

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

Scripps Senior Theses

Scripps Student Scholarship

2021

Eye of the Beholder: How the Female and Male Gazes Perpetuate Anti-Catholicism and the Cult of Domesticity in The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk and Matthew Gregory Lewis' The Monk

Olivia Silva
Scripps College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Silva, Olivia, "Eye of the Beholder: How the Female and Male Gazes Perpetuate Anti-Catholicism and the Cult of Domesticity in The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk and Matthew Gregory Lewis' The Monk" (2021). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1635.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/1635

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

**EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: HOW THE FEMALE AND MALE GAZES
PERPETUATE ANTI-CATHOLICISM AND THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY IN
THE AWFUL DISCLOSURES OF MARIA MONK AND MATTHEW GREGORY
LEWIS' *THE MONK***

by

OLIVIA SILVA

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR KOENIGS
PROFESSOR DECKER**

May 7, 2021

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge Professor Koenigs for being an amazing mentor throughout this process and helping me every step of the way. This thesis, as so many others were, was written during a global pandemic, and I am so thankful to have had him as a reader and an advisor during this very challenging time. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Decker for serving as my second reader. I am so glad to have had such a wonderful thesis team.

To Professor Prakas, for being an incredible English Literature major and primary advisor, as well as all of the other professors who were a part of my Scripps English Literature journey.

To my family, who I love more than anything. Mom and Dad, thank you for always being there for me and for being my biggest cheerleaders and supporters. I love you so much and am so proud to be your daughter. Joey, we're both graduating in one way or another this year. I'm so glad we got to spend so much time together while at home and am so lucky to have you as my brother. Tony, the newest member of our family and who constantly sat by my side while I wrote this very big paper. It was very nice to have you as company, even though 70% of the time I was making sure you didn't eat anything a puppy isn't supposed to.

To all my friends and anyone who let me share my thesis ideas with them in an attempt to make sure my topic made sense to someone other than me. Thank you for listening very patiently and nodding and smiling supportively as I ranted on and on about what I was trying to accomplish. It was very much appreciated. Your love and friendship mean the world to me and I am so blessed to have so many amazing people in my life.

Table of Contents

I.	Thesis Introduction and Topic	3-7
II.	Historical Context	8-12
III.	Critical Situation	12-23
IV.	The Male Gaze in <i>The Monk</i>	23-30
V.	The Female Gaze in <i>The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk</i>	30-39
VI.	Conclusion	39-40
VII.	Works Cited	41-43

I. Thesis Introduction and Topic

Jonathan Schroder once defined the sociological concept of “the gaze” as “more than to look at- it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze.”¹ In other words, a person in any position of privilege in relation to the social hierarchy will always look at others who differ from them from a place of supremacy. Although everyone has differing perceptions and usages of the gaze, it is not limited to the individual eye. Rather, these gazes can be shared through both film and literature, and filmmakers and authors bring their own privileges (or lack of) and those of their characters to life through visual formats. In this regard, the politics behind “the gaze” can be used to politicize stories, either through the camera or the narrative voice, and is a tactic in forging understandings and furthering social ideologies. These gazes, in turn, are consumed by audiences and readers, allowing them to examine the overall human experience from different points of view.

The 19th century American literary scene was defined by the narrative gaze Schroder discusses as authors took to writing during an era of social and political reformation. Inspired by the Protestant Second Great Awakening, a religious revitalization of older ideals in the wake of a newer day and age, Americans began to look at the social infrastructures in-place and see if they could be changed. Whether these changes, from temperance and abolition to women’s rights, signified improving the systems or abolishing them altogether, an

¹ Schroeder, Jonathan "Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research." *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

outpouring of arguments voicing their opinions on various subjects led to the mid-1800s being labelled as the Age of Reform.²

One of the most profound and noteworthy movements to come out of this period was a substantial increase in Anti-Catholicism. A product of the Second Great Awakening and a rise in Catholic immigration, Protestants preached Catholicism in America would inspire licentious and immoral behaviors that contrasted to 19th century patriarchal, social norms. These social norms were only further imposed through the Age of Reform bringing about the Cult of Domesticity, a movement centered around defining how women were meant to appear, act, and behave within and outside of the home. The Cult of Domesticity was also an institution based in the fear of social disorder due to female nonconformity, or women pursuing a life beyond the doting, virtuous housewife and mother. To further their Anti-Catholic agenda, both Protestant and Anti-Catholic writers played into worries surrounding not only the Catholic Church, but women, either without consent or willingly, escaping their assigned societal roles. An effective subgenre in perpetuating both Anti-Catholic stereotypes and the helpless, vulnerable woman was the captivity narrative, or testimonies from abuse survivors often used to expose or enlighten the public about certain groups and affiliations. Gaining popularity as early as the 17th century, captivity narratives often followed young, virtuous women (though sometimes focusing on men) and their journeys while being held hostage by kidnappers ranging from pirates to certain indigenous groups in North America. In the 19th century, American Anti-Catholic writers often utilized this format to create what became known as the “convent exposé,” which specifically touched on the violence women faced within the confinements of a convent or nunnery.

² “Reform Movements: 1800s.” National Geographic.

The revitalization of the convent exposé in promoting an Anti-Catholic agenda came in 1836 in the publication of *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk: The Hidden Secrets of a Nun's Life in a Convent Exposed*. The text follows the titular character, a Protestant-raised woman and her journey after taking the veil as a Catholic nun. A resident of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal, Monk details the humiliation, manipulation, and physical and sexual violence she endured under the authority of Catholic priests and superior nuns. The text ends in her escaping the convent and *The Awful Disclosures* is meant to serve as proof of her living to tell the tale. The sensationalism of the work stemmed from its vivid portrayal of assault and destruction against the female body, but the text itself is noteworthy due to its perpetuation of a gaze that shows similarities to the contemporary female gaze. That is not to say that Maria Monk's female gaze was completely ahead of its time. *The Awful Disclosure's* narrative voice is based in 19th century values of idealized and virtuous femininity seen within the Cult of Domesticity movement. Through Monk's first-person account, women in the work are consistently compared to these values and are judged upon whether they meet or undermine them. Despite this, the text is still forward in its thinking and positions itself so that it is not an Anti-Catholic narrative, but a story about the mistreatment of women and silencing of the female voice through an Anti-Catholic lens.

However, despite the rise in female-driven convent exposés and *The Awful Disclosure's* popularity, Anti-Catholic literature was dominated by men. With this majority in male authorship came an employment of male-centered narratives as well as a male gaze, and just glancing at Anti-Catholic literature cements this patriarchal influence through how men write female characters. Maria Monk used her female gaze to encourage Anti-Catholicism and spread other political agendas such as domesticity, and other texts of the day used the male

gaze in spreading this same dialogue. However, these works contained a different outlook on the importance of authentically representing the female experience in tandem to the male experience, particularly in issues surrounding sexuality and patriarchal power dynamics.

Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk*, published in 1796 in England, serves as a prime example of how this male gaze was used in promoting the patriarchy against an Anti-Catholic background. *The Monk* details the journey of beloved Catholic clergyman Ambrosio who ends up ultimately selling his soul to the Devil after being seduced and influenced by a demonic temptress. Although Lewis' text was a predecessor to the American Second Great Awakening and was penned on a different continent, England served as a battleground during the 16th century Protestant Reformation and was a hub for Anti-Catholicism. The forty-year (as well as cultural) difference between *The Monk* and *The Awful Disclosures* only reinforces the utilization and scope of Anti-Catholic literature, but also tracks the evolution of this genre and literature as a whole. Both texts deal with Anti-Catholic subject matter and incorporate the dynamic of the female victim and the licentious priest in bringing public awareness to the dangers of Catholicism. It is how each text uses this trope, however, that shows how these agendas are effectively furthered (or hindered) by their male and female gazes.

