

Discuss the anti-feminist sentiments in matthew gregory lewis's the monk essay



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The Monk by Mathew Gregory Lewis is a Gothic novel published in 1796. His novel follows the dark descent of the monastery's abbot, Ambrosio, and his fall from grace and virtue, as he engages in immoral acts. Enticed by the temptations of the devil's agent, the cross-dressing hermaphroditic Matilda, he succumbs to debauchery and witchcraft leading to the murder of his own mother, Elvira and incest with his sister, Antonia.

After succumbing to sin and having his plans found out, he finally sells his soul to the Devil, in exchange for freedom, but to no avail as the Devil reveals that Ambrosio has played into his plans. Deceived, Ambrosio is forced to suffer for six days alone and in terrible agony before his death and eternal damnation. Ambrosio's tale is coupled with the subplot of the nun, Agnes, and how she is left to die in the convent's dungeons as a result of the discovery of Agnes's pregnancy with her lover, Don Raymond.

The portrayal of the women, throughout the novel, as 'damsels in distress', can be seen to be degrading and anti-feminist in modern standards. Most of the female characters in The Monk meet their ends violently and brutally, and serve as a medium to either drive other characters to a doomed predestined fate, or to fuel Ambrosio's descent into sin and darkness.

The objective of this essay is to discuss the anti-feminist concerns through firstly, the portrayal of the female characters in the Monk, focusing on Antonia and Matilda, followed by the symbolism of the female and male powers in the book; and finally the element of the supernatural and their contributions to the plot. Rosario, albeit Matilda incognito, a "young novice"

(p 31) in monastery, is characterized as the main antagonist and the catalyst for Ambrosio's dark descent into debauchery and illicit acts.

Lewis's characterizing of Matilda as the "crafty spirit", the instrument of Satan in the female form who tempts Ambrosio with a combination of means and methods that undermine feminism or all semblance of female dignity. Matilda undermines female dignity subtly through the process of telling Ambrosio the story of her 'sister', whose infatuation with a married man led her to give everything she had to him and how his rejection 'broke her heart' and "carried [her] to her grave" (p 43).

This appeal to pity, not only undermines the female as being dependant on a man's affections to live, but also shows Matilda's cunningness, by planting the idea, in Ambrosio's mind that if he were to reject her, she would take her life. Apparently, Lewis is undermining the feminine on two layers, first through showing that women are weak and dependant on men and secondly through the slyness of Matilda to play on their traditional weaknesses to deceive the man. Through the use of diction and image, Lewis drives home the perverse portrayal of the submissive woman.

He presents Matilda as 'prostrating on the ground... waiting in silence the decision of [her] judge'. Having Matilda prostrate on the ground, alleviates Ambrosio visually and metaphorically, thereby empowering the superiority of male dominance and de-empowering the female. This can also be seen when Matilda "spr[an]g from the ground, ... [and] hastened to follow him... throwing herself in his passage and embracing his knees" (p 44). The dehumanization and objectification of women can be seen through Lewis's

description of Matilda's breasts, calling it a "beauteous orb" (p 49) of "dazzling whiteness" (p 49).

Lewis objectifies the female body and symbol, by calling it an "orb", no better a common trinket that is "dazzling" to Ambrosio. Also, how Lewis describes the unveiling of Matilda's breast, "... she lifted her arm, and made a motion as if to stab herself... She had torn open her habit, and her bosom was half exposed. The weapon's point rested upon her left breast" (p 49). Here the diction having the "weapon's point rest upon her ... breast" is not only sexual but it is also a crafty use of 'suicide' to seduce Ambrosio, completely eradicating any semblance of propriety from the chief female antagonist.

A theme that is most prevalent in the character of Matilda, or Rosario, is the blurring of gender roles, where it is unclear if Matilda, is a woman, a man, a hermaphrodite, or merely an entity that is sexualized to further both the plot's as well as Ambrosio's development as a character. It is also seen in her actions of disguising as a monk, to infiltrate the Monastery, which is a man's sanctuary from evil, that she is not only sly, but also evil.

When she masquerades Rosario, a man, 'he' is "careful to avoid the company with [other] monks" (p 31) with the exception of Ambrosio whom 'Rosario' adores with "a respect approaching idolatry" (p 31) and he eagerly seized 'ever means to ingratiate himself in [Ambrosio's] favour'. Although Matilda's gender is unclear, she is portrayed prevalently as a woman, and is still the main catalyst of Ambrosio's fall. Revealing her female body, Matilda

finally manages to seduce him into sleeping with her after he discovers that she is the model for his beloved painting of the Madonna.

Intelligent and wicked, it is through Matilda's plans that Ambrosio succumbs and ultimately, through her persuasion, sells his soul to the devil in exchange for freedom. This is further evidence that Lewis portrays female characters in an anti-feminist manner. In contrast to the sinister of Matilda but with equal pervasion against feminism is the character of Antonia who was portrayed by Lewis to be the "chaste and virtuous"(p 27) female protagonist, victimized by Ambrosio's dark desires.

