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Beauty in the Abyss: (De)creating Human Form in Lewis’s The Monk

Daniel Robert Persia ’14

The advent of nineteenth-century Romantic literature was inscribed in a period of cultural transition. The early emergence of Gothic fiction quickly distorted conventionalist views of sexual identity, religious upbringing, and gender roles within society. Among the twisted array of Gothic inventors is Matthew Gregory Lewis, a nineteen-year-old boy whose infamous novel, The Monk (1796), continues to terrify readers today. Raised in a scandalous household permeated by adultery, lust, and illegitimacy, Lewis reflects the shattered virtues of his youth onto the terrors of his own literature. Moreover, abandoned by his mother at the age of six, Lewis was plagued with a shattered identity; the instability of his home life mirrored the ambiguity of his sexual desires. Lewis became absorbed in a whirlwind of cultural change that only picked up speed as his family deteriorated before his very own eyes. However, in the midst of a transformative time period, Lewis accomplishes a truly daunting task; in The Monk, he captures the essence of identity by constructing a bare existence. Lewis portrays the living being as an androgynous form that exists in a desolate moral vacuum, absent of all but sexual desire. The erotic core of the individual is all that is left after the body is stripped naked of its religious, filial, and gendered garments. Lewis thus depicts life through the rhetoric of body; nakedness becomes symbolic of the physical and sexual incarnations of self. It is a rhetoric that unfolds throughout the novel, entangling earthly creatures and Satanic forms. The monk’s iconic portrait of the Madonna is defiled by its inherent connection to Lucifer, thus unearthing a symbolic destruction of all religious sanctity in the novel. Furthermore, Lucifer’s intrusive presence throughout the narrative strips gender from the heart of the individual while outlining the concurrence of homoerotic and heteroerotic tendencies that contribute to the rhetoric of body. Ultimately, Ambrosio is sucked into a web of incest that removes him from the conventional realm of family identity. Thus, the monk becomes a vicarious representation of Lewis himself; the moral vacuum that enfolds Ambrosio coexists with the cultural vortex that plagues Lewis, illustrating a paradox. The result is a novel that not only provokes disgust but illustrates creation as well. Through the rhetoric of body, The Monk, a quintessential work of Gothic fiction, unfolds as a Romantic assertion of how beauty appears in its purest form, and, more importantly, how that beauty is shattered before the world’s watchful eyes.

Matthew Gregory Lewis’s progression through youth is essential to his perception of beauty and its twisted manifestation in the physical world. Born in London on July 9, 1775, “Mat” was the “spoil playmate of his...
mother,” Frances Maria Sewell, and the distant son of Matthew Lewis, a stringent yet distinguished man (Railo 82-83). When Matthew Gregory Lewis was only six, Sewell left her husband, along with her four young children, for a man named Samuel Harrison. The affair unfolded as Lewis’s father denounced Sewell with blatant accusations of adultery and lechery. A year after eloping with Harrison, Sewell gave birth to an illegitimate child “whose identity and sex have not yet been definitely established.” Despite her abrupt departure, Matthew Gregory Lewis remained emotionally closest to his mother. It was to her that he “gave his devotion and his affection” (Irwin 13). Moreover, these “affectionate relations between mother and son never altered” (Railo 83). Lewis harbored a bitter resentment toward his father, yet he continually nurtured a fondness for his mother. Matthew Lewis’s petition for a divorce was denied, and thus the two remained unhappily married for the remainder of their lives. Matthew Gregory Lewis “regarded his Christian names with ‘horror’ and ‘abomination,’” for they stemmed from his paternal side, and it was not until the publication of The Monk in 1796 that he gained an agreeable identity: “Monk” Lewis (Macdonald 30). Lewis thus displayed signs of the Oedipus complex; he desired to be in only his mother’s company, and perhaps his consequent affection was held in the desire of removing his father from the family portrait. As Lewis entered the literary ranks, his newly acquired identity prevailed, allowing his social and sexual affinities to emerge in full form.

