

# Sin and Sexuality in *The Monk*

A Zine by Sophie Butler

## Chapter Intro

My chapter, "Sin and Sexuality in *The Monk*" is an analysis of the 18th-century novel *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis. I focused on the themes of sexuality and gender presented in the novel, and connected them with the cultural and historical events at the time the novel was published.

## About the Author

Sophie Butler is a sophomore at Wake Forest University, planning to major in Classics with a minor in Religious studies.

## Cover

### Page description

At the top of the page is the title "Sin and Sexuality in The Monk", on top of a black and white image of a convent.

## Page 1: Background

### Page description

Three large red titles: Lewis, The Monk, and England with text underneath, on top of collaged images of an old handwritten letter, illustration of stained glass, and a gothic church.

## Main text

### Lewis

Matthew Lewis was born in London, England in 1775 to an affluent British family. After his education at Christ Church, Oxford, Lewis became involved with the British Embassy

and even served as a member of Parliament for several years. He wrote *The Monk* when he was only 19, and due to its success, he became known as “Monk” Lewis for the remainder of his career. He died in 1818, at age 42.

## The Monk, 1796

*The Monk* is a tale of the pious and vain Ambrosio, a superior among the Franciscan friars of the Catholic Church. The novel follows his descent into sin and depravity which stem from his inability to keep his vows of chastity. As he commits increasingly unholy acts, the other characters in the novel are drawn deeper into a web of temptation and immorality.

## England

The Monk was published during a time of major transformation in England. The French Revolution was nearing its end, fueling the anxieties of the public. It was also an era of rational thinking and questioning historical conventions, commonly referred to as the Enlightenment Period or the Age of Reason. This rejection of tradition created social and religious tensions among the people, which manifested in Lewis’s novel as not only a criticism of Catholic ideals, but a commentary on the societal fears of sexual and social deviants: feminine men, masculine women, and homosexuals.

# Page 2: Woman as The Temptress

## Page description

A large title that states: “Woman as the Temptress” on top of a red background, and a text box on top of a black and white image of a couple embracing, and a diagram of a chapel.

## Main text

The archetype of the temptress is embodied by almost every female character in *The Monk* and is seen as an unstoppable force with a disastrous effect on all of the male characters. Consequently, these women are blamed by the men for their own sexual transgressions. Ambrosio especially projects his guilt onto the women with whom he has sex.

## Page 3: Woman as The Temptress (2)

### Page description

Boxes of text on top of a reversed image of a building, with black and white decorative borders and an image in the bottom right corner of a nude woman reclining on a rock.

### Main text

Ambrosio first violates his vow of chastity with Matilda, who was living in disguise as a monk in order to get close to Ambrosio. Although they have become extremely close, when she reveals to him that she is in fact a woman, he orders her to leave immediately. Because she is a woman, she is no longer his friend but in fact a temptation. She desperately wants to remain his companion, and begs, "Temptation, say you? Forget that I am a woman, and it no longer exists: consider me only as a friend" (58). However Ambrosio cannot resist the temptation, and after they have sex he immediately blames her for seducing him into the act. "'Dangerous woman!' said he; 'into what abyss of misery have you plunged me! Should your sex be discovered, my honour, nay, my life, must pay for the pleasure of a few moments...Wretched Matilda, you have destroyed my quiet for ever!'" (193).

## Page 4: The Allure of Innocence

### Page description

A large title that states: "The Allure of Innocence" on a red background, with boxes of text on top of a decorative illustration, a black and white image of the Virgin Mary.

### Main text

Innocence, specifically the sexualization of and attraction to innocence in women, is a major theme of the novel. It can be seen most obviously in the opening moments of *The Monk* where Antonia is introduced.

[Antonia]

Antonia is a young woman who has been sheltered by her aunt her entire life. She is the epitome of purity at the beginning of the novel, so guarded against anything

immoral she is ordered by her aunt to “not seem to remember that there is such a thing as a man in the world, and you ought to imagine every body to be of the same sex as yourself” (19). Lorenzo, a noble in Madrid, develops an immediate attraction to Antonia due to her youth and innocence. He describes her as appearing to be “scarcely fifteen....with excess of timidity...She looked around her with a bashful glance; and whenever her eyes accidentally met Lorenzo’s, she dropped them hastily...her cheek was immediately suffused with blushes” (15). He notes these characteristics of her modesty and child-like nature as the traits that are most enticing to him.