Growing up in "no other society" (p 7) than that of her mother, Elvira's, she is described to be a "young creature" (p 7) who is "totally ignorant of the world" (p 7). Coupled with her ignorance, she serves to be a stereotypical 'hapless heroine', incapable of saving herself when Ambrosio forces himself on her. Where she only "prayed, wept and struggled", and even "exert[ing] all her strength" (p 208) to no avail. Lewis over-description of Antonia's helplessness despite her massive efforts, prove incapable of stopping Ambrosio's advances. In doing so, Lewis accentuates the mental and physical weaknesses of the female psyche and physiology.

The overall significance of Lewis's characterization of Antonia augments for the purpose of undermining the portrayal of the female through the hyperbolic description of Antonia's innocence and ignorance. Ultimately, Antonia is buried alive, brutally raped and murdered at the hands of her own brother Ambrosio, who "treated her with the rudeness of an unprincipled barbarian... wounded and bruised her tender limbs... heedless of her tears,

cries and entreaties”(p 306). Lewis highlights the helplessness of Antonia through her inability to defend her virginity and even her life.

The over-dramatization of Ambrosio’s ease in violating Antonia’s body and causing her death further emphasizes the dominating powers that medieval males have over the females through the combination of positional authority and physical strength. Beside characterization, Lewis’s undermining of feminism is further accentuated through his use of various symbolic images. The mirror that Matilda uses to tempt Ambrosio into coveting Antonia is symbolic. In *The Monk*, the mirror is used to show Ambrosio the scene of Antonia bathing. Functionally, the mirror becomes a tool for the man, Ambrosio, to violate a woman’s privacy and intimate space.

The mirror also serves to reflect as well as reveal, here the Antonia’s body is made visible and is objectified as a commodity for Ambrosio as well as the readers. It is also in this scene that Ambrosio completely renounces his vows and gives into his “ phrens[ied]” desires” (p215) and turn to witchcraft. Thus it can be concluded that the ultimate reason for Ambrosio’s descent into sin is credited to the irresistible temptation of the female body made irresistible through the mirror who is the connotative object to reveal the woman’s beauty. The myrtle branch that Ambrosio receives from Satan is also symbolic.

In Jewish mysticism, the myrtle branch symbolizes the phallic, masculine force in the universe. Lewis is, therefore, using the symbol as an aid to display male dominance over female vulnerability. Also symbolizing love and fertility of the pagan goddesses Aphrodite and Demeter, the acceptance of

the myrtle branch by Ambrosio signifies his turn to heretical beliefs, which stem from female gods and the promise of pleasure. * Throughout the novel, Lewis uses both female and male symbols to show the superiority of male and the subjugation of the female. This is shown most clearly in his treatment to the Monastery and the Convent respectively.

In *The Monk*, the Monastery serves to be a symbol of male religious power. Shown through the “crowd that [had] assembled” (p 3) and the fact that “the church of Capuchins [was] thronged with auditors” (p 4) on a Thursday, which is not a day of obligation, to hear Ambrosio preach. This shows the extent of influence that Ambrosio, the head abbot and a man, holds over the people. This also indirectly connotes the power of the Monastery over the masses. Although the novel follows the transgression of the head abbot, Ambrosio, the reputation of the Monastery ironically still remains intact.

Showing the prevailing theme of male dominance and its lasting influence. Once again, Lewis continues to show male superiority even when the main transgressor is a man. The Convent, however, unlike its male counterpart, is, at the end of the novel, “wrapped in flames” and “the whole [scene] presented ... devastation and horror”(p 286). The symbol of the female is undermined again as the Convent, which represents is a place for the protection of females and their chastity, has failed in its objective dramatically. Within the Convent, the Prioress herself misuses her power and plots to have the pregnant Angles starve to death.

The sacred purpose of the Convent being a place of sanctuary has now been reduced to a “gloomy vault”(p 323), where females are punished. The

destruction of the Convent by the hands of the masses, can also symbolize the punishment against females who defy Patriarchal order. As the Prioress herself ignores the Papal Bull (p165) to release Agnes from her vows and in turn the Prioress is trampled on and beaten to death. Lewis's embodiment of the supernatural takes the form of women. Undermining the feminine body, he reduces the role of the woman to be a spectacle of horror and terror to drive the plot forward.

The depiction of the bleeding nun and the story behind her appearance alludes to a sinful woman, who is deprived of a proper burial and her soul is left to wander the castle of Lindenberg (p 116) for eternity. Another example takes the form of Matilda, Satan's instrument, who drives the plot with her use of witchcraft and dark magic. She summons the last supernatural element, the embodiment of Satan, who is, although portrayed as a man, depicted to be feminine when subservient to Matilda and Ambrosio's wishes. Lewis's lurid tale of the monk Ambrosio shows its emphasis on male chauvinism.

Through the characterization of the sly Matilda and ignorant Antonia, he brings out the two extremes of a woman. One who is cunning as the other is feeble. This coupled with the clever use of symbolism alluding to male and female powers in the form of the Monastery, the Convent, the mirror and the myrtle branch. Elements of the supernatural acting as a driving force to the plot, fulfill the criterion of a gothic novel and further emphasize the female be akin to the Devil himself, thus the root of all evil. The Monk, truly, epitomizes male chauvinism and seeks to degrade the females in the 18th century society.

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