The contextualization of Lewis’s craft illustrates a cultural transition between three consecutive centuries that questions the nature of Lewis’s sexual orientation and its impact on The Monk. As Lewis ascended the literary ranks, the scandals of his childhood slowly dissipated; however, they were quickly replaced by episodes of gossip among prominent writers of the early nineteenth century. Lewis was renowned for being a “famously voluble conversationalist” (Malchow 16); a “species of hyphen, a man of ambiguous identity” (186); or, as Byron professed, a “good man, a clever man, but a bore” (Railo 97). Lewis talked incessantly, for “he had always dukes and duchesses in his mouth, and he was particularly fond of anyone that had a title” (98). Lewis perceived himself as a man of great status, for he had assumed the worthy title of “Monk.” Byron further describes Lewis as a man “fond of the society of younger men than himself” (Macdonald 60). This statement parallels Montague Summer’s explicit identification of Lewis as a homosexual in his 1938 analysis The Gothic Quest (as quoted by Macdonald 59). Lewis seemed to interact too intimately with his younger male companions to support a heterosexual orientation. However, his most recent biographer, Louis F. Peck, asserts that Lewis’s homosexuality cannot be proven beyond a reasonable doubt: there is “no evidence that Lewis ever engaged in homosexual behavior” (Macdonald 64). Thus, it is more accurate to consider Lewis as a homosocial figure; perhaps he preferred non-sexual relations with fellow men, embracing his own masculinity in the company of other same-sex companions.

The mere presence of this debate illustrates a shift in culture that is essential to a complete understanding of Lewis’s Gothic fiction. “In the seventeenth century, heterosexual debauchery as well as sodomy was believed to make a man effeminate”; no distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality arose until the eighteenth century, the period during which Lewis progressed through youth and adolescence (Macdonald 78). Moreover, according to Focault in The History of Sexuality, it was not until the nineteenth century that the “homosexual became a personage,” or a recognizable figure in commonplace literature and society (as quoted by Macdonald 64). Thus, the homoerotic tendencies that emerge throughout The Monk are illustrative of a cultural transition, one that defines sexual orientation as a component of identity. Because “hidden--that is, disguised--sexual identity is perhaps a more common theme in early rather than late Gothic fiction,” it embodies both the impetus and the progression of nineteenth-century Romantic literature (Malchow 139). Disguised sexual identity in The Monk establishes undertones of incest, homosexuality, and androgyny, all of which relate to fundamentally Romantic concepts concealed in the guise of Gothic perversion.

Lewis allows sexuality to permeate the fabric of the novel by establishing it as the primary governing force of the church. In describing the audience of Ambrosio’s oratory, Lewis immediately notes, “the women came to show themselves- the men, to see the women” (3). The voice that initiates the story is “aggressively anti-Catholic in tone,” and thus it allows sexual urges to triumph over religious institutionalization from the very beginning (Napier 125). Attendance is marked not by the conventions of faith and worship, but rather by the potential for heterosexual attraction. However, Ambrosio does not seek such attraction; a man with “no single stain upon his conscience,” the monk retreats to his cell and beholds a vastly different object of affection: the portrait of the Virgin Madonna (27-28). Lewis objectifies Ambrosio’s desires, for the monk declares, “It is not the woman’s beauty that fills me with such enthusiasm: it is the painter’s skill that I admire; it is the divinity that I adore” (28). The painting will last forever, and thus Ambrosio will be able to gratify his sexual desires for eternity.

However, Lewis unveils the monk’s objective fetishism as only one element of his connection to the Madonna. Underneath Ambrosio’s adoration for the female icon rests a “latent erotic component” (Brooks 257), for the Virgin represents a maternal figure as well as the object of desire in man (Andriano 35). Moreover, “since [Ambrosio’s] idolatry is charged with eroticism, and the Virgin is the Mother of God, his worship has overtones of incest” (Macdonald 78). An “elaboration of the surface,” or the painting, leads the reader to the depths of its sexual content, demonstrating Sedgwick’s notion of repressed “inner drives” (255). There is something beyond the evocative imagery of the painting that penetrates Ambrosio’s core. Hence, the painting, the “repressed object of his infantile desire,”
morphs into the “conscious object of his lust” (Jones 134). In the physical world, the painting of the Madonna delineates beauty in one dimension. However, the beauty of surfaces does not fully satisfy the monk’s eroticism. As the “ultimate wish fantasy,” the Madonna invades Ambrosio’s dreams, and her three-dimensional form strikes nearest to reality (Andriano 44). Her nakedness enters a new dimension, gratifying Ambrosio’s sexual taste for the purity of flesh:

Sometimes his dreams presented the image of his favourite Madonna, and he fancied that he was kneeling before her; as he offered up his vows to her, the eyes of the figure seemed to beam on him with inexpressible sweetness; he pressed his lips to hers, and found them warm: the animated form started from the canvas, embraced him affectionately, and his senses were unable to support delight so exquisite. Such were the scenes on which his thoughts were employed while sleeping; his unsatisfied desires placed before him the most lustful and provoking images, and he rioted in joys till then unknown to him. (Lewis 48, italics mine)

Lewis holds no reservation in utilizing the rhetoric of body to envision a fleshly relationship between Ambrosio and the Madonna. He is “quite explicit about the repression itself, about the sexual dreams that torment Ambrosio once Matilda has aroused his desires, and his hungry addiction to physical gratification once the barriers are broken down.” MacAndrew argues that Ambrosio is “monstrously guilty” of his irreverent sexual desires, yet it seems as though his satisfaction through fantastical encounter outweighs his moral obligation to the church (88). In fact, “for the eighteenth-century Gothicist, the monastery was the quintessential repressive institution,” and thus the strictness of the church seemingly normalizes Ambrosio’s behavior (Ellis 146). It is only natural that his repressed desires reach the surface. However, Ambrosio soon comes to realize that the object of his lust is much farther from the iconic and blessed Virgin, and thus Mother Church, than he had ever conceived.

The Madonna’s concealed connection to Lucifer shatters all religious sanctity in the novel through the mastery of guise and the construction of a deceitful veneer. Matilda, who penetrates the consecrated walls of the monastery in the guise of the male novice Rosario, brings about the monk’s illness through a Genesis reconstituted in terms of sexual passion (Williams 116). As the incarnate serpent, Matilda tempts Ambrosio, the male embodiment of Eve, to pluck a rose, exhorting, “I will hide it in my bosom, and, when I am dead, the nuns shall find it withered upon my heart” (Lewis 50). Matilda’s counterpart, the fleshly serpent, bites the monk, and he is ravaged by an illness of the most severe proportions: “he raved in all the horrors of delirium” and “foamed at the mouth” (51). Lewis molds the origin of man into a story of sexual creation, inverting the traditional gender roles of Adam and Eve. In the Book of Genesis, “the LORD God caused a

deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man” (King James Bible, Gen. 2:21-22). God creates Eve with the flesh of man, yet, inversely, in The Monk, Lucifer forms Rosario with the flesh of woman: Matilda. Thus, Lewis depicts the “Fall of man through woman and the birth of lust into the world” (MacAndrew 92). However, despite his masculine form, Ambrosio is portrayed as a woman by virtue of his parallel existence to Eve. Likewise, Matilda is portrayed as a man, for she assumes the earthly figure of the male Rosario. As Lewis only begins to strip gender from the human forms of the novel, he continues to defile religion by upholding Matilda, Lucifer’s quasi-hermaphroditic fiend, as the revered Virgin Madonna.

The true identity of the Madonna is revealed only after Ambrosio succumbs to temptation and falls victims to Lucifer’s ploy. It is not until the monk becomes ill that he realizes the parallel between his “nurse,” Matilda, and the Virgin Madonna:

The suddenness of [Matilda’s] movement made her cowl fall back from her head; her features became visible to the monk’s inquiring eye. What was his amazement at beholding the exact resemblance of his admired Madonna! The same exquisite proportion of features, the same profusion of golden hair, the same rosy lips, heavenly eyes, and majesty of countenance, adorned Matilda! Uttering an exclamation of surprise, Ambrosio sank back upon his pillow, and doubted whether the object before him was mortal or divine. (Lewis 58)

Ambrosio establishes this connection by observing Matilda’s sexual form and inadvertent exposure. To the monk’s proclamation, Matilda responds, “yes, Ambrosio, in Matilda de Villanegas you see the original of your beloved Madonna. Soon after I conceived my unfortunate passion I formed the project of conveying to you my picture” (58). Thus, Matilda invades the monastery in objectified terms before penetrating Ambrosio’s sex in her masculine guise. However, her declaration is a complete and utter lie; she did not pose for the painting of the Madonna, and the portrait was not “created in her image” (Sedgwick 261). After Ambrosio signs away his soul at the end of the novel, Lucifer reveals, “I observed your blind idolatry of the Madonna’s picture. I bade a subordinate but crafty spirit assume a similar form, and you eagerly yielded to the blandishments of Matilda” (319). As the omnipotent force of the novel, Lucifer, not Matilda, offers the most compelling argument. Thus, Williams suggests, “Matilda presents herself as a twin of Ambrosio’s portrait of the Madonna.” The Madonna comes first in the sequence, followed by Rosario and Matilda, respectively. Consequently, Mother Church, the “most ominous, pervasive, and inescapable female presence in the novel,” assumes the representation of Matilda, the feigned Virgin Madonna: Mother of God (Williams 117). Therefore, the
Matilda/Madonna conceit, as identified by Brooks, demonstrates “why God can no longer be for Ambrosio the representative of the Sacred: Spirituality has a latent daemonic content; the daemonic underlies the seemingly Holy” (258). Matilda’s role as a host of daemonic torment is essential to Lewis’s creation of an empty soul, and moreover, to the construction of a sacrilegious, genderless vacuum.

Who— or better yet, what—is Matilda? Is it simply a female who assumes the guise of the male Rosario to infiltrate the monastery? Is it an “agent of Lucifer, and not a human being at all!” (Irwin 49). Is it truly “a succubus as at the high point just preceding the final action of the book”? (Irwin 49). Or is it an androgyne “agent of cosmic darkness” that earlier showed signs of humanity” (Andriano 35). Only one individual holds the answer to this loaded question: Milton. Milton reveals, “Spirits when they please/Can either Sex assume, or both” (1. 423-424). Thus, Grudin notes that “theories about the incubus-succubus” can elucidate Matilda’s “puzzling androgyny” (140). Conventions of demonology reveal that the incubus is the male demon “lying upon” the woman, whereas the succubus is the female demon “lying beneath” the man (141). Matilda assumes both male and female forms, which suggests that she embodies the complete incubus-succubus model. However, since Ambrosio is the only subject upon whom she acts, Lewis is proposing that the monk is an androgyne as well. As a demon, both incubus and succubus, Matilda represents “not a wholly other, but a complex of interdicted erotic desires” within Ambrosio (Brooks 258). If both Matilda and the monk are androgyne beings, able to morph into male and female forms, then there exists the potential for homosexual encounter. Thus, “the device of the disguise allows the author to achieve something of the sensational frisson of the androgynous and profane, if inexplicable, world in which the monk lives: the same world that Lucifer invades.

Lucifer’s dimorphic presence in the novel sustains the concepts of androgyne and eroticism while further deepening the emptiness that plagues Ambrosio’s soul. Lucifer, the “fallen angel,” first appears upon being summoned by Matilda in the sepulcher of St. Clare (Lewis 194). The ritual is both enigmatic and revealing, for it mirrors an earlier scene in the novel that reflects the monk’s lustful attraction to Matilda. In this scene, the monk’s resolute stance requiring Matilda to leave the monastery is destroyed by the revelation of her naked body. Matilda resists Ambrosio’s commands, and “she lays her dagger’s point against her naked bosom- and their union is heralded by an episode that symbolically associates semen and poison” (Napier 129). Matilda’s features captivate the eyes and organs of Ambrosio’s lust:

She had torn open her habit, and her bosom was half-exposed. The weapon’s point rested upon her left breast- and, oh! That was such a breast! The moon-streams darting full upon it enabled the monk to observe its dazzling whiteness. His eye dwelt with insatiable avidity upon the beauteous orb: a sensation till then unknown filled his heart with a mixture of anxiety and delight; a raging fire shot through every limb: the blood boiled in his veins, and a thousand wild wishes bewildered his imagination. (Lewis 46, italics mine)

Here, Ambrosio’s erotic fascination parallels his aforementioned homosexual attraction to the feigned Rosario, as well as his heterosexual lust for the nakedness of the Virgin Madonna: all three desires provoke “a sensation till then unknown.” Matilda openly exposes her naked body, the stimulus that elicits a sexual response in the monk similar to those induced by Rosario and the Virgin Madonna. “Lewis’s culture thought of sexually aggressive women not just as masculine but as hermaphroditic,” thus
reinforcing Matilda’s link to androgyne and the incubus-succubus model (Macdonald 77). Ambrosio becomes fixated on the naked form, both male and female, upon first being seduced by Matilda’s breast. The rush of blood that flows through his body attains a purely sexual function, and it deems him Matilda’s demonic prey. Lucifer appears only after Matilda spills their shared blood in a torrent of delirium.

