

AN ANALYSIS OF THE WORK “*THE MONK*” THROUGH TZVETAN TODOROV’S AND ANN RADCLIFFE’S DEFINITION OF “FANTASTIC”

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Abstract

The Monk by Matthew G. Lewis epitomizes a true fantastic novel of the Gothic Era. The fantastic elements within the novel concord with Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of Fantastic. The balance between the “uncanny” and “marvelous” is prolonged, which evokes the sensations of the readers more as they confront with the events. Hence, the purpose of fantastic of Todorov is accomplished. Also, this study will analyze The Monk according to Ann Radcliffe’s assertions about the horror and terror in literature of fantasy. The explicit depictions of Ghosