

The Monk

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The Monk: A Romance is a Gothic novel by Matthew Gregory Lewis, published in 1796. It was written before the author turned 20, in the space of 10 weeks.

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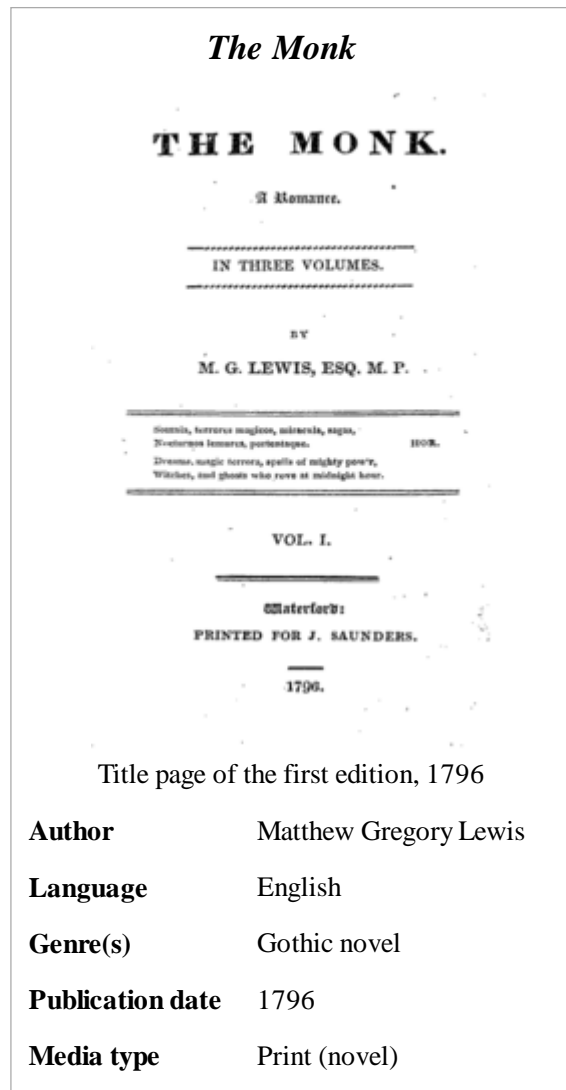
Plot summary

The story concerns Ambrosio - a pious, well-respected monk in Spain - and his violent downfall. He is undone by carnal lust for his pupil, a woman disguised as a monk (Matilda), who tempts him to transgress, and, once satisfied by her, is overcome with desire for the innocent Antonia. Using magic spells, Matilda aids him in seducing Antonia, whom he later rapes and kills. Matilda is eventually revealed as an instrument of Satan in female form, who has orchestrated Ambrosio's downfall from the start. In the middle of telling this story Lewis frequently makes further digressions, which serve to heighten the Gothic atmosphere of the tale while doing little to move along the main plot. A lengthy story about a "Bleeding Nun" is told, and many incidental verses are introduced. A second romance, between Lorenzo and Antonia, also gives way to a tale of Lorenzo's sister being tortured by hypocritical nuns (as a result of a third romantic plot). Eventually, the story catches back up with Ambrosio, and in several pages of impassioned prose, Ambrosio is delivered into the hands of the Inquisition; he escapes by selling his soul to the devil for his deliverance from the death sentence which awaits him. The story ends with the devil preventing Ambrosio's attempted final repentance, and the sinful monk's prolonged torturous death. Ambrosio finds out by the devil that the woman that he had raped and killed, Antonia, was indeed his sister.

Publication history

First edition

The first edition of *The Monk* was published sometime between 1795 and 1796. Older scholarship tended



Title page of the first edition, 1796

Author	Matthew Gregory Lewis
Language	English
Genre(s)	Gothic novel
Publication date	1796
Media type	Print (novel)

toward a 1795 publication year, but because no copies of the book so dated could be found, and because contemporary sources did not begin announcing or referencing the work until March 1796, the latter date began to be preferred.^[1] It was published anonymously, but for Lewis's initials after the preface^[1] and was highly praised by reviewers in *The Monthly Mirror* of June 1796 as well as the *Analytical Review*.^[2]

Second edition

The first edition sold well, and a second edition was published in October of 1796.^[2] The good sales and reviews of the first had emboldened Lewis, and he signed the new edition with his full name, adding "M.P." to reflect his newly acquired seat in the House of Commons.^[3] The book continued to rise in popularity, but in February 1797 review by a writer for the *European Magazine*, the novel was criticized for "plagiarism, immorality, and wild extravagance."^[2]

Fourth edition

Lewis wrote his father on 23 February 1798, attempting to make reparations: the controversy caused by *The Monk* was a source of distress to his family.^[4] As recorded by Irwin: "*twenty* is not the age at which prudence is most to be expected. Inexperience prevented my distinguishing what should give offence; but as soon as I found that offence was given, I made the only reparation in my power: I carefully revised the work, and expunged every syllable on which could be grounded the slightest construction of immorality. This, indeed, was no difficult task, for the objection rested entirely on expressions too strong, and words carelessly chosen; not on the sentiments, characters, or general tendency of the work."^[4]

The fourth edition of the novel was published in 1798, and, according to Peck, "contains nothing which could endanger the most fragile virtue... He expunged every remotely offensive word in his three volumes, with meticulous attention to *lust*. Ambrosio, formerly a *ravisher*, becomes an *intruder* or *betraye*r; his *incontinence* changes to *weakness* or *infamy*, his *lust* to *desire*, his *desires* to *emotions*. Having *indulged in excesses* for three editions, he *committed an error* in the fourth."^[5] Lewis wrote an apology for *The Monk* in the preface of another work; as recorded by Peck: "Without entering into the discussion, whether the principles inculcated in "The Monk" are right or wrong, or whether the *means* by which the story is conducted is likely to do more mischief than the *tendency* is likely to produce good, I solemnly declare, that when I published the work I had no idea that its publication *could* be prejudicial; if I was wrong, the error proceeded from my judgment, not from my intention. Without entering into the merits of the advice which it proposes to convey, or attempting to defend (what I now condemn myself) the *language and manner* in which that advice was delivered, I solemnly declare, that in writing the passage which regards the Bible (consisting of a single page, and the only passage which I ever wrote on the subject) I had not the most distant intention to bring the sacred Writings into contempt, and that, had I suspected it of producing such an effect, I should not have written the paragraph."^[6]

Reviews

In the same month as the second edition was published, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote a piece in *The Critical Review*, an important literary magazine of the day, in which he both praises and criticizes the novel harshly. He acknowledges that it is "the offspring of no common genius," that the "underplot... is skilfully and closely connected with the main story, and is subservient to its development," that the story Lewis weaves in about the bleeding nun is "truly terrific" and that he cannot recall a "bolder or more happy conception than that of the burning cross on the forehead of the wandering Jew." Coleridge gives his highest praise to the character of Matilda, whom he believes is "the author's master-piece. It is, indeed, exquisitely imagined, and as exquisitely

supported. The whole work is distinguished by the variety and impressiveness of its incidents; and the author everywhere discovers an imagination rich, powerful, and fervid. Such are the excellencies” (7). Coleridge continues by saying that “the errors and defects are more numerous, and (we are sorry to add) of greater importance.” Because “the order of nature may be changed whenever the authors purposes demand it” there are no surprises in the work. Moral truth cannot be gleaned because Ambrosio was destroyed by spiritual beings, and no earthly being can sufficiently oppose the “power and cunning of supernatural beings.” Scenes of grotesquery and horror abound, which are a proof of “a low and vulgar *taste*.” The character of Ambrosio is “impossible... contrary to nature.” Coleridge argues that the most “grievous fault... for which no literary excellence can atone” is that “our author has contrived to make [tales of enchantments and witchcraft] ‘pernicious’ , by blending, with an irreverent negligence, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition,” commenting with the immortal line that “the Monk is a romance, which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale.” Coleridge finishes the piece by explaining that he was “induced to pay particular attention to this work, from the unusual success which it has experienced” and that “the author is a man of rank and fortune. Yes! the author of the Monk signs himself a LEGISLATOR! We stare and tremble.”^[7]

Thomas James Mathias followed Coleridge’s lead in *The Pursuits of Literature*, a poem in the 18th-Century satiric tradition, but takes a step farther than Coleridge by claiming that a specific passage made the novel indictable under law.^[8] The passage, found in Chapter Seven Volume II, discusses an interpretation of the Bible as too lewd for youth to read.

These two major pieces lead the way for a multitude of other attacks on the novel, from such sources as the *Monthly Review*, the *Monthly Magazine*, and the *Scots Magazine*; the last of these attacked the novel six years after its publication.^[9] It was a general trend amongst those who criticized, however, to offer praise of some aspect of the novel. “It looked,” writes Parreaux, “as if every reviewer or critic of the book, no matter how hostile he was, felt compelled to at least pay lip-service to Lewis’s genius.”^[10]

The criticism of his novel, extending even into criticism of his person, never truly left Lewis, and an attack on his character was published by the *Courier* posthumously, calling itself a “just estimate of his character.”^[11] As recorded by MacDonald: “He had devoted the first fruits of his mind to the propagation of evil, and the whole long harvest was burnt up ... There is a moral in the life of this man ... He was a reckless defiler of the public mind; a profligate, he cared not how many were to be undone when he drew back the curtain of his profligacy; he had infected his reason with the insolent belief that the power to corrupt made the right, and that conscience might be laughed, so long as he could evade law. *The Monk* was an eloquent evil; but the man who compounded it knew in his soul that he was compounding poison for the multitude, and in that knowledge he sent it into the world.”^[11]

There were those who defended *The Monk* as well. Joseph Bell, publisher of the novel, spent half of his essay *Impartial Structures on the Poem Called “The Pursuits of Literature” and Particularly a Vindication of the Romance of “The Monk”* defending Lewis;^[12] Thomas Dutton, in his *Literary Census: A Satirical Poem*, retaliated against Mathias and praised Lewis;^[13] Henry Francis Robert Soame compared Lewis to Dante in his *The Epistle in Rhyme to M. G. Lewis, Esq. M. P.*^[14]

“Assurances that *The Monk* was not as dangerous as its enemies maintained failed to dampen its success with the reading public,” writes Peck. “They had been told that the book was horrible, blasphemous, and lewd, and they rushed to put their morality to the test.”^[14] Indeed, the novel’s popularity continued to rise and by 1800 there were five London and two Dublin editions.^[15]

Critique

The Monk is one of the more lurid and "transgressive" of Gothic novels. It is also the first book to feature a priest as the villain. In this respect it would serve as a model for such future works of literature as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.^[*citation needed*]

This novel shares a number of traits with Ann Radcliffe's gothic novels *The Italian* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Featuring demonic pacts, rape, incest, and such props as the Wandering Jew, ruined castles, and the Spanish Inquisition, *The Monk* serves more or less as a compendium of Gothic taste. Ambrosio, the hypocrite foiled by his own lust, and his sexual misconduct inside the walls of convents and monasteries, is a vividly portrayed villain, as well as an embodiment of much of the traditional English mistrust of Roman Catholicism, with its intrusive confessional, its political and religious authoritarianism, and its cloistered lifestyles. The American fictitious anti-Catholic libel, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, borrowed much from the plot of this novel. Despite the critics' comments on its crudeness and lack of depth, it proved to be one of the most popular novels of the Romantic Period.

It is among the many Gothic works referenced in the Jane Austen novel *Northanger Abbey*.

This novel was considered by the Marquis de Sade as a reaction to the 1789 French Revolution, with Lewis using the Gothic to express concerns circulating around England in the Romantic Period. Concerns such as social stability and the mis-use of power are some of the issues explored.

Robert Miles suggests that *The Monk* is about “veiling and disguise”^[16] and that it is possible to read into the novel a possible expression of the “open secret” of Lewis’s homosexuality through the characters of Ambrosio, Rosario/Matilda, and Lucifer.^[17] “In the end, Ambrosio’s desires are insatiable... But Ambrosio’s desire may be insatiable because it is denied its true object. The closest the text gets to disclosing what this object might be is an elaborately staged event which obfuscates as it reveals. In the centre of the text, in quick succession, Matilda performs two acts of conjuration. In the first, Antonia’s coy, modest, naked body is displayed before Ambrosio in Matilda’s magic mirror. In the second, in labyrinthine caverns beneath the monastery, Matilda invokes an androgynous, decidedly camp ‘Daemon’: ‘a Youth seemingly scarce eighteen, the perfection of whose form and face was unrivalled’. The ‘beautiful’ figure, ‘perfectly naked’, with ‘silken locks’ and surrounded by ‘clouds of rose-coloured lights’ (277), appears as the key to Ambrosio’s possession of Antonia. The figure, at Matilda’s strident behest finally relinquishes the ‘myrtle’ which will enable Antonia’s seduction. The parallelism of the stagin raises the question of causation: is the Daemon the key to the sexual possession of Antonia, or is Antonia’s image a screen for Ambrosio’s true object of desire, the epicene devil?”^[16]

Adaptations

Edward Loder used the work as the basis for his 1855 opera *Raymond and Agnes*.^[18]

The French writer Antonin Artaud's only full-length novel of the same name is a reworking of Lewis's plot. Artaud discarded some of the original's subplots and added others of his own, wanting his version to be even more shocking and subversive than the original.^[19]

Luis Buñuel and Jean-Claude Carrière attempted to film a version of *The Monk* in the 1960s, but the project was halted due to lack of funds.^[20] Buñuel's friend, the Greek director Ado Kyrou, used this script as the basis for

his 1972 film version. *Le Moine* (English *The Monk*) boasted an international cast with Franco Nero in the title role. The film also starred Nathalie Delon, Eliana de Santis, Nadja Tiller and Nicol Williamson.^[21]

In 1990 *The Monk* (film) was produced by Celtic Films. It starred Paul McGann as the title character, and was written and directed by Francisco Lara Polop.^[22]

A stage adaptation by Christopher Renstrom was produced off-off-Broadway by Bad Neighbors Theater Co. in 1992.^[23]

A new stage adaptation of *The Monk* written by Nirmala Nataraj premiered Oct. 9, 2008 at the Exit Theatre in San Francisco.^[24]

A brand new musical parodying the novel is in development. A workshop of the first act (of at least three) was presented at Carnegie Mellon University in March 2010, and the second act in October 2010.

Grant Morrison and Klaus Janson's 1990 DC graphic novel *Batman: Gothic* relies heavily and overtly upon *the Monk*, combined with elements of *Don Giovanni*, as the inspiration for the plot.

The film adaption is currently in work by French-German director Dominik Moll^[25], it is shot in Madrid and stars Vincent Cassel, Déborah François, Geraldine Chaplin and Sergi López i Ayats.^[26] The shot begins in mid April and is set for 12 weeks.^[27]

References

- ^a ^b Peck, 1961, p. 23.
- ^a ^b ^c Peck, 1961, p. 24.
- ^a Irwin, 1976, p. 35.
- ^a ^b Irwin, 1976, p. 47.
- ^a Peck, 1961, pp. 34-35.
- ^a Peck, 1961, p. 36.
- ^a Norton, 2006, pp. 603-606.
- ^a Irwin, 1976, p. 46.
- ^a Peck, 1961, p. 27.
- ^a Parreaux, 1960, p. 75.
- ^a ^b MacDonald, 2000, p. 74.
- ^a Irwin, 1976, pp. 47-48.
- ^a Irwin, 1976, p. 48.
- ^a ^b Peck, 1961, p. 28.
- ^a Peck, 1961, p. 28.
- ^a ^b Miles, 2000, p. 53.
- ^a Miles, 2000, p. 44.
- ^a Raymond and Agnes at amadeusonline.net (<http://www.amadeusonline.net/almanacco.php?Start=0&Giorno=&Mese=&Anno=&Giornata=&Testo=Raymond+and+Agnes&Parola=Stringa>)
- ^a Antonin Artaud at Solar Books (<http://www.solarbooks.org/solar-pages/aboutartaud.html>)
- ^a "Radio Times - Film Review" (http://www.radiotimes.com/servlet_film/com.icl.beeb.rtfilms.client.simpleSearchServlet?searchTypeSelect=5&frn=37711) . *www.radiotimes.com*. Radio Times. http://www.radiotimes.com/servlet_film/com.icl.beeb.rtfilms.client.simpleSearchServlet?searchTypeSelect=5&frn=37711. Retrieved 2007-04-05.
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- ^a <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099609/plotsummary> *The Monk* at imdb

23. ^ Little Miracles at Kaleidoscope Theatre (http://kaleidoscopetheatre.org/little_miracles/)
24. ^ Biography of Stuart Eugene Bousel at Horror Unspeakable (http://www.horrorunspeakable.com/creator_main.html)
25. ^ Vincent Cassel to Fornicate With the Devil in The Monk (<http://www.dreadcentral.com/news/35986/vincent-cassel-fornicate-with-devil-the-monk>)
26. ^ Dominik Moll helming adaptation of Lewis novel (<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118015375.html?categoryid=3534&cs=1&query=vincent+cassel+The+Monk>)
27. ^ The Devil in Sheep's Clothing Tricks 'The Monk' (<http://www.bloody-disgusting.com/news/19159>)

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External links

- *The Monk* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/601>) at Project Gutenberg
- The Monk in a 1907 edition (http://books.google.com/books?id=RvEOAAAIAAJ&dq=matthew+gregory+lewis+monk&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=qqtoSobTGYacML6q6c8M&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4) at Google Books

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