He

writes, “ Do not encourage the idea that the Crowd was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information... and in a city where superstition reigns with such despotic sway as in madrid, to seek for true devotion would be a fruitless attempt” (Lewis 7). Notice the coded language for the strong anti-Catholicism that ran rampant at the time, i. e. “ where superstition reigns”. Lewis does this to criticize the Catholic Church’s treatment of Ambrosio and blame it for his character’s downfall. He also includes in these lines the implication that the power of the Catholic Church acts like the power of a despot. This is to further indict the Church with the cause of Ambrosio’s fall in sin, as he seems to say that their power over him is unavoidable and overpowering. The obsession the Church places upon Ambrosio’s forced innocence causes the congregation to study the man Ambrosio himself, instead of God or the Bible. Lewis writes, “ The only persons truly anxious to hear the Preacher were a few antiquated devotees, and half a dozen rival Orators, determined to find fault with and ridicule the discourse” (7). This line presents an argument regarding Ambrosio’s purity that mirrors one made about Antonia’s. It is assuming that Ambrosio’s well-known purity and innocence, which the Catholic Church holds so highly within his power to be a leader in the Church, actually makes him more desirable to see fall. The Orators don’t desire to learn from him, but rather see that his “ purity” be proven false, because of the pompous importance placed upon it. Ambrosio’s purity not only draws rival Orators in, but the Devil himself as well. The Devil cites Ambrosio’s innocence, and the overdone pride that is caused by this fetishization of his purity, as what that made him so desirable for the Devil to take, saying, “ I have him then in my power! This model of piety! This being without reproach! This Mortal who

<https://assignbuster.com/criticism-of-the-fetishization-of-purity-found-in-the-monk/>

placed his pun virtues on a level with those of Angels” (337). A very similar argument is made towards Antonia later on.

Antonia is both a cautionary tale of a secluded life of innocent purity and an echoing call for the education of women. Antonia grew up similar to Ambrosio, innocent and secluded. Lewis writes of this, “‘Tis a young creature’, said She, ‘who is totally ignorant of the world. She has been brought up in an old Castle in Murcia; with no other Society than her Mother’s, who, God help her! Has no more sense, good Soul, than is necessary to carry her Soup to her mouth” (11). This ignorance of the world is meant to make Antonia virtuous, as that’s what her parents and her aunt desire her to be. On the contrary, Lewis says that this is what makes Antonia all the more desirable to men and all the more likely to fall victim to lust, writing, “She looked round her with a bashful glance; and whenever her eyes accidentally met Lorenzo’s, She dropt them hastily upon her Rosary, Her cheek was immediately suffused with blushes, and She began to tell her beads; though her manner evidently showed that She knew not what She was about” (11). These lines tell us that though Antonia is ignorant of the world’s sins, she is not protected by them because of that ignorance. We see Antonia delve further into lust when she sees Ambrosio: “Antonia, while She gazed upon him eagerly, felt a pleasure fluttering in her bosom which till then had been unknown to her, and for which She in vain endeavored to account. She waited with impatience till the Sermon should begin; and when at length the Friar spoke, the sound of his voice seemed to penetrate into her very soul... Though no other of the Spectators felt such violent sensations as did the young Antonia, yet every one listened with interest and

emotion” (15). These “fluttering” pleasures and “violent sensations” that Antonia is feeling are utterly new to her, and uncontrollable for her. These feelings coupled with her ignorance of them lead her to be tricked by Ambrosio later on, where we again see that Antonia’s innocence causes men to desire her more: “An air of enchanting innocence and candour pervaded her whole form; and there was a sort of modesty in her very nakedness, which added fresh strings to the desires of the lustful Monk” (232). When Antonia’s flawed upbringing and the destruction it causes her to experience is, like Ambrosio’s, said to be at the fault of the Church, but it is also at the fault of the home and society in which she lives. Though Lewis extends the wish for better education to men as well, since Ambrosio is brought down by very similar faults in his character as Antonia is, one can see the result of an obstructed education in woman through Antonia’s upbringing. Antonia’s mother, Elvira, buys into the purity fetishization of the Church and raises Antonia to a parallel extreme to Ambrosio. Antonia must read a Bible that her mother has censored, leaving her to be ignorant of the very sins her mother wants her to not commit. Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman* that a woman would be more suitable to society and her home if she were educated as much as the man. This argument finds holding in regards to Antonia, for if she were to be educated on what the sins she is expected to resist are, she could hold true on the question she asked in the beginning of the story, “Does that make me a Saint?” (Lewis 15). To the Church, her ignorance would make her a “saint.” To Lewis, however, education would both protect her and make her more of a companion to society.

This criticism of Elvira's parenting extends the fault from the Catholic Church to secular society. Elvira represents to Lewis the social acceptance and adoption of Church doctrine. Seemingly fearing a repetition of her own life by her daughter, Elvira adheres to the social norms promoted by the Church as a parent. Lewis uses her as a warning against reacting this way, because while she was exposed to too much perhaps, her daughter is now ignorant of the dangers her mother faced rather than able to learn from them. She also is a representation of the idea that the Church may have good intentions in their motives, but their actions and promotions do not bring forth good results. Elvira has the right motives for her daughter, saying to Ambrosio, "Antonia secure from you? I will secure her! You shall betray no longer the confidence of parents!" (234) Her fault, however, is in the sheltering and censorship of her daughter's education due to her fear of the sin her daughter might fall into.

Lewis indicts the fetishization of purity of leading to the sexual degradation and social ignorance. Where does this degradation stem from? He gives different but similar answers for each of his main morally degraded characters. For Ambrosio, the cause of his degradation lies in the seclusion he is forced into by the Church. For Antonia, it is the lack of education she receives from her mother about the sin she is expected to avoid. Both characters, however, find their downfall stemming from the innocence that the Catholic Church fetishizes, according to Lewis. Thus, this anti-Catholic criticism doubles with secular social criticism of a norm that Lewis finds flawed and dangerous.

## **Works Cited**

Lewis, Matthew. *The Monk*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016. Print.

Milton, John. "A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing." London: 1644. Print.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. New York: Bartleby, 1999. Print.