

The Construction Of Horror In *The Monk*

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to show the difference between terror and horror, and focus on the construction of horror in The Monk at the level of the setting, the landscape, the meaningfulness of the psychology of characters as well as the style. These elements constitute the yardstick in the artistic foundation of this piece of work.*

KEYWORDS: *Horror, Gothic, Phantasmagoria, Terror.*

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I. INTRODUCTION.

The Monk – published in 1796 – was Matthew Lewis’s masterpiece that appeared in an era of agitation and turmoil. Many critics attributed the term ‘Monk’ as a nickname to the author himself. In the introduction embedded within the book, Christopher Mac Lachlan admits that “Matthew Lewis, was commonly referred to as ‘Monk’ Lewis” (*The Monk* vii). Departing from Ann Radcliffe’s inclination to terror, Lewis’s work is believed to hinge on horror which is constructed on many levels.

II. HORROR AND TERROR.

To begin with, it is important to draw a distinction between terror and horror. Ann Radcliff in her posthumous essay “On the Supernatural in Poetry” infuses her own vision on the concept of terror through Mr. W. For her, “terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a higher degree of life, the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (qtd. in Van der Lans 44-5). In this respect, terror carries a positive impact, for it “is clearly the preferred emotion” while “horror has a more negative effect on the mind of characters” (Van der Lans 45).

III. THE SETTING.

The elevation of horror in *The Monk* is attested in the choice of the setting. The castle, the convent, the vaults are places where horrible scenes have taken place. Not only do they shake the body, but also engulf the characters in a state of disgust. First, the ‘castle of Lindenburg’ - where Raymond once enters to see Agnes - is full of ghosts, vampires and specters. Furthermore, the scene where Beatrice de Las Cisternas kills the baron of Lindenburg is quite paralyzing “[t]he fatal night arrived. The baron slept in the arms of his perfidious mistress, when the castle bell struck ‘one.’ Immediately Beatrice drew a dagger [...] and plunged it in her paramour’s heart” (*The Monk* 151-2).

Lewis’s success lies in his ‘excess.’ In a sense, what makes *The Monk* a gothic novel resides in the author’s excessive punctuation of the ‘shakable’ scenes. The convent is where the heroine Agnes is imprisoned and treated savagely. The prioress is intent on expiring the soul of Agnes after discovering she is pregnant. Her destiny has been traced by this woman who discloses fervent volition to exercise harshness on her. She claims that “the crime of Agnes shews [her] the necessity of their revival” (46-7). By breaking her vow to remain chaste, Agnes’s illicit pregnancy has given the prioress green light, and unlimited privilege to kill the poor soul. St Clare’s convent witnesses the horrible crime of the murder of Agnes; Lewis scrutinizes the heartless attempt of the prioress who – with the help of four nuns “guessed her design: she seized her forcibly by the arm, and pushed her back [...] drawing a dagger, and placing it at the breast of the unfortunate Agnes” (304).

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Besides, 'the Church of the Capuchins' becomes another spot for crime, hypocrisy and murder. The Abbot Ambrosio unrestrictedly musters his courage and arranges inhuman crimes against his mother Elvira and sister Antonia. He abuses Antonia sexually behind the walls of a holy building and has frequent sexual intercourse with Matilda, the demon. Worse than that, he kills Elvira heartlessly:

Ambrosio struggled in vain to disengage himself. Elvira quitted not her hold, but redoubled her cries for succor [...] he adopted a resolution equally desperate and savage [...] he grasped Elvira's throat so as to prevent her continuing her clamour, and with the other [hand], dashing her violently upon the ground. (*The Monk* 262)

When it comes to Antonio's death, Ambrosio discloses a mingled emotion of passion and menace. He rapes her and enjoys seeing her entombed in the vaults. The scene of her being thrown in the tomb aggravates the state of panic. The description of Antonia, agonized to death, is quite disgusting, "she was half naked: her long disheveled hair fell in disorder over her face [...] Lorenzo stopped: he was petrified with horror. He gazed upon the miserable object with disgust and pity" (316-7). In this instance, Lewis manages through the abundant use of adjectives and frequent pauses to describe the darker side of the church where beneath in the almost dead corpse of Antonia reposes in extreme humiliation. Stripped of her dignity and honor, she counts the days that may approach her to death. Thus, horror is experienced in a gloomy setting where death hovers around each corner. Following the same vein, Botting argues that "Horror is most experienced in underground vaults or burial chambers. It freezes human faculties, rendering the mind passive and immobilizing the body. The cause is generally a direct encounter with physical mortality, the touching of a cold corpse, the sight of a decaying body" (Botting 75). The setting fits the very notion of phantasmagoria where ghosts, vampires and even monsters hover over the whole narrative. However, Lewis expands the notion of terror and delves further into the territory of the mind. He goes beyond the mere sphere of terror and dwells in the realm of horror, for it is "an emotion so strong that is usually destructive in its effect" in Malcolm Ware's own words (qtd. in Vander Lans 53).