## Page 5: The Allure of Innocence (2)

### Page description

In the middle of the page is a black and white image of a woman sitting outside and leaning against a wall, and on the top and bottom of the page are blocks of text.

### Main text

Antonia commands the attention of not only Lorenzo, but Ambrosio as well later on in the novel. After he grew tired of Matilda’s lack of remorse for their intimacy, he became drawn to Antonia for the mere fact that she was pure and he wanted to corrupt her. Upon seeing her for the first time, he exclaims: “How enchanting was the timid innocence of her eyes! And how different from the wanton expression, the wild luxurious fire, which sparkles in Matilda’s! Oh! Sweeter must one kiss be, snatched from the rosy lips of the first, than all the full and lustful favors bestowed so freely from the second” (209).

## Page 6: Reversing Roles of Gender

### Page description

A title on the top of the page that states: “Reversing Roles”, continued on the next page with text on top of a dark image of a ceiling, and on the bottom of the page is a black and white image of a nude woman on the ground reaching towards a snake with a human head.

## Main text

Many times in the novel, female and male characters are seen taking on opposite gender roles, specifically in sexual situations. Lewis does this by using gendered language in the way he describes his characters. He highlights more feminine traits of Ambrosio, for example, by emphasizing his innocence, ignorance of sex, and by generally describing him in the way one might think of a young virginal woman. Just as Antonia is completely ignorant of sex, Ambrosio is said to be "so strict an observer of chastity, that he knows not in what consists the difference of man and woman" (19).

## Page 7: Reversing Roles of Gender (2)

### Page description

A title on the top of the page that states "Of Gender" continued from the previous page, underneath is a block of text on top of a photograph of a church ceiling, and on the bottom of the page is an image of a nude man reclining on the ground reaching towards his left.

## Main text

By contrast, Matilda, Ambrosio's confidant turned seductress, takes on the masculine role. Matilda is the one who seduces Ambrosio, with her experience of sex and worldly knowledge. She is the one who corrupts Ambrosio and robs him of his virtue, reassuring him when he expresses remorse for his sins. An interesting aspect of this gender role reversal is the fact that Matilda is initially disguised as a man, where she earns Ambrosio's trust and deep admiration. The two have a very intimate relationship that only turns explicitly sexual once she confesses that she is a woman.

## Page 8: Sexual Guilt and Sin

### Page description

A title on the top of the page that states: "Sexual guilt and sin" on top of a photograph of a church ceiling, underneath are blocks of texts on a red background, and two images of tombstones.

## Main text

Acts of sin as defined by the Catholic Church are committed throughout *The Monk*. Early in the novel, Lewis highlights the relationship between sin and punishment when Ambrosio discovers a note belonging to Agnes, one of the nuns of the abbey. From the note he learns Agnes is pregnant, and the father of her baby is planning on aiding in her escape so they can be together. Ambrosio is horrified, and berates Agnes for her transgressions. "You have abandoned yourself to a seducer's lust; you have defiled the sacred habit by your impurity," (44) All the while, he is hiding the secret of his temptation to Matilda. Agnes replies, "And where is the merit of your boasted virtue? What temptations have you vanquished? Coward! You have fled from it, not opposed seduction." (46) Agnes can accept both the breaking of her vows as a nun, and her sexual temptation as a natural part of her being. Ambrosio, however, is so disturbed by his own innate sexuality, he punishes another for the same crime of which he is responsible.

## Page 9: Sexual Guilt and Sin (2)

### Page description

A title on top of a black and white background that states: "the catacombs", underneath is a block of text on top of a black and white image of catacombs with a wall of skulls.

## Main text

The Catacombs: Sexual guilt is a major theme of *The Monk*, and is a feeling shared by all. At the end of the novel, the characters find themselves in the catacombs, where their worst and most egregious crimes come to light. The physical catacombs can be seen as a metaphor for the subconscious, the deepest part of one's mind, home to extreme guilt, taboo thoughts, and immoral deeds. Many believe through this exploration of guilt, Lewis is attempting to express his own feelings of otherness.