In this paper, I will discuss how the male and female gazes in *The Monk* and *The Awful Disclosures* both act in garnering Anti-Catholic support through the victimization of women and the condemnation of Catholicism's treatment of female virtue and the domestic space. Through illustrating how Lewis and Maria Monk accomplish their similar agendas through a male and female gaze, a larger conversation can be found surrounding the representation of women in congruence to religious and social reformations of the time. The comparison of these two works also acts in showing Maria Monk's true impact and how the

Anti-Catholic narrative is improved through the shifting of gazes. In *The Monk*, Lewis uses the male gaze to play into social anxieties surrounding womanhood, female sexuality, and the Catholic practices of sexual repression and abstinence. Readers are shown through Ambrosio's interactions with women how Catholicism is a danger to the patriarchal, social order and morality through its potential to corrupt female virtue. However, this gaze is counterproductive despite its utilization as a political tool. While *The Monk's* depictions of rape and assault are meant to denounce the Catholic Church, the language used beautifies and tones down the violence against women. This hyper-sexualization of the female characters due to the male gaze results in the novel's Anti-Catholic message being overshadowed, and these borderline pornographic descriptions add an almost appealing aspect to Ambrosio's crimes.

On the other hand, Maria Monk's testimony utilizes a female gaze that acts as a cautionary tale on the repercussions of not abiding to the Cult of Domesticity or Protestant values surrounding chaste and demure femininity. Her take on physical and sexual abuse describes the trauma she and the other nuns suffered in a way that highlights the female existence instead of objectifying it. Maria Monk certainly makes use of the female form like Lewis in perpetuating an Anti-Catholic and patriarchal narrative, but does so in a manner that grounds women in the story instead of bolstering the masculine point of view. This then further highlights not only Maria Monk's contributions towards the American Age of Reform and Second Great Awakening but emphasizes the beginning of shifting perceptions on womanhood and femininity within literature and 19th century political and religious institutions.

II. Historical Context and Background

The Monk's publication took place at the turn of the century amidst the European Age of Enlightenment, a movement paralleling the 19th century American Age of Reason in technological, political, and social advancements.³ Simultaneously, an ongoing war dating back to the 16th century between the Protestant and Catholic churches was taking place, a conflict that would eventually be carried over to North America. *The Monk* is set in Spain and centers around Ambrosio, a devout monk revered for his moral conduct who was abandoned at a monastery as a baby. His reputation as a pious man is tainted by Matilda, a demon disguised as a beautiful woman who seduces him into committing numerous crimes. With sins ranging from murder and rape to incest, Ambrosio's tragic tale ends in him serving a life sentence of torture and misery in Hell. While primarily based in fiction, the novel played into fears regarding the Catholic Church and how Catholic authorities, such as priests and nuns, can abuse their power and manipulate practitioners. As Protestantism was a response to a corrupt Catholic hierarchy and discrepancies between sermonized religious doctrine and everyday practice, Protestants believed Catholicism posed a threat to an upstanding, moral lifestyle. This was ironically furthered through Protestants criticizing how Catholics approached morality through their treatment of sin. The Protestant belief in predestination determining one's pathway to Heaven or Hell highly contrasted with the Catholic teachings of one sin, no matter the repercussions, damning an individual for eternity.

Another distinction between Protestants and Catholics that was often weaponized was Catholic priests' abstinence from sex. While Protestants allowed their priests to marry

³ "Enlightenment." *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks, 2009.

(before or after they were ordained, depending on the sect), Catholic priests never married and remained celibate. This celibacy, in the Protestant's mind, actually inspired licentious behavior rather than prevented it, and aided in forming the trope of the immoral priest in Gothic and Anti-Catholic literature. As seen within texts such as *The Monk*, male Catholic authority were usually depicted as wicked and depraved due to their vows of chastity, and *The Monk* implies Ambrosio's downfall at the novel's end is not only provoked, but caused by unaddressed sexual needs that are brought out whenever he is around women.

As mentioned previously, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* can be classified as a convent exposé. The 19th century was a period where female authors, though still sparse, began to make more of an impact on the American literary canon, and *The Awful Disclosure's* substantially helped in increasing the popularity and profit gained from women's literature. The rise in female authors, interestingly, also occurred around the rise of anxieties towards the preservation of ideal femininity, resulting in the Cult of Domesticity. Domesticity promoted a lifestyle where white middle and upper-class women were to be caretakers of the house, their husbands, and their children. Men and women were separated by the public, "masculine" sphere of the workplace and the private, "feminine" sphere of the home. While some women were able to find a form of independence through being in charge of their space, the domestic sphere also served as a means to maintain "Piety, Purity, and Submissiveness" through women upholding their faith and their virtue."⁴ As female chastity was an important aspect of the Cult of Domesticity, sexual liberation was nonexistent for women. Instead of women finding pleasure in intercourse, their sole engagement in sex was

⁴ MacKethan, Lucinda. "The Cult of Domesticity," *America in Class*, National Humanities Center, 2011.

meant to start a family.⁵ The Cult of Domesticity left little room for women to make a career outside of the home and marriage, although there were a few options that were considered an acceptable alternative. Though not ideal according to Protestant familial and marital values, taking the veil and becoming a nun was tolerated. Before the rise in Anti-Catholicism, the public perception of nunneries and convents was that they were seen as a means to preserve a woman's virtue and morality. *The Awful Disclosure's* exposure of a seemingly safe space for women as a center of abuse and violence frightened the public, particularly Protestant audiences, and the stories revolving around infanticide, rape, and satanic rituals played into this unease. As the domestic space was a vital part of the 19th century household and to the middle and upper-class societal structures, Maria Monk's novel and similar texts encouraged readers to join the protests against Catholicism while simultaneously protecting patriarchal ideals and idealized femininity of the 1800s.

When compared, both novels share a connection in furthering Anti-Catholic political agendas surrounding corrupt leadership, protecting ideal womanhood, and the blurred lines between religious and sacrilegious practices. Specifically, these messages are carried out through gazes from both the masculine authority and female victim. The modern concept of the male gaze serves as an analysis of both mainstream media and its specifically targeted audience, female characters often sexualized for the sake of pleasure and from a gaze paralleling that of the heterosexual male. Devised by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," "[the male gaze] is central to the plot"⁶ as the

⁵ "Women's Sphere and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement", Module 4: Romantic Literature (1820-1860), American Literature I, Lumen.

⁶ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no.4, 1975, pp. 6-18.

camera transforms from an item to an active observer. Whether the objectification of women is integral to the storytelling or not, the incorporation of the male gaze forces audiences to view the female form as inherently desirable, no matter the situation⁷. All the women in *The Monk* are treated equally in terms of being scrutinized under the male eye, and the attractiveness of their physicality and moral character are determined from a masculine outlook. The scenes of female distress and suffering are also given an inherent sensuality through an emphasis on the sex itself over whether it is consensual or realistic.

The Awful Disclosure's commitment to detailing violence and its taking place from Maria Monk's female gaze is what makes the novel so gripping. While Lewis' writing romanticizes abuse and blatantly objectifies his female characters, Monk's blunt account provides a feminine counterpart to contrast Lewis' masculine narrative. In other words, Maria Monk, like Lewis, uses gaze to address threats towards female virtue and domesticity, but does so in a way that spreads awareness towards the horrors women faced under the Catholic Church. Suzanne Moore's essay entitled *Here's Looking at You, Kid!* discusses the phenomenon of both the male and female gazes, and the importance of studying them together while also simultaneously considering them as separate concepts. As the male gaze serves to objectify women, it is logical to assume the female gaze objectifies men. However, Moore writes that assumptions based on Laura Mulvey's original definition ironically limits the scope of the female gaze and maintains the masculine viewpoint. Moore claims that Mulvey's argument focusing solely on how media is geared towards the heterosexual male calls for "a temporary masculinization" (51) in women or non-male viewers taking on this

⁷ "The Male Gaze in Retrospect," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

male gaze as the only means of finding media pleasurable. It is then crucial to consider the female gaze as a concept that extends beyond sexuality, and not doing so results in viewers inadvertently catering to the male gaze.⁸ In general, while there are many working definitions, it is overall agreed that women under the female gaze are allowed to exist and act as they would without being subjected to masculine judgement. In regard to sex, the female gaze combats the hyper-sexualization of women, but does not necessarily signify the absence of female sexuality altogether. Rather, it merely switches the perspective, the women engaging in sexual relationships because they want to rather than sex being used to please the (male) audience. If the sex is non-consensual, it is depicted as such and not as a voyeuristic ploy to keep viewers engaged. Maria Monk's depictions of sex in her testimony are consistent with this definition, and *The Awful Disclosures* uses sex and assault to achieve its Anti-Catholic and domestic agendas without an unnecessary sexualization of women.