IV. THE LANDSCAPE.

The detailed description of the landscape is telling. It draws a clear framework for the reader to share the characters' extreme feelings of anxiety and panic. The village reflects the decaying aspect of rogues, robbers and bandits. In this respect, Raymond says: "I told the countrymen that [...] I had passed through the village of Rosenwald. They shook their heads wistfully, and made signs to each other that I must certainly be delirious" (*The Monk* 138). Besides, the element of the 'sublime' is linked to the Gothic genre. It is defined as "a quality of awesome grandeur in art or nature, which some 18th-century writers distinguished from the merely beautiful." (Baldick 247). Edmund Burke further expands the notion of the sublime in his "influential Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), which argues that the sublime is characterized by obscurity, vastness, and power, while the beautiful is light, smooth, and delicate. The 18th-century enthusiasm for the sublime in landscape and the visual" (Baldick 248).

Sublimity constitutes the yardstick of Ann Radcliffe's works. Devendra Prasad Varma claims that Radcliffe excels in "the accumulation of successive details: desolate scenery, tempests, screeching owls, hovering bats, exciting events in burial vaults or on dark, windswept moors; melancholy birds circle portentously over dilapidated battlements" (qtd. in Van der Lans 20).

Lewis's insistence on darker scenes divorces his work from showing any affinity with the 'grandeur' as being the attribute to the 'sublime.' Unlike Radcliffe, who explores the beauty and aesthetic aspect of the landscape, Lewis's Gothic novel is classified as a horror narrative and by extension, it gives voice to the macabre and phantasmagoric space. Lewis gives his landscapes darker auras to fit the very palpable and wished-for effect of extreme loss of reason. He rids his characters of the opportunity to alleviate or mollify their accumulated pains through a symbiotic embrace with the healing aspect of nature in its vastness. In contrast to openness, Lewis's characters are provided with some kind of meditation or pondering. They are confined in closed spaces and tempestuous landscapes.

They are on the move, wrapped in acute trouble. A good example occurs when Raymond intends to stay in Strasbourg for relaxation; his hope has been dashed by another interrupting incident. As a consequence, he resumes his journey. The landscape projects the mood of horror that will enthrall the poor soul when Raymond decides to stay with Agnes in the castle. Lewis plunges the reader in a gloomy picture of nature that goes hand in hand with the condensation of tension. The season is winter- emblematic of coldness, frigidity and panic. Raymond argues:

I resumed my journey, intending to reach Strasbourg that night. My hopes, however, were frustrated by the breaking down of my chaise: the accident happened in the middle of thick forest [...] It was the depth of winter; the night was already closing round us [...] that season [was] very far away from agreeable. (*The Monk* 87)

The season serves to anticipate the disagreeable scenes to come where Raymond will be horrified. In this novel, the emphasis on the tempestuous side of nature helps convey the fact that the vastness and brightness of nature do not fit the atmosphere of accumulated horror “the winds howled around us, the lightning flashed the thunder roared tremendously. Never did I behold so frightful a tempest!” (*The Monk* 137).

Turning our attention to the idea of ‘false sublimity,’ it is important to add the significance of the artificial nature. The garden, for instance, when interfered by man, loses its grandeur and infinity. Its artificiality reflects the claustrophobia in which all characters abide by. The garden is associated with evil; it is where Agnes gets conceived. Indeed, woebegone by the woeful picture of Agnes’s punishment, Ambrosio finds solace in the ‘abbey-garden.’ Instead, he gets afflicted by tension when Rosario interrupts his transient privacy. Despite the external natural components, it is then true that the garden remains fabricated:

In all Madrid there was no spot more beautiful, or better regulated [...], and, though artfully arranged, seemed only planted by the hand of Nature. Fountains, springing from basins of white marble, [...] the walls were entirely covered by Jessamine, vines and honey – suckles [...] the nightingale poured for her melodious murmur from the shelter of an artificial wilderness. (*The Monk* 47)

As a tale characterized by horror, Fred Botting argues that “*The Monk* is about excess” (77). Lewis immerses his novel in dark scenes of murder, rape and violence. The setting and the landscape are evocative of gloomy cadences, shrouding the characters in a state of inertia and mental distress. There is inclination towards destructive actions, and the characters’ inner whipped soul is at the heart of *The Monk*. By focusing on the characters’ actions, Lewis tends to evacuate his novel of the essence of the sublime. These actions catch the breath and unravel the mood of horror rather than on the immense beauty of nature including mountains, hills or rivers.

V. THE CHARACTERS’ PSYCHE.

The description of the psyche of characters is another dimension of the horror narrative. Unlike Radcliffe, Lewis shuns the supernatural element at the expense of the psychological aspect. Every character is wrapped in spirals of loss. Ambrosio loses mental stability and no longer enjoys tranquility of the mind. He throws himself in a world of sin from which he is barely able to escape. His sexual relation with Matilda has crippled him. Haunted by his evil deeds, Ambrosio starts to lose his temper, feeling the roof tumbling above his head. Woebegone, he finds himself shrouded in a double limbo, tossed between two distinct extremes, two divergent entities: virtue and vice. The illicit sexual impulse dulls his senses and thus he is denied all kinds of order or cognitive awareness of what is happening to him. Stricken by confusion and shame, Ambrosio vents his anger on ‘dangerous’ Matilda: “[H]e looked forward with horror: his heart was despondent” (*The Monk* 193). The agony he feels is aggravated as instead of getting stuck within him, words begin to float in a ruminating way from his mouth, creating by extension a staunch and coarse resonance in Matilda’s ears “dangerous woman! [...] into what abyss of misery have you plunged [me]” (*The Monk* 193). This voiced out utterance eerily and intentionally mirrors his descent towards dementia. The intensified dilemma is one of the main symbolic vehicles through which Lewis depicts the horrors of the hypocritical drives and double facets of the supposedly ‘virtuous’ monk. He is the synecdoche for the Church as a religious institution. In this novel, Ambrosio is driven mad by his evil deeds while being aware of his move away from morality. He avows: “fool that I was to trust myself to your seductions! What can be done? How can my offence be expiated? What atonement can purchase the pardon of my crime? Wretched Matilda, you have destroyed my quiet forever!” (193).

On the other side, Lorenzo’s psyche is endangered. He also goes zero strides towards restoring his mental disorder after having been witness to his beloved’s dead corpse. In this respect, words speak for themselves in a vexed and fragmented way. The abundant use of adjectives is a case in point. They foreground Lorenzo’s tormented and deranged soul:

Lorenzo stopped:/ he was petrified with horror./ He gazed upon the miserable object with disgust and pity./ He trembled at the spectacle./ He grew sick at heart:/ his strength failed him./ and his

limbs were unable to support his weight./ He was obliged to lean against the low wall which was near him,/ unable to go forward or to address the sufferer. (*The Monk* 317)

The afore-mentioned quote projects the idea of ‘excess’ of horrible scenes that have wrapped both Ambrosio and Lorenzo in a pang of instability. All these “violent images and extravagant scenes” intensify the state of paranoia and neurosis (Botting 79).

After we have glossed over the construction of the horror narrative in terms of setting, landscapes and psychology, it is worth dissecting in minute details the structural framework of *The Monk*. Several parts of the novel are characterized by discontinuity. The stilted discourse of characters mirrors this fragmentation. Each one speaks in an intermittent, scattered voice which is in line with a slowed-down pace. It reflects the dislocation of speech acts. The characters’ innermost feelings of agony are stylistically determined: lucid disposition of pauses and a number of scattered phrases are the norm. The pang of horror that assails Raymond embraces the fragmented kind of pace he speaks with. He breathlessly says:

I ventured to look out./ The beams of the moon permitted me to distinguish a man,/ whom I had no difficulty to recognize for my host./ I watched his movements./ He walked swiftly,/ then stopped and seemed to listen:/ he stamped upon the ground,/ and beat his stomach with his arms,/ [...] if a voice was heard [...], if a bat flitted past (*The Monk* 95).

At the level of the plotline, *The Monk* is made up of two plots that follow no linear structure. The intermingling of two plots aggravates the scene of panic. Besides, the complexity of the work lies in being awash with epigraphs. They serve to anticipate horrible scenes by hinting at them in an implicit way. It is a tool manipulated by both Radcliffe and Lewis to magnify the essence of terror and horror. A good example occurs when the epigraph advances the scene of Ambrosio’s upbraiding of Matilda for her temptation.

The presence of intertextuality in this work underlines the intensified panic. Intertextuality is “a term coined by Julia Kristeva to designate the various relationships that a given TEXT may have with other texts” (Baldick 128). The intertexts help evoke the idea of anticipating shocking incidents that will occur to some characters. For instance, the “Gipsy’s Song” is quite revealing. As the Gipsy woman looks at Antonia’s hand, she foretells her:

But, alas! This line discovers
That destruction o’er you hovers;
Lustful man and crafty devil
Will combine to work your evil;
And from earth by sorrows driven,
Soon your soul must speed to heaven. (*The Monk* 37)

VI. CONCLUSION.

The Monk as a work that pertains to the Gothic genre foregrounds the concept of horror through the setting, the structure and the characters’ psychology. It is paramount to pigeon-hole that this novel “manifests the first of the three things David Punter argues are definitive of Gothic; that is, the concept of paranoia [...] ‘the notion of the barbaric,’ that is, the limits of the civilized, and the nature of the taboo, ‘areas of socio-psychological life which offend” (qtd. in *The Monk* xxii-xxiii).

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