The monk encounters Lucifer’s naked figure after witnessing Matilda’s elaborate invocation of the demons. Matilda, “seized with an excess of delirium,” conjures the evil spirits of Lucifer, throwing “three human fingers, and an Agnus Dei,” into the “pale sulphurous flame” that rises from the trembling blue fire of the sepulcher. Just as the profanation of the Madonna shatters religious sanctity, the destruction of the Agnus Dei illustrates the desecration of Jesus, Lamb of God. The ritual reflects a sacrificial practice, for Matilda invokes Lucifer through the offering of blood. Matilda, “drawing the poniard from her girdle, plunged it into her left arm. The blood gushed out plentifully; and as she stood on the brink of the circle, she took care that it should fall on the outside. The flames retired from the spot on which the blood was pouring” (Lewis 200). Matilda draws blood from her left arm, a region of the body near her breast. The blood is not only hers, for it flows parallel to that of the monk during his sexual stimulation. Moreover, “the poison of Ambrosio’s wounds [is] circulating in her veins” (Napier 131). When Ambrosio is bit by the centipede in Lewis’s contrived Eden, the garden of lustful desire, Matilda “kissed the wound, and drew out the poison with [her] lips” (Lewis 63). Thus, in extracting the venom from the monk’s body, Matilda engages in a transfer of bodily fluids. Lewis is consistent in describing the rush of blood that flows through Ambrosio’s core, and thus the serpent’s venom becomes symbolic of not only poison, but blood and semen as well. Consequently, “The Monk . . . moves from the monastery garden to Ambrosio’s concluding inferno,” awaiting the presence of Lucifer upon the sacrifice of the monk’s blood (Hennelly 152-153). Stripped even of his sexual fluids and the warmth of his own blood, Ambrosio becomes a physical form living a bare existence. His nakedness is ironically sacrilegious, for although “Adam and Eve first appear gracefully unclothed,” Lucifer does as well in this Gothic novel (152). Once an idol of the congregation, Ambrosio becomes a fallen beauty, and his erotic desires carry him simultaneously to the pinnacle of lust and the nadir of religious esteem.

The monk finds Lucifer’s naked figure to be arousing, for it completes the sexual triad composed of his own blood. Matilda’s ritual distorts the notion of Jesus, sacrificial Lamb, into Lucifer, product of sacrificial blood:

... he beheld a figure more beautiful than fancy’s peril ever drew. It was a youth, seemingly scarce eighteen, the perfection of whose form and face was unrivalled. He was perfectly naked: a bright star sparkled upon his forehead, two crimson wings extended

Appearing as a “beautiful youth,” Lucifer radiates a “chillness that paradoxically makes him more seductive” (Cavaliero 28). Shockingly, Lucifer’s naked form produces the same “erotic proclivity” in the monk as the portrait of the Virgin Madonna (Sedgwick 261). “For two years [the Madonna] had been the object of his increasing wonder and adoration. He paused, and gazed upon it with delight” (Lewis 28); similarly, when first seeing Lucifer, the monk “gazed upon the spirit with delight and wonder” (201). It is the same delight and wonder that governs both reactions, and thus it is the same eroticism that springs forth from the monk’s bosom. Lewis’s parallelism highlights the continuity of sexual themes throughout the monk’s progression, and thus when Lucifer makes his first appearance, the reader is able to relate such an omnipotent force to the major thread of the novel. Unlike the reader, Ambrosio takes note of the beautiful youth’s voluptuous form, but he fails to identify Lucifer’s guise. Thus, “Ambrosio’s blindness symbolizes the inability of his native ‘goodness’ to recognize evil” (MacAndrew 92). The monk is blinded by his homosexual proclivities, and he is incapable of equating a fallen angel with a full-blown devil. The reader observes the monk as he sinks into Lucifer’s deadly grasp. “The Devil is real enough,” but “the mercy and grace of God remain invisible”; there is no one to save the monk from his demise, for his destruction comes from within (Cavaliero 29). Unable to be saved, the monk pursues the object of his dearest affection, an alluring yet innocent youth who embodies the fusion of homosexual, heterosexual, and hermaphroditic eroticism: Antonia.