III. Critical Situation

As the literary world has diversified over the centuries, more audiences have come into contact with *The Monk* and *The Awful Disclosures* and have been able to voice their opinions on the works, particularly regarding how Lewis and Maria Monk tackle gender in the context of religion and 19th century society. The similarities seen in the male and female gazes within the two texts to the modern male and female gazes is no coincidence. Scholars have noted that these early conceptions of the gazes can be found all throughout 19th century literature and are particularly prominent within Gothic novels. This consistent presence of the male and

⁸ Moore, Suzanne. "Here's Looking at You, Kid!" *The Female gaze: women as viewers of popular culture*, edited by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshmen, Real Comet Press, 1989.

female gazes throughout Gothic literature has resulted in the coinage of the terms “male Gothic” and “female Gothic.” The labels indicate their significance: both pertain to the experiences of a narrator or protagonist that directly correlates to their gender and relations to the other sex. The “male Gothic,” as explained by Anne Williams in her book *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* is a perspective that sees “a world of cruelty, violence, and supernatural horrors grounded in ‘the female’ ”(109). Williams explains that views on femininity and virginity enforced by the Catholic Church have labelled the male gaze as a form of indulging in sin. In other words, women will always be seen as impure in the eyes of men despite being victims to the male gaze, serving as catalysts to the horrors that characterize the Gothic genre.⁹

The “female Gothic,” in turn, attempts to instill some agency back into the female form through cutting through the obscuring male gaze. Angela Leonardi writes how Ellen Moers first used the term “female Gothic” in her 1974 essay “Female Gothic: The Monster’s Mother.” Moers states that the “female Gothic” label applies to “work(s) that women writers have done in the literary mode,” but also notes how the definition goes beyond a novel being credited to a female author. Rather, Leonardi quotes Moers in explaining how the term acts “as a coded expression of women’s’ fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body.”¹⁰ Specifically, the pressures and limitations of the domestic space and 19th century gender roles carried over into the Gothic format, women writers using horror as an

⁹ Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, University of Chicago Press; 1st Edition, 1995

¹⁰ Moers, Ellen. “Female Gothic. The Monster’s Mother.” *Literary Women: The Great Writers*. Oxford University Press, 1974.

outlet to express their own sufferings and implementing a female gaze to contrast “male Gothic” narratives.¹¹

As Anti-Catholic writers wanted to use their writing to both vilify and condemn Catholicism, the Gothic style was incredibly appealing. The utilization of the supernatural, ominous settings, and the trope of young maidens being brutalized made for the perfect structure in portraying Catholics as immoral and wicked. The privacy of the convents and monasteries became homes for evil, and the antagonists of vampires and demons were warped into subhuman, malicious priests and nuns. Based on this logic, tropes that define the Gothic format can often be found within Anti-Catholic literature, including *The Monk* and *The Awful Disclosures*. The terms of “male Gothic” and “female Gothic” can also be applied to both Lewis’ and Maria Monk’s texts as well as in reference to their male and female gazes. Williams describes Ambrosio as a narrator who possesses “piercing, penetrating eyes” and whose “I” narrative is inherently based in the differences between masculinity and femininity¹². It is Ambrosio’s overpowering male gaze that focuses on his journey amidst romanticized female struggle and virtue (or the lack of) that places *The Monk* in the “male Gothic” genre. Contrastingly, Maria Monk’s first-person narrative illustrating her trials and tribulations that allows women to be seen beyond male objectification classifies her narrative as “female Gothic.”

Not only does Lewis’ narrative act as a lens into the Catholic male gaze, but the original criticism and reception surrounding *The Monk* was met with an overwhelmingly

¹¹ Leonardi, Angela. “The Function of Gender in Female and Male Gothic.” University of Erlangen-Nuremberg.

¹² Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, University of Chicago Press; 1st Edition, 1995.

male audience. 19th century public opinion was intensely influenced by men, and their critiques and arguments helped to form overall societal views on various topics, including literature. While *The Monk*'s writing style can be viewed as engaging to a heterosexual male audience, the book was ironically slandered by male critics. Particularly, the criticism the novel met was prompted by the ways in which sex and the women involved were depicted, likened by critic and clergymen Reverend Thomas James Mathias to mainstream pornography.¹³ Poet and author Samuel Taylor Coleridge is perhaps the most famous of *The Monk*'s reviewers, and while he detailed aspects of the work that he liked, he also described the text as one "which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale."¹⁴ He then goes on to say how the potential corruption of youthful readers comes from Ambrosio's interactions with Matilda and Antonia, attacking Matilda's "shameless harlotry" and Antonia's "trembling innocence." Matilda's promiscuity and Antonia's naivete are met with equal disdain, and their sexual interactions with Ambrosio, whether consensual or not, are both viewed as furthering his spiritual corruption. Although Coleridge goes into detail about Ambrosio's crimes, he labels him more as a victim who succumbs to outside temptations, mainly the women he interacts with. It should be noted that while Coleridge praises Matilda's overall character, calling her "[Lewis'] masterpiece" early on in his review, he simultaneously denounces her for her sexual liberation. This acts in upholding the belief of women maintaining their chastity before and after their marriages, sex viewed as a means of procreation and an activity not meant to be enjoyed by female participants. While

¹³ Mathias, Thomas James. *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues, with Notes*, J. Milliken, 8th edition, 1798

¹⁴ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Review of *The Monk*." *A Guide to the Gothic*, edited by Jeanette A. Laredo, Open Education Network.

Coleridge clearly states his appreciation towards Matilda's character, he cannot appreciate her as a woman of 19th century society.

Interestingly, while Antonia's role as the female ingénue aligns more with 18th-19th century standards for women, Coleridge dismisses her in a manner similar to Ambrosio after assaulting her. Coleridge seemingly does not take pleasure in the sexual descriptions Lewis provides, but he nevertheless objectifies Antonia along with Matilda by only recognizing her for the loss of her chastity.¹⁵ This then demonstrates how the novel's male gaze ironically clashes with Coleridge's own gaze, and he reads Lewis' objectification of women from a patriarchal viewpoint regarding domestic femininity and female nonconformity. While Ambrosio's male gaze can be interpreted as a tactic in furthering its Anti-Catholic message, critics like Coleridge were so blinded by their own male gazes they were unable to separate *The Monk's* overall message from the bawdiness of the narrative.

Fortunately, Coleridge's review on *The Monk* does not represent the overall critical and public response to the novel. As more female and non-male reviewers and critics have been able to peruse the text, there have been a variety of responses that have shifted *The Monk* from being written and judged from the male gaze to focusing on what this gaze says and does to the overall narrative. For example, one of Coleridge's major criticisms of *The Monk* was the women, blaming Matilda, Antonia, and all those involved in Ambrosio's corruption rather than acknowledging the monk's autonomy in committing sins. Going back to *Art of Darkness*, Williams offers a contemporary analysis of the male response to *The Monk's* characters through the chapter "Demon Lovers: *The Monk*." In this section she

¹⁵ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Review of *The Monk*," *A Guide to the Gothic*, compiled by Jeanette A. Laredo, Open Education Network

discusses that what makes the novel so horrifying to male readers, such as Coleridge, are the female characters' subversions of ideal femininity. She details how "In [*The Monk*], female characters also manifest that instability, that refusal to be *one thing*, that is so troubling to patriarchal order" (116). While *The Monk* promotes ideals of 18th -19th century femininity compliant to patriarchal standards, Williams notes how reactions like Coleridge's express discomfort when those women defy those expectations. Under the male gaze, women cater to what attracts the heterosexual male, and are immediately viewed as dangerous temptations because of their potential to corrupt. Scholar Agnieszka Łowczanin also discusses this phenomenon of the public female form in "*The Monk* by M.G. Lewis: Revolution, Religion, and the Female Body." Łowczanin describes how "*The Monk* is a fictional digestion of the ways in which the female body [was] expected to be secluded within the confinements of domesticity" (17) and how escaping these confinements turned a woman "from a spectacle of display to a spectacle of degradation," (17) specifically when interacting with Catholicism.

It is also interesting to note the way Lewis indicates both female conformity and nonconformity within the text. Conventionality or the lack of in women, according to *The Monk*, is something that is manifested physically, virtuous women described as beautiful and pure and unorthodox women as undesirable and horrifying. In her essay "The Figure of the Nun and the Gothic Construction of Femininity in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," Marie Hause writes how women such as Matilda, who refused to conform to societal standards "became figures of death, deformity, or demonic evil" (26). She continues by saying that the physical traits of "grotesque female figures in the novel do indicate the vigorous though apparently threatening and repellent existence of transgressing women that exceed the definition of women as static

objects of desire” (26). The idea of female nonconformity having an ugliness to it is the male gaze’s response to women not existing simply for masculine pleasure and approval. Even when characters such as Antonia are taken advantage of, they are written off as disposable and repulsive because they no longer fit into society’s standards for women determined by men.

In turn, this nonconformity, seen in such the likes as Matilda (who takes the form of a promiscuous woman while hiding her demonic persona),¹⁶ coupled with carrying out misdeeds through Ambrosio and the Church, serves in proving the destruction Catholicism can supposedly do to society and femininity. *The Monk’s* characterization and usage of female characters as plot devices, therefore, acts in showing how Catholicism brings out the worst in its participants and is able to make both conventional and unconventional women even more threatening under the male gaze. Based on logics such as Williams’, Łowczanin’s, and Hause, the novel presents a plea not only to end Catholicism and its negative influence on female practitioners, but to beware of the monstrous women who choose to not follow and embrace the Cult of Domesticity.

The Awful Disclosures, in comparison to *The Monk*, was also much-discussed in the public eye and propelled Maria Monk to becoming one of the most prominent symbols of the American Anti-Catholic tirade. However, while Monk became one of the best-selling authors of the 1800s, her prosperity spiraled once her authorship caused a controversy. As told in her testimony, Monk states she is a runaway Catholic nun from Montreal who was impregnated by one of the convent’s priests. As it was later revealed, Monk’s past life was

¹⁶ Grudin, Peter. “The Monk”: Matilda and the Rhetoric of Deceit.” *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 5, No. 2, May 1975, pp. 136-146.

quite the opposite. Trauma to her brain from an injury in childhood and a life of prostitution resulted in a teenage Maria Monk being confined to a Catholic asylum, not a nunnery. After becoming pregnant, she was forced to leave, and her experiences as a patient and her own mental illness made Monk an easy target. It is believed *The Awful Disclosures* was a consequence of her being exploited by Anti-Catholic authorities rather than a text written out of her own desire. There is evidence that Monk did not pen the novel herself, but instead dictated her stories about the asylum to a group of men who were prominent figures in the Anti-Catholic movement. These men, including Reverend William K. Hoyt, who took Monk on as a mistress, embellished her tales and crafted a work that shamed and denounced Catholicism. While the men claimed they merely wrote down what Monk said, their strong Anti-Catholic sentiments and Monk's promiscuous past resulted in the novel being discredited. *The Awful Disclosures* faced backlash from various sources after becoming a national success, from the people of Montreal who knew the nuns of Hotel Dieu personally to William Leete Stone, a journalist who visited the convent and even interviewed Monk to prove her story was untrue.¹⁷

In spite of Maria Monk's fall from grace, the impact *The Awful Disclosures* had on American Anti-Catholicism solidified the convent exposé's place in the literary sphere. In reviewing Maria Monk along with other captivity narratives of the time, Marie Anne Pagliarini in her essay "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: an Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America" states that the convent exposé's format tended to utilize Anti-Catholic stereotypes in supporting their narratives. She

¹⁷ Hughes, Ruth. "The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk." Penn Arts and Sciences at University of Pennsylvania.

writes that “[c]entral to Anti-Catholic literature was the representation of Catholicism as a menace to the pure American woman and the Protestant family. The literature was replete with examples of innocent young women whose purity was defiled in the confessional or in the convent.” She continues by saying that “sexual deviance personified in the priest and nun [showed how] Catholicism endangered the most fundamental cultural values of antebellum Protestant America.”¹⁸ *The Awful Disclosures* overwhelmingly relied on these misconceptions surrounding the Catholic Church and heavily played into this idea of threats against female virtue and domesticity. However, despite being exposed as a false testimony, the absurdities of Monk’s account only further kindled the Anti-Catholic wildfire that overtook both the American public and private spheres. The story’s taking place in Canada also helped in promoting the text, the 1800s seeing a wave of nativism due to a sweeping increase in immigration (particularly Catholic immigrants) into the United States.

However, as mentioned earlier, the magnitude of Monk’s historical and literary influences are often overlooked due to her past not aligning with her narrative. In an essay titled *The Enduring Legacy of Maria Monk*, scholar Dennis Castillo points out discrepancies between Monk’s claims and reality, discussing how her book is taken out of context and is unfair in its criticisms towards Catholicism. While he mentions that the Catholic Church has a history of abuse, Monk’s novel makes generalizations about the institution as a whole.

¹⁸ Pagliarini, Marie Anne. “The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: an Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, University of California Press, Vol.9, No.1, 1999, pp. 97-128.

Castillo, similar to other critics since the book's release, also focuses on the facts of Monk's life and how her prostitution and mental illness invalidate her narrative.¹⁹

There is also the problem with the testimony's authorship. While this paper has been advocating for Maria Monk's female gaze, it is certainly complicated by the fact that a female-driven text was written by men. In the chapter "Two 'Escaped Nuns': Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk" in her book *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*, author Jenny Franchot claims that *The Awful Disclosures* becomes a "masculine" take on a "feminine" problem (154) due to Monk's tale being filtered through a masculine viewpoint. This idea then insinuates that although the novel centers around women, men still control the narration's gaze and can further their own political agendas rather than those of Maria Monk herself.

While the credibility of Monk's novel is less than full-proof, it is also important to recognize the context of her narrative separate from the details added on to her story. Although Monk perhaps produced the most famous North American convent exposé of all time, she was by no means the only author to do so nor the first. Rebecca Reed's memoir *Six Months in a Convent*, another famous captivity narrative, was published a year before *The Awful Disclosures*, and suspicions surrounding convents and monasteries were already present before Maria Monk became a public figure. Monk's novel certainly furthered the Anti-Catholic revolution, but abuse allegations against the Church were neither started nor ended with her. Furthermore, Monk's allegations should not be completely dismissed due to some fabrications. Her journey of being committed to Montreal's Magdalene asylum, a

¹⁹ Castillo, Dennis. "The Enduring Legacy of Maria Monk." *American Catholic Studies*. vol. 12, No. ¼, 2001, pp. 49-59.

Catholic center specifically targeted to help misguided women, can be paralleled to that in the account of her joining the nunnery. Named after Jesus' devout follower and former prostitute Mary Magdalene, these mental institutions have been reported as having poor working and living conditions, and many patients said they suffered from sexual abuse at the hands of nuns and priests. These claims have been continuous and as recent as 2018, more than 180 years after *The Awful Disclosures* was published. In an article written in 2016 by The Canadian Press, author Rie Croll describes her latest project of compiling testimonies of survivors who were sent to Magdalene asylums in Canada, including the very institution Maria Monk was sent to two centuries before. Croll confirmed that while she received a variety of accounts from differing patients, there was a common thread interconnecting their stories: "All of the former inmates have focused on (one) point — they were taken advantage of. They were exploited." She also stated that the promises the asylums made contradicted with their practices, commenting "The Catholic Church says it was about saving fallen women, giving them a refuge, giving them a trade."²⁰ This false promise harks back to the duality the Anti-Catholic movement claimed was at the root of Catholicism where the public image of the Church acted as a façade to cover the corruption lying at its core. Croll's observation and findings then provide merit to Monk's and other convent exposés' narratives in detailing the maltreatment of women within Catholic-run institutions.

It also must be accounted for that *The Awful Disclosures*, despite its questionable authorship, took inspiration from and gave an unprivileged woman a voice and room to share her female gaze. Women had limited opportunities to become writers, and these opportunities

²⁰ "Researcher probes Canadian links to abuse at Magdalene laundries," Maclean's, July 17, 2016, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/researcher-probes-canadian-links-to-abuse-at-magdalene-laundries/>.

were often only attainable to those who came from wealthy backgrounds and had sheltered, non-trivial upbringings. Maria Monk's background and institutionalization would have made it nearly possible for her to become an author without the help of her male co-writers. It is important, therefore, to not solely focus on the contradictions in Monk's testimony, but what it meant for the female voice, the female gaze, and what it revealed about the Catholic Church. *The Awful Disclosures* advocated for the female experience through a narration that focuses entirely on the woman as opposed to narratives focused on men with women on the side. Monk's gaze, therefore, should not be overshadowed by the fact that men helped to conceptualize it, or else her story would have never been told in the first place. It is crucial to concentrate on the truths that can be pulled from her narrative, and how the perpetuation of the female gaze through her testimony allows readers to gain insights into 19th century womanhood and the dynamic between young women and Catholicism. *The Awful Disclosure's* preface speaks to this point, outlining that the goal of the text is "that the reader of the ensuing narrative will not suppose that it is a fiction, or that the scenes and persons that I have delineated, had not a real existence. It is also desired, that the author of this volume may... receive sympathy for the trials which she has endured." Although ironic due to the fabrications to the testimony, this preface and critical situation serve as a reminder in what readers should take away from it; the importance of listening to female survivors through exposing an abusive institution and accommodating the female point of view.

IV. The Male Gaze in *The Monk*

The Monk's trajectory starts with Ambrosio as a respected figure in his community who slowly falls prey to temptation, lust, and greed. However, his transition from righteous monk to a corrupt sinner is not sudden. Rather, the novel showcases how his potential to

being corrupted has always been present, even before meeting Matilda. Lewis enforces this idea through establishing Ambrosio's male gaze from the text's beginning, particularly highlighted when in the presence of female characters. The emphasis on his male gaze when around women while he is simultaneously on duty demonstrates how this gaze conflicts with his religious responsibilities. This illustrates the predatory nature of Catholic priests that Anti-Catholic authors hoped to advertise as well as how Ambrosio's male gaze is only encouraged and strengthened by his Catholic vows of celibacy and isolation. One scene in particular that speaks to this is Ambrosio studying a portrait of the Virgin Mary. While his contemplation is initially respectful, he struggles between basic instinct and his religious reputation as admiration strays into a more libidinous territory:

‘What Beauty in that countenance!’...‘How graceful is the turn of that head! What sweetness, yet what majesty in her divine eyes! How softly her cheek reclines upon her hand! Can the Rose vie with the blush of that cheek? Can the Lily rival the whiteness of that hand? Oh! if such a Creature existed and existed but for me! Were I permitted to twine round my fingers those golden ringlets, and press with my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom.... Away, impure ideas! Let me remember that Woman is for ever lost to me....What charms me, when ideal and considered as a superior Being, would disgust me, become Woman and tainted with all the failings of Mortality. 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!’ (Lewis, Chapter II)

Ambrosio's commentary on Mary starts out as innocently noting how her physicality reflects her chastity. Her “sweetness” directly correlates to her “divin[ity]” and is compared to that of a flower through his mentioning of the rose and the lily. However, this comparison to flowers, similar to the passage's trajectory, contains a duality in not only acting as a symbol of Mary's innocence, but her sexuality through its yonic imagery. This symbolizes Ambrosio's attraction to Mary due to her purity and mimics the heightened sexual emphasis

the male gaze places on the nonconsenting female form. Ambrosio's internal turmoil only increases through transitioning from looking upon Mary to longing to touch her. While saints and relics are often venerated through physical contact, these signs of reverence usually take place on hands and feet. Ambrosio's referencing of Mary's hair and breasts show how his thoughts slowly veer away from religion, and his position as a monk and duty to venerate Mary creates a duality in public vs. private behavior in Catholic authority figures.

What is key is the word choice of "permitted" in being allowed to carry out these thoughts. This points to Ambrosio's inability to embrace his sexuality due to his vow of chastity. He reminds himself, "Let me remember that Woman is forever lost to me," expressing how this Catholic repression is an active effort that goes against innate human nature. The trajectory of his thoughts demonstrates a struggle and not only establishes Ambrosio as vulnerable to future temptations but reveals how repressing his sexuality has resulted in a fetishization of virtue and has made even Mary, the symbol of righteousness, desirable. It is also telling that because she is a piece of art, Mary can neither speak nor shield herself from being objectified, signifying how the male gaze silences women and their truths for the benefit of male pleasure.

Although Lewis establishes Ambrosio's faltering virtue from *The Monk's* beginning, his morals completely crumble after encountering Matilda, a beautiful woman disguised as a boy called Rosario who has been living in the monastery. Matilda symbolizes the physical manifestation of Ambrosio's fantasies. Her revealing that she served as the model for the Virgin Mary portrait he was lusting over earlier only solidifies this fact. Even though he has interacted with female parishioners in his daily profession, this is the first instance Ambrosio converses with a woman (his ideal woman, no less), within the walls of the monastery. While

initially he instinctively embodies his clergyman role and orders Matilda to leave, he ultimately lets her stay when Matilda threatens suicide. However, despite the extreme circumstances, it is in Lewis' description of the event that gives readers answers as to why through using Ambrosio's Catholic male gaze:

The Friar's eyes followed with dread the course of the dagger. 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 Moonbeams 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.

'Hold!' He cried in an hurried faltering voice; 'I can resist no longer! Stay, then, Enchantress; Stay for my destruction!' (Chapter II)

This passage is only a fragment of *The Monk's* overt utilization of melodrama, Matilda on the precipice of taking her life seemingly out of devotion. As Catholicism states that suicide renounces God, Lewis presents a sinful tableau in Matilda choosing death over the gift of life. However, despite the inevitable tragedy if she follows through with her actions, Matilda's willingness to indulge in sin adds an erotic and passionate undertone to the scene. This eroticism is made explicit by not only her choosing to transgress for Ambrosio's love, but her breast being exposed in her desperation. There is an intrinsic, physical aspect to the passage that focuses on Matilda's figure in a dramatic setting, and Ambrosio's horror and sense of duty in preserving her virtue instantly disappears upon seeing her body. The narration, similar to when Ambrosio is gazing at the Virgin Mary's portrait, focuses on Matilda's physicality as proof of her virtue. The language Ambrosio uses in describing Matilda parallels the language when gazing upon Mary. The "whiteness" of her skin matches the "whiteness" of Mary's hand, and the word choices of "dazzling" and "beauteous"

correlate to the adjectives used about the painting. This demonstrates that Matilda is not only the manifestation of Ambrosio's desires, but how her appearance of purity only increases her sensuality. Similar to Mary, this adoration of Matilda's image also takes on a double meaning through the imagery's composition. The phallic symbol of the knife "resting upon her left breast" and the "moonbeams," the moon a symbol for womanhood and sexuality, plays into how both Ambrosio's own sexual repression and the male gaze can warp how women are represented.

It is also crucial to distinguish Matilda's exposure of herself as accidental rather than purposeful. Her seduction of Ambrosio is initiated by her showing her breast, but he buys into this seduction because she does it in a conventional manner. In other words, rather than making it appear the stripping of her clothing was intentional, it is portrayed as a moment marked by her allegiance and admiration for a patriarchal figure. As women killing themselves, often at knife point and as a means to maintain their virtue, was a fictional trope often utilized in 18th century literature, this commitment is viewed as commendable in the eyes of the male gaze. However, Lewis turns this imagery on its head, and Matilda's threat of killing herself actually corrupts morality, specifically Ambrosio's, rather than upholds it. Ambrosio allowing Matilda to stay despite her gender confirms this idea, and is meant to exemplify Catholicism actively destroying the domestic sphere through him letting her be a part of a space meant for men. This false virtue Matilda initially puts out is also how she is able to repeatedly tempt Ambrosio²¹, and overtime her beauty begins to decrease in his eyes because of her unconventional practices (despite his own participation). Her eventual reveal

²¹Grudin, Peter. "The Monk": Matilda and the Rhetoric of Deceit." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 5, No. 2, May 1975, pp. 136-146.

as a shapeshifting demon confirms how the male gaze treats conformity in contrast to nonconformity and what is deemed as attractive in women, further illustrating the dangers of the Catholic male gaze in preying upon pure and traditional femininity.

Ambrosio's corruption, although starting out as physical through sexual intercourse with Matilda, is a mostly internal affair that he keeps to himself. In other words, the beginnings of his downfall take place within the monastery, away from the public eye and worshippers who he could easily manipulate. However, overtime Ambrosio's duplicity begins to seep into his clerical profession. He starts to see his role and his relationship to practitioners as one to use to his advantage, utilizing his reputation and occupation within the church to abuse worshipers. In one scene in the confessional booth, Lewis depicts Ambrosio interacting with different women coming to confess their sins. Ambrosio's male gaze objectifies their guilty states and anguish, his focus on their appearances and vulnerability providing insights into how Catholic authority supposedly view their followers (female followers in particular):

The Petitioner seemed bowed down with affliction: Her cheeks were pale, her eyes dimmed with tears, and her hair fell in disorder over her face and bosom. Still her countenance was so sweet, so innocent, so heavenly, as might have charmed an heart less susceptible, than that which panted in the Abbot's breast. With more than usual softness of manner he desired her to proceed and heard her speak as follows with an emotion which increased every moment.....

'So!' thought the Monk; 'Here we have a second Vincentio della Ronda. Rosario's adventure began thus,' and He wished secretly that this might have the same conclusion. (Lewis, Chapter III).

This passage provides two contrasting figures in the female confessor and the male listener. The female petitioner, later revealed to be the virtuous and future victim of Ambrosio's crimes Antonia, is established in her state of fragility. Her "pale cheeks" "teary eyes" and

“disordered hair” convey she is troubled and has come to confession seeking answers. Her honesty and comfortability in expressing her emotions reveals she believes the confessional booth is a safe space, and the monk receiving the confession can be trusted with her information. The structure of older confessional booths also lends itself to this trust, a wooden box with a screen placed between practitioners and priests to protect sinner’s identities. This can be interpreted as a physical metaphor for the external security and welcoming atmosphere Anti-Catholics said Catholicism used to trap unsuspecting worshippers. Unfortunately, Ambrosio pays no attention to her inner turmoil and is instead drawn to the morality she radiates. His objectifying of her both without consent and within an inappropriate context mimics the modern-day male gaze. While he makes no efforts to outwardly express or indicate to her his attraction, the “panting” of his heart clues readers in to his interest and presumed arousal. His referencing of Matilda’s alias of Rosario also hints at him hoping to have a similar relationship with Antonia. Furthermore, it is presumed that if Ambrosio can see Antonia through the booth despite the screen, he is looking at her intensely. This acts as commentary on his own corruption, magnified by the male gaze, in quite literally being able to penetrate through the confessional structure. This contrasts to Antonia being “bowed down with affliction” while confessing, further victimizing her and solidifying how Ambrosio’s male gaze perceives her more as an object to be looked at than as a person.

As seen in characters such as the Virgin Mary and Antonia, a common thread can be found based throughout *The Monk* of women abiding to patriarchal standards being perceived as better. While this certainly was a truth that existed beyond *The Monk*, Lewis used these gender norms along with the male gaze to show how much of a threat Catholicism was to

female virtue and complacency. This idea is epitomized in one of the novel's turning points in which Ambrosio compares his attraction towards Matilda and Antonia. He ultimately decides that the latter is superior due to her compliance to 18th-19th century gender norms, musing:

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 favours bestowed so freely by the Second. Matilda gluts me with enjoyment even to loathing, forces me to her arms, apes the Harlot, and glories in her prostitution. Disgusting! (Lewis Chapter III)

In this passage, Antonia's virtue is directly juxtaposed to Matilda's wantonness, and her innocence is almost fetishized. Throughout the novel, Ambrosio is drawn to female virtue, first out of admiration, but slowly out of wanting to dismantle it. It is only in this passage through comparing her to Matilda where it becomes clearer as to why. Antonia's "sweetness" is commended while the "gluttony" Matilda aspires is condemned. Compared to the headstrong and bawdy Matilda, Lewis using more masculine, aggressive descriptors, Antonia's purity is coupled with a naivete that is stereotypically feminine and requires her to be protected. As a result, under the male gaze Matilda is labelled as undesirable for her projected masculinity and Antonia is desirable for fitting the conventional feminine mold. In turn, rather than Matilda being objectified for being comfortable in her sexuality, Antonia's inexperience is sought after, presenting Catholics as a danger to idealized femininity and how Catholicism directly targets the most defenseless and virtuous members of the patriarchy.

V. The Female Gaze in *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*

Contrastingly, Maria Monk's testimony begins by explaining her journey in becoming a nun rather than being born into a clerical role like Ambrosio. Maria Monk's childhood was

loosely defined by her family identifying as Protestant, but they did not engage in religious endeavors. It is revealed that Monk's life at home was far from ideal, and her relationship to her parents was cold and distant. She particularly focuses on the absence of her mother in her account, and later points to this absence as the reason she was drawn to the Catholic Church. In the middle of her narrative, Monk makes the point to explicitly blame her family for the abuse she is suffering, writing "I will merely say, that I thought [my mother] indulged in partialities and my Antipathies in her family during my childhood, and that I attribute my entrance into the nunnery, and the misfortunes I have suffered, to my early estrangement from home, and my separation from family." This paragraph carries significance because it directly associates Monk's taking the veil with her life back home. Even without having known the details about Monk's past, this statement helps to paint a picture of her resentment towards her family and their inability to provide her with a happy childhood. Based on Monk's placement in an asylum at a young age, it can be assumed her isolation from her family, particularly her mother, bears at least some truth.

Considering the time period and the focus Protestants placed on domesticity, it is inferred Monk believes her family has failed in living up to 19th century expectations regarding the private space. Therefore, Monk's female gaze lets her see her parents, particularly her mothers' errors, as a societal disruption that goes against Protestant domestic and familial ideals.²² Her inability to adapt and create a domestic space of her own forces her to become a nun, the only acceptable position an unmarried woman could occupy and one that appealed to women who lacked a sense of domesticity growing up. Franchot discusses this in *Roads to*

²² Franchot, Jenny. *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*. University of California Press, 1994.