## Page 10: Homosexuality

### [Page description]

A title on top of the page states: "homosexuality", underneath is a block of text on top of a collage of gothic architecture, with a black and white image of a man praying.

## Main text

Many suspect *The Monk* to be in part a representation of Lewis's own frustration and guilt as a homosexual man in 18th-century London. Analyzing *The Monk* through this lens allows it to be read in a way that is much more personal than simply a criticism of the Catholic Church that it appears to be on the surface. George E. Haggerty explores this in his article "Literature and Homosexuality in the Late Eighteenth Century" and offers the idea that the novel can be seen as Lewis "playing out the drama of his worst fears about himself and his place in society." The relationship between Ambrosio and Rosario (Matilda's male identity) at the beginning of the novel does support this idea, as the subtext between the two is written with such intimacy that this part of the novel was often attacked by critics for its homoeroticism. On this, Haggerty states that the novel might be an outlet in which Lewis can express his homosexuality openly without anyone knowing. He writes: "for Lewis sexuality seems so deeply rooted in aberrant desire and guilt-ridden fear that no easy expression of sexual identity is possible."

## Page 11: Libel? Obscenity? Pornography?

### Page description

A title on the top of the page that states: "Libel? Obscenity? Pornography?" on top of an illustration of a stained glass window and a photograph of the interior of a church, on top are blocks of text.

## Main text

Thomas James Mathias

In his satiric poem *The Pursuits of Literature* Mathias categorizes *The Monk* as a work of pornography, belonging to the category of obscene libel, and unfit for the public. He specifically claims that Lewis could be charged with sacrilege, due to the commentary of Catholicism in the novel, specifically certain passages about the Bible. He writes:

"But though that Garden-God forsaken dies, Another Cleland see in Lewis rise.

Why sleep the ministers of truth and law?

Has the State no control, no decent awe,

While each with each in madd'ning orgies vie,  
Pand'ers to lust and licens'd blasphemy?  
Can Senates hear without a kindred rage?  
Oh may a Poet's light'ning blast the page,  
Nor with a bolt of Nemesis in vain  
Supply the laws, that wake not to restrain." (292-95)

## Censorship

Following these criticisms, Lewis published a fourth edition of the novel. According to Louis Peck and Parreaux, other critics of *The Monk*, if Lewis had not put out this censored version of the novel, he likely would have faced legal prosecution on account of obscene libel. This charge pertained to any work deemed as obscene and a threat to public morals.

# Page 12: Criticisms

## Page description

On top of the page is a title that states: "Criticisms" on top of collaged images of an interior of a church and black and white photograph, on top are blocks of texts.

## Main text

Upon its initial publication, *The Monk* was widely popular, and even received positive reviews despite its salacious content. This version however was published anonymously. Only after the second edition was published, in which Lewis decided to take credit for his success by including his initials, did harsh criticisms begin to appear. This is thought to be a consequence of his position as a member of Parliament, as many criticisms and generally negative opinions of *The Monk* came from government officials. As Michael Gamer states in his article "Genres for the Prosecution: Pornography and the Gothic": "The small flourish of these two final letters cost him dearly; reviewers, satirists, clergy members, and politicians began calling for the book's suppression for obscenity and blasphemy, sometimes even reversing their prior positive reviews."



# Page 13: Criticisms (2)

## Page description

Several blocks of texts on top of collaged photographs of exterior and interior of churches, and a monk praying, with a black and white decorative border.

## Main text

### William Wilberforce

In William Wilberforce's diary from the year 1797, he writes: "Dined Lord Chancellor's-Loughborough, Windham, Pitt, Lord Chatham, Westmoreland, &c.-talk rather loose. I fear not guarded and grave enough. Much talk about 'The Monk,' a novel by Lewis' son" (Wilberforce and Wilberforce 183-84). This is significant as Wilberforce was the head of the Proclamation Society, an organization created for the purpose of suppressing libel and obscenity.

### Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was another harsh critic of Matthew Lewis. He wrote in his "Critical Review" from February 1797 that *The Monk* was a dangerous work of literature for the effects it could have on readers' morals, specifically children. "The Monk is a romance which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale."

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