Matilda’s Satanic agency compels Ambrosio to inadvertently commit matricide and incest, for she inflames the monk’s lust by forcing him upon Antonia, the only pure feminine form in the novel. Matilda seeks to intensify the monk’s desires to a level beyond his control; “her interest is not in the man, but in his perdition” (Grudin 139). Thus, Matilda, Lucifer’s servant and “an incubus from a literal hell,” presents Antonia’s image in its absolute nakedness and untempered form (Andriano 35). Once again, the incubus, or male demon, is manifested in Matilda’s “masculinized stature,” and it compels the monk to “seek a ‘feminine’ source elsewhere in the body of Antonia” (Suyehara 2). The incubus reveals Antonia’s “voluptuous contours and admirable symmetry” as she throws off her last garment before bathing her naked body (Lewis 197). This scene, depicted through the darkness of the magic mirror, excites the monk’s passions while foreshadowing the “incestuous enjoyment of his sister” that is soon to come (Townshend 232). Antonia raises her arms to drive the “tame linnet” from
its “delightful harbour” in her bosom, revealing her breasts to the monk’s naked eye (Lewis 197). Because the vision in the magic mirror “fetishes [Antonia’s] breasts,” and because breasts are “the universal synecdoche of the mother,” Lewis establishes undertones of incest marked by the coalescence of brother, sister, and mother (Jones 134). Thus, Lewis begins to manipulate the conventions of family identity, allowing the monk to approach matricide and incest as he comes closer and closer to Antonia’s naked form.

However, Lewis treats Antonia differently than the monk’s other sexual interests. The Madonna, the incubus (Rosario), and the succubus (Matilda) represent the monk’s objectified, homosexual, and heterosexual desires, respectively. Where does this leave Antonia? The answer lies within Lewis’s subtle parallelism and hidden rules of sexuality. Each of the three aforementioned figures provoked in Ambrosio “a sensation till then unknown”; Antonia does not. Rather, quite the opposite is true: upon first sight, the monk provoked in Antonia “a pleasure fluttering in her bosom which till then had been unknown” (Lewis 11). Thus, Antonia is drawn, heterosexually, to the monk’s illustrous form. Lewis reverses the force of attraction, suggesting that the monk becomes the seducer rather than the seduced. Although the monk is unable to resist his three tempters, Antonia holds the capacity to defy Ambrosio’s sexual advances. Perhaps it is her natural instinct to resist, for although she is unaware of their consanguinity, the blood relationship they share runs deep in her veins. Nonetheless, after being corrupted by the demon Matilda, the monk lacks this capacity to resist and conceives Antonia’s purity “only as something to be despoiled”; thus, Antonia becomes the Madonna incarnate (Brooks 259). The monk will possess Antonia for eternity just as he possesses the Madonna, but for a different reason. Ambrosio violates the virgin youth’s innocence, yet “in raping Antonia, he causes her death and guarantees his eternal damnation” (Napier 132). Antonia is stripped of her proper narrative: she loses her mother, her brother rapes her, and she has no chance of salvation. Lorenzo, her knight in shining armor, does not rescue her and take her to a far-away land to “live happily ever after” (Jones 138). Thus, “seduction is inevitably destruction,” a realization that holds true not only for Antonia, but for Ambrosio as well (Brooks 259). Upon being raped, Antonia is condemned to suffer the same fate as the monk; hence, “Antonia’s body serves to emblematize her brother’s subsequent demise” (Suyehara 3). Doomed to perdition, Ambrosio punishes his creator and seeks a new redeemer, only to sink further into the depths of despair.