Rome and writes about how the church's hierarchy creates a faux familial structure to lure young women in: "Monk's historic divulgence of sexual caresses and punishments illuminates a civilian world of emotional absence and physical exploitation, supplying a fawning priest in place of the lost father, a dominating mother superior in place of the indifferent mother who fails to provide any religious instruction, thus leaving her daughter entirely without traditional Protestant theological equipment" (157). Maria Monk's predicament can be seen as a criticism and demonstrating the repercussions of not complying to 19th century femininity and domesticity. Without that stability, women are forced to find it in other outlets that have a sense of order and structure not found within their own lives. When explaining her attraction to becoming a nun, Monk describes how her unsatisfactory home life and lack of religious guidance from her parental figures inspired her to convert to Catholicism:

To my want of religious instruction at home, and the ignorance of my Creator, and my duty, which was its natural effect From all that appears to the public eye, the nuns of these Convents are devoted to the charitable objects appropriate to each....and [I] began by degrees to look upon a nun as the happiest of women, and a Convent as the most peaceful, holy, and delightful place of abode. (Chapter I)

The passage above dictates how Maria Monk's lack of spirituality in her childhood caused her to be drawn to the safe haven forged by Catholic nuns. The idea of a space for women outside of domesticity that still encouraged the values of female chastity and morality would be attractive to someone who never experienced the Cult of Domesticity firsthand. There is also the idea of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery promoting "happiness," an interesting word choice to use during a time where a woman's happiness was connected to marriage and children. Perhaps this speaks to Monk taking the veil as a means to gain independence and define her

life beyond her family. This want for independence could also be seen as dangerous and a catalysis to her trauma, Monk choosing to break away from society despite believing the Hotel Dieu will provide her with some sense of domesticity. Through this logic, the testimony stresses the importance of domesticity in young womens' lives, as Maria Monk, due to growing up without an idea of conventional womanhood, makes the unconventional move to not marry and become a nun in order to find it.

Despite her initial excitement, Monk's time at the nunnery is the opposite of what was promised before taking the veil. She, along with other newly converted nuns, are forced to suffer through rape, manual labor, and time in the confessional booths and numerous self-harming rituals as acts of repentance. The overseers of these punishments and misdemeanors convey a shift in the traditional male and female abusive power dynamic. Where Maria Monk crucially differs from *The Monk* is that the abuse comes from both ordained men and women rather than solely men. Monk goes into incredible detail about the influence of the superior nuns, who aid the priests in their licentious acts and supervise the disciplining of their inferiors. She emphasizes the viciousness of these women, setting up a similar juxtaposition seen in Antonia and Matilda of the ideal vs. unconventional woman. While women such as Monk are depicted as virtuous and wanting to keep that virtue, the superiors are cunning, malicious, and manipulative. In one infamous scene, the Mother Superior reveals to Monk not only the common occurrence of a nun getting pregnant (in the aftermath of sexual assault) and giving birth in the nunnery, but how their newborns are killed as a means to preserve their souls. While the Mother Superior seems to find great amusement in the practice, Monk is terrified, describing her reaction as such:

Into what a place, and among what society, had I been admitted! How differently did a Convent now appear from what I had supposed it to be! The holy women I

had always fancied the nuns to be, the venerable Lady Superior, what were they? And the priests of the seminary adjoining, some of whom indeed I had had reason to think were base and profligate men, what were they all? I now learnt they were often admitted into the nunnery, and allowed to indulge in the greatest crimes, which they and others called virtues. (Chapter VI)

The Mother Superior's joy in murdering infants and Monk's response acts in exhibiting both the presence and lack of the 19th century maternal instinct. Monk's horror is an appeal to female readers, showing how this behavior and practice is not only unnatural, but also made more horrible due to other women engaging in it. The female gaze that Monk utilizes puts both men and women under scrutiny, the men being seen merely as monstrous while the women are viewed as both monstrous and unconventionally female. This passage also displays Maria Monk's transition in perspective on convent life after seeing this direct destruction of femininity and the domestic space. This is the tipping point for her, and while she has endured torture, humiliation, and violence up until this point, it is when she learns of the infanticide and atrocities committed against babies where her instincts as a caretaker, woman, and mother take control. The "holy women" she once revered and the Mother Superior she considered a mentor are discovered to be the opposite of what they present themselves to be. The same can be said for the priests, and this duality that Monk consistently points out in the Catholic Church serves as a warning, especially towards young women, about putting trust in Catholic authority.

There is also an interesting contrast between "crimes" and "virtues," displaying how the Church justifies their questionable practices as ways of worshipping God. This reveals how Catholics view virginity and virtue due to this skewed definition, as well as how the twisted logic can almost be an excuse to justify taking away a woman's innocence as a virtuous act. While the preservation of female virtue is a concept publicly encouraged by

both the domestic space and the Catholic Church, the rape and assault of female practitioners by priests and nuns reveals a hypocrisy between public and private Catholicism. This also then correlates to how Catholics and Protestants viewed power. While Catholics were direct outlets for God and could interpret the Bible in their own fashion, the Protestants believed only God could dictate what exactly Christian teachings meant.²³ The priests and superiors abusing and torturing nuns and using a religious guise to explain their actions indicates how corrupt Protestants and Maria Monk were trying to make the Church out to be. Monk often discusses the power of the priests and how the superiors consistently pressured her and other nuns to directly obey them, one passage dictating:

The authority of the priests in everything, and the enormity of every act which opposes it, were also impressed upon our minds, in various ways, by our teachers.....While at confession, I was urged to hide nothing from the priest, and have been told by them, that they already knew what was in my heart, but would not tell, because it was necessary for me to confess it. I really believed that the priests were acquainted with my thoughts; and often stood in great awe of them. They often told me they had power to strike me dead at any moment. (Chapter VIII)

While Ambrosio's influence in *The Monk* is implied more than explicitly stated, Monk provides an insight on the female worshipper's view on the male, Catholic authority. The priests are positioned as almost an omniscient force by Monk saying, "they already knew what was in my heart." Despite this, the nuns are still encouraged to confess their sins, forcing women to not only trust Catholic authority but giving the confessional booth a voyeuristic quality through facilitating conversations on sin. By "not hiding," young women are forced to bare themselves to the priests in a manner disguised as repentance.

²³ Del Rosario. Mike. "7 Key Differences Between Protestant and Catholic Doctrine." Dallas Theological Seminary, January 18, 2014.

Interestingly, as in *The Monk*, acts of confession are seen as a way to cleanse the soul where priests absolve confessors upon hearing their faults. This then hints at how Catholicism manipulates female practitioners who are trying to maintain their morality, into practices that actually feed into their superiors' sexual perversions.

The fear Monk describes when saying the priests told her “they had power to strike [her] dead at any moment” is met with a kind of veneration, her fear coupled with “great awe.” This correlates to the public image Catholicism promotes through their clergymen and how their power inspires a kind of admiration their followers are drawn to. Maria Monk's female gaze, rooted in ideals of the Cult of Domesticity, is tricked by the priests being situated as paternal and fatherly figures over the nunnery. As women were viewed as inferior and submissive to men, being treated as such does not initially bother the nuns because of their familiarity with these gender norms. This allows the priests to gain their trust and for Maria Monk to not know she is being abused until it is too late. It should also be noted this trust is further forged through other women, the superiors urging the young girls to bare their souls to the priests. The superiors act as henchmen, doing the priest's biddings with no motivation other than wanting to bring about chaos and destruction to the social order. This points out how women who do not abide to conventionality and take on the role of faithful and naïve femininity can result in the further corruption of female virtue, creating a domino effect that was believed to threaten the Cult of Domesticity's very existence. The female gaze, therefore, is something that can be violated and fooled, further criticizing the Church for promoting a false, ideal womanhood. Monk then insinuates the narrative that women must be protected, which both coincides with the patriarchal norms of the day while also stating the reality of abuse against women.

