

A failure in characterization: female depiction in the monk



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In the novel *The Monk*, author Matthew Gregory Lewis' portrayal of women is often blatantly fused with patriarchal stereotypes. While not surprising in a piece of literature from this period, the weak development and cliché characteristics of many of the female characters provide head-scratching moments for the modern reader. Indeed, the novel is centered around two male protagonists, and the female characters often seem to function simply as disposable plot-advancing appendages. The most blatant examples of this tendency are found in the virginal women, Antonia and Virginia. Scarcely a word is said of them that does not enforce their banal purity, and the plot seems to sweep them up and spit them out without any difficulty. As a result, their characters are incomparably insipid, seeming to exist only as tokens of purity rather than real individuals with agency. Not all of the female characters are so easy to orient in this scheme, however. At a first glance, a few of these characters, including Matilda and Agnes, may seem more active participants in the plot. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that their narrative power only exists in exchange for overtly masculine affiliations, dehumanization, or nearly complete subordination to male characters. Thus, it can be seen that Lewis is ineffective in his attempts to present sympathetic female characters. This paper will consider the characters of Antonia, Matilda, and Agnes in this light.

Lewis' depiction of Antonia exemplifies the shallow conception of a number of the female characters in the book. From the beginning, Antonia is a passive, conveniently quiet female figure. From the scene where the reader meets her in the Church of the Capuchines until the point of her death in the catacombs, her character is designed essentially no development. In the

opening church scene, Antonia is veiled and says scarcely a word. Her aunt, Lionella (an archetypically shallow “ old maid” archetype) does all of the speaking for her. This first interaction essentially sets the scene for the rest of the novel. Although she does eventually remove her physical veil, Lewis leaves a figurative veil over her real characteristics, choosing to shroud her in tropes of purity and moral perfection. One of these cliches is apparent in how affected she is by the sermon in the church, wiping away a single tear after hearing his fire-and-brimstone discourse on spiritual morality and punishment. Her purpose in the novel is apparent within the first few pages: she is a sacrifice to vice, too pure for this world. On page 63, the gipsy makes this abundantly clear by relating that “ destruction o’er you hovers;/Lustful man and crafty devil/Will combine to work your evil;/and from earth by sorrows [drive]” (Lewis). The rest of the gipsy’s song only functions to add more certainty to the message that was already blatantly clear—she is going to be defiled by a “ crafty devil” and be driven from this earth. Immediately after these two scenes, the reader is presented with Lorenzo’s dream, yet another vision of Antonia’s fate and immaculacy, only this time in even clearer terms. In this dream, she is standing at the altar, on the point of marrying Don Lorenzo (clearly his fantasy). As he approaches, things quickly go awry. She moves to throw herself into his arms, and a gigantic figure with the words “ Pride! Lust! Inhumanity!” tattooed on his forehead opens a flaming abyss and drags her into it. She immediately rises up in white light, and ascends through the opened ceiling of the cathedral, which rings with “ harmonious voices” and shines with “ dazzling brightness” (Lewis, 55). In displaying her as an angel, Lewis is in no uncertain terms establishing her archetypal form. These three scenes effectively complete her development

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and establish her as a perfectly one-dimensional symbolic character.

Throughout the rest of the book, she remains essentially as the image of the perfect woman to court, who would prove an ideal wife. The majority of the rest of the scenes she appears in are either simple plot-advancing ones which increase her hopes of marrying Don Lorenzo, or eventually her being “defiled” by Ambrosio. In both, she is the passive object of the action rather than an agent.

A discussion of Matilda in this context could take up a whole book. Matilda is inarguably the most insidious character in the book, if you consider her as a human character. She is the instrument of Ambrosio’s destruction, working closely together with Lucifer himself to bring ruin upon him. She first lures Ambrosio into sin by fornicating with him, and then by degrees enables him to commit further crimes, culminating in the incestuous rape and murder of Antonia. She is also perhaps the most developed character in the book, and the most active in driving the plot. But in exchange for this activity, she is depicted first as a male (because, of course, only someone masculine would be able to have as much agency as she does in the book), and then, indeed, as an inhuman demon-sorcerer. With these facts in mind, it seems that Lewis is perhaps capable only of developing female characters that are either virginal and pure to the point of banality, or masculinized, inhuman, and evil. His major female characters thus seem only to fall at either end of this spectrum, or fail to gain the reader’s true sympathy.

One may argue that Agnes seems to provide a counterexample to this last point. She begins as a pure character, similar in many ways to Antonia, but appears more active in her destiny. She falls in love with Don Raymond,
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plays a part in conceiving the plan to remove her from her “house arrest,” and eventually becomes pregnant by Don Raymond. In the end, she is rescued from the monastery she has relegated herself (and subsequently been effectively imprisoned and tortured) and marries him. Thus, she is found to be imperfect, but not a moral anomaly like Matilda. However, each of these scenes can be analyzed to show that Lewis is uncomfortable writing a sympathetic active female character. When Agnes shares her plan to elope with Raymond, it is in the form of a note that is less than five lines in length. This is essentially the full extent of her involvement, apart from a short meeting scene in which she affirms her plan with Lorenzo before being discovered by her maid, Cunegonde. At least 90% of the ensuing rescue tale, as told by Don Raymond, is only a collection of scenes of Raymond pining after her and plotting his side of the escape plan. After this plan is botched by the appearance of the Bleeding Nun, Agnes fears she has been abandoned and agrees to go to the convent in Madrid out of desperation. The main critique of her character is that her story is told at varying levels of removal, and she is only allowed a short monologue in chapter 11 to explain her story (Lewis, 334-345). Her activity in the novel is therefore co-opted and seen through the lens of a male character, which removes a large amount of the power of her account. Therefore, Lewis’ sole attempt at a relatable female character in the novel is ineffective.

Overall, it is apparent that the novel *The Monk* is not successful at presenting realistic and sympathetic female characters. Antonia is effectively a symbol of purity and not much more, and Matilda is complex and active in the plot, but mostly by virtue of the fact that she is literally a demon under

Lucifer's control. Agnes, a possible counterexample to this trend, is portrayed ineffectively because she is not allowed to tell her own story, and is viewed almost exclusively through the lens of a male character. An analysis of these three characters, while by no means a complete look at the book, shows without question that Lewis fails in his presentation of female characters.