Lewis returns to the monk’s birth and the origin of his creation to establish a parallel between his two contrasting states of nakedness, each fostered by a single creature in the novel. Elvira, Ambrosio’s mother and earthly procreator, brings the monk’s naked form into the world of innocence. Despite her over-protectiveness toward her daughter, Antonia, Elvira is by no means a “good woman,” for she abandons Ambrosio, leaving his naked body exposed to the sins of the world (Williams 116). Moreover, Elvira’s vigilance becomes a barrier to the monk’s sexual conquest of Antonia; thus, “with one hand he grasped Elvira’s throat so as to prevent her continuing her clamour . . . and pressing his knee upon her stomach . . . endeavored to put an end to her existence” (Lewis 220). By allowing the monk to commit matricide, Lewis enables him to rape his sister, and, eventually, adopt a new father: Lucifer. However, Lucifer does not appear in the guise of a seraph as before, but rather in “all that ugliness which, since his fall from heaven, had been his portion”: His blasted limbs still bore marks of the Almighty’s thunder. A swarthy darkness spread itself over his gigantic form: his hands and feet were armed with long talons. Fury glared in his eyes, which might have struck the bravest heart with terror. Over his huge shoulders waved two enormous sable wings; and his hair was supplied by living snakes, which twined themselves round his brows with frightful hissings. (314) Lucifer’s ghastly form does not sexually arouse the monk, as did the naked guise of the archangel. Now, Ambrosio acts only in desperation; the pressures of the Inquisition allow the prospect of salvation to triumph over sexual gratification. To wholly establish the father-son bond that Ambrosio equates with deliverance, Lucifer strikes an iron pen “into a vein of the monk’s left hand” (315), sucking the blood with which Ambrosio signs the “fatal contract,” at last selling away his soul (317). Thus, Lewis constructs a new form of nakedness; deprived of religion, gender, family, and soul, the monk is nothing more than a bare corpse surrounded by the emptiness of the world around him. Lucifer, the triumphant father and the possessor of Ambrosio’s blood, releases the corpse into the abyss, forever sealing the monk’s eternal damnation.

Lewis mentions the abyss only at the conclusion of the novel, when, in reality, it is present all along. The abyss represents not only the moral vacuum that hosts the inevitable reign of Lucifer, but also the void that consumes Lewis’s own personal life. Just as Elvira abandoned the monk, Lewis’s mother fled when he was only six. Just as the monk’s sexual drives were torn between men and women, Lewis’s urges wavered on the edge of homosexuality and homosociality. Lewis was plagued by a never-ending state of confusion; he was unable to establish a concrete identity that defined him as an individual, and thus he assumed the title of “Monk” Lewis, reflecting his own self in Ambrosio. Ambrosio is Adam, experiencing his fall. Ambrosio is Satan, undergoing his expulsion from heaven. Ambrosio is the ultimate decreation (Napier 125). Ironically, in depicting Ambrosio’s bare existence, Lewis acquires the despairing monk’s essence, becoming the ultimate (de)creator.

In contriving Ambrosio’s narrative while constructing his own identity, Lewis strips the monk to his most naked form. This paradox illustrates Lewis’s assertion that (de)creation underlines the Romantic
sublime. Lewis recognizes that “nature permits everything and authorizes nothing. The only principle inherent in nature is in fact destruction, and desire is both inflamed and frustrated by the recurrent discovery that its illogical outcome is destruction” (Brooks 260). Thus, through destruction, Lewis brings the reader closer to nature and its impact on man. Nature becomes a “source of despair, for in its mirror we ultimately discover our own death and decomposition.” Antonia, an incarnation of Eden’s perfection and nature’s ideal state, becomes a fallen idol. Raped and profaned by the libidinous monk, she represents “the impossibility of the existence of purity, incorruption, [and] immutability” in nature. Even Ambrosio, one of God’s “best creations,” is destined to “defilement, corruption, loss of innocence, and erotic desire” (261). The monk suffers the same fate as Antonia, for after Lucifer releases him into the abyss, his “bruised and mangled” body mirrors Antonia’s violated corpse (Lewis 320). The decaying corpses come to represent how nature permits destruction; however, fallen beauty only strengthens the sublime, for it suggests a beauty that once was: a beauty that existed contrary to nature’s destructive path. Thus, Lewis approaches Romanticism in a way that defines the Gothic mode while illustrating a major cultural transformation.