The Awful Disclosures, as mentioned before, is infamously known for the amount of violence it contains. While other novels of the 18th-19th century, such as *The Monk*, usually wrote violent scenes more metaphorically, covering up the brutalities with romantic language and abstract imagery, Maria Monk spends multiple paragraphs delving into every tortuous aspect she and other nuns were put through. Rape and torture scenes, especially when featuring women, sometimes have a tendency of straying into the erotic territory, but she provides a straightforward depiction of what she endured without any indications of trying to please audiences. In a similar manner to the modern-day female gaze, Maria Monk's gaze depicts female trauma in an almost excruciatingly blunt manner, and these descriptions occur so often throughout it is difficult to ignore them. One particular instance takes place when Monk is punished for disorderly conduct and is made to wear a gag in her mouth, recalling:

The rough gagging which I several times endured wounded my lips very much; for it was common, in that operation, to thrust the gag hard against the teeth, and catch one or both the lips, which were sometimes cut. The object was to stop the screams made by the offender as soon as possible; and some of the old nuns delighted in tormenting us. A gag was once forced into my mouth which had a large splinter upon it, and this cut through my under lip, in front, leaving to this day a scar about half an inch long. (Chapter VI)

Similar to the instance in *The Monk* when Matilda wishes to commit suicide, Maria Monk presents a tableau of the female body in agony, marked by her "teeth" and "lips" being cut and bruised. The violent nature of the paragraph is met with a kind of inherent sexuality in Monk's torture, seen through the imagery of the gag being "thrust[ed] heard against the teeth." However, despite this sexual undertone being present, it does not romanticize the moment like in Lewis' writing, nor does it make this activity appear consensual or enjoyable in any manner. Rather, the language creates discomfort and emphasizes how the women are manipulated into violating themselves out of atonement. It is revealed that this atonement is

common practice at the nunnery, observed by the phrase “several times.” This attack on female virtue, therefore, is not a single occasion but continuous. The act of the gag silencing Monk’s screams is also noteworthy in its targeting of the female voice, leaving the eyes as the only tool she can use to analyze her situation. Kathleen Kennedy in her article “The Nun, The Priest, and the Pornographer: Scripting Rape in Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*” details how the torture devices used in Monk’s account often act in physically silencing those being punished. The physical pain, according to a quote pulled from critic Elaine Scarry, in turn, results in an “attack on the tortured’s reason.”²⁴ While female autonomy was practically non-existent (and there is irony in woman silencing other woman being viewed as unacceptable instead of a man being the perpetrator), Kennedy suggests that this type of violence creates a dependency and an attachment in the victims.²⁵ Women like Maria Monk therefore are made to rely on their torturers, and this makes it easier to assault them as well as their virtue. This can be also be seen in the scar the gag leaves behind, another point Kennedy mentions that can be attributed to historian Margaret Abruzzo. This symbolizes how permanent this type of damage is on impressionable young women.²⁶ Not only do their bodies bare evidence of their virtue and sense of domesticity being destroyed, but it is a physical and moral injury they will carry for the rest of their lives. The “old nun[s]’delight”

²⁴ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

²⁵ Kennedy, Kathleen. “The Nun, The Priest, and the Pornographer: Scripting Rape in Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*.” University of Colorado Boulder, 2013.

²⁶ Abruzzo, Margaret. *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

continues this contrast between the right and wrong ways to express one's femininity as well, the superiors finding fulfilment in watching their pupils be afflicted with pain. While this is only one of the multiple times in Maria Monk's narrative where she describes being brutalized by the Catholic system, it is certainly one of the most powerful and difficult to read. Each time Monk reports a past trauma, she makes sure to emphasize what women are put through, neither trying to twist the moment into something sexually gratifying nor repressing the extent of the horrors undergone by her and abuse survivors, specifically victims of the Catholic Church.

VI. Conclusion

Despite the controversy surrounding its authorship and plot, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* is proof of the gaze's importance in telling a story and how it can be used effectively in carrying out social and political messages. In juxtaposition to a text such as *The Monk*, which relies on the male gaze in its Anti-Catholic propaganda, it can be seen how the texts' overall meanings are influenced by these specific lenses. Lewis emphasizes the objectification of *The Monk's* female characters to prove how Catholicism results in Ambrosio's (and other clergymen's') male gazes being formed and solidified. The sexual repression Catholic priests endure creates a reverse psychological effect based in moral corruption, and the way Ambrosio constantly sexualizes women no matter their principles is meant to instill fear and anxiety over how Catholic authority truly view parishioners, particularly young women of domestic society. On the other hand, Maria Monk's female gaze works in a similar manner but without sexuality overshadowing female struggle. She details her experiences at the Hotel Dieu with incredible authenticity that forces readers to acknowledge the mistreatment of women without the influence of the male voice.

Simultaneously, she stands as an advocate for the Cult of Domesticity like Lewis, but as a means to foster a stable and loving environment for women to thrive in rather than simply as a way for women to be controlled and constrained by men. Both texts speak towards the 19th century rise in Anti-Catholicism as well as female identity within a patriarchal society, but it is Maria Monk's survivor testimony that convinces and moves its audience due to utilization of a gaze that challenges the normalized "male Gothic" story. The messaging is by no means perfect and certainly promotes negative and untrue stereotypes, but this comparison is meant to demonstrate how the modification of the gaze within literature can allow characters as well as people to be truly seen for who they are and what they have gone through.

VII. Works Cited

- “Enlightenment.” *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks, December 16, 2009.
- “Reform Movements: 1800s.” National Geographic.
- “Researcher probes Canadian links to abuse at Magdalene laundries.” *Maclean’s*, July 17, 2016.
- “Sexual Repression Part 1: How the Catholic Church Made Sex Dirty.” *Let’s Please God*, November 20, 2012.
- “The Male Gaze in Retrospect.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- “Women’s Sphere and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement.” Module 4: Romantic Literature (1820-1860), *American Literature I*, Lumen.
- Abruzzo, Margaret. *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.
- Castillo, Dennis. “The Enduring Legacy of Maria Monk.” *American Catholic Studies*. vol. 12, No. ¼, 2001, pp. 49-59.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Review of *The Monk*.” *A Guide to the Gothic*, edited by Jeanette A. Laredo, Open Education Network.
- Del Rosario, Mike. “7 Key Differences Between Protestant and Catholic Doctrine.” Dallas Theological Seminary, January 18, 2014.
- Franchot, Jenny. *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Grudin, Peter. “*The Monk*: Matilda and the Rhetoric of Deceit.” *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 5, No. 2, May 1975, pp. 136-146.

- Hause, Marie. "The figure of the nun and the gothic construction of femininity in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." JMU Scholar Commons, James Madison University, May 7, 2010, pp. 2-122.
- Hughes, Ruth. "The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk." Penn Arts and Sciences at University of Pennsylvania.
- Kennedy, Kathleen. "The Nun, The Priest, and the Pornographer: Scripting Rape in Maria Monk's Awful Disclosures." University of Colorado Boulder, 2013.
- Leonardi, Angela. "The Function of Gender in Female and Male Gothic." University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, 2017, pp. 1-16.
- Łowczanin, Agnieszka. "*The Monk* by M.G. Lewis: Revolution, Religion, and the Female Body." University of Łódź, Vol. 6, No. 6, 2016, pp. 16-34.
- Mathias, Thomas James. *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues, with Notes*, J. Milliken, 8th Edition, 1798.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no.4, 1975, pp. 6-18.
- MacKethan, Lucinda. "The Cult of Domesticity," *America in Class*, National Humanities Center, 2011.
- Moore, Suzanne. "Here's Looking at You, Kid!" *The Female gaze: women as viewers of popular culture*, edited by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshmen, Real Comet Press, 1989, pp.
- Moers, Ellen. "Female Gothic. The Monster's Mother." *Literary Women: The Great Writers*. Oxford University Press, 1974.

- Pagliarini, Marie Anne. "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: an Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, University of California Press, Vol.9, No.1, 1999, pp. 97-128.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Schroeder, Jonathan "Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research." *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, University of Chicago Press; 1st Edition, 1995.