Lewis invokes the supernatural for a reason far beyond his own search for identity. Lewis takes the monk, the epitome of religious order, strips him of his gender, and forces him to have sex with a hermaphroditic demon, rape his sister, murder his mother, and sell his soul to Lucifer. Why does Lewis include such “Gothic bosh or absurd machinery” to establish a rhetoric of body, where nakedness becomes symbolic of both creation and decreation? (Hennelly 147). When all that will remain is a naked corpse consumed by a desolate moral vacuum, why go to such great lengths to depict the lust and sins of the monk? Lewis’s reasoning is by nature romantic, for “the involvement of the reader’s imagination is central to the Gothic endeavor” (Hume 284). However, Gothic writers “have no faith in the ability of man to transcend or transform [everyday life] imaginatively.” Thus, as opposed to the “more profoundly ‘true’ reality” that mainstream Romantics depict by invoking imagination, Gothic writers create a more absurd unreality by linking imagination to the supernatural. This “involvement of the reader in a more than rational way” demonstrates the Gothic reaction against conformity and reason (289). Thus, Lewis’s novel becomes a polemic against the Enlightenment (Andriano 43), built within an “imaginative framework.” His fictional world is a reaction against the traditional eighteenth-century novel of manners (Brooks 253). When stripped to its barest level, The Monk is a clear representation of Gothic form, and it has much to contribute to the emerging Romantic Movement.

Lewis composes body rhetoric with supernatural origins yet natural implications. Behind Lewis’s paranormal machinery lie Romantic ideals of the sublime and imaginative creation. Plagued by sexual confusion and religious inversion, the monk and the victims of his desires, all naked of life, are the only true representations of beauty: “the wonders of sublimity” are evoked only through the “transgression of all legal and aesthetic limits” (Townshend 240). Lewis recognizes the need for inversion, as does Coleridge. In discussing his role in crafting the Lyrical Ballads, Coleridge asserts, “my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural . . . so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (as quoted by Hume 284). The dialectical relationship between disbelief and imagination represents the constant struggle faced by both Gothic and mainstream Romantic writers. Lewis leaves the reader with the corpses of Antonia and Ambrosio but does not explain the significance of their naked bodies. Thus, The Monk remains entirely discordant: Lewis does not resolve elements of sexual confusion, offer a mechanism to repress desire, or elaborate on the emotional implications of matricide and incest. Paradoxes remain paradoxes; contradictions remain contradictions: Lewis provides no answers. In contrast, “Romantic writing reconciles the discordant elements it faces, resolving their apparent contradictions imaginatively in the creation of a high order” (Hume 290). Hence, unlike Antonia, the poet in Shelley’s “Alastor” finds a world where purity, incorruption, and immutability are indeed possible. Thus, Romantic writers progress on a linear path toward creation; imagination leads to an ideal state. In contrast, Gothic writers retrogress on the same linear path toward (de)creation; imagination allows the reader to envision an ideal state that has since fallen as a result of supernatural forces. Although Romanticism and Gothicism advance in opposite directions, they inevitably share the same path.

What began as a search for Lewis’s own identity quickly transformed into a narrative that now defines the role of Gothicism in nineteenth century Romantic literature. Although Lewis contrives the narrative, there is a sense of rawness left at the novel’s conclusion that makes it seem incredibly real and palpable. Lewis’s body rhetoric reveals the stark nakedness of two forms: Ambrosio and Antonia. He characterizes both individuals as sublime figures at the start of the novel yet treats neither as such at the novel’s end. Antonia is the same innocent youth at opposite extremes of the novel; she commits no crime. However, as the victim of her brother’s rape, her body is defiled, her persona disparaged. The monk’s illicit sexual encounters create an overwhelming disgust in the mind of the reader that is only intensified by his willingness to rape and murder innocent women. Nonetheless, when the reader should feel sympathy for Antonia, he/she is preoccupied by the grotesqueries that reflect Lewis’s own life. Nature, or rather, nature’s destruction, is present throughout. It is the task of the reader to search deeper than the surface, to identify the repressed inner drives that govern the novel, and to use imagination to resurrect the beauty.
of two fallen idols. Beauty is not religion, nor gender, nor family; it is the
body’s essence, the state of being that receives life from nature, and, perhaps
more importantly, the state of being that, at any time, has the potential to be
destroyed by the very same forces of its own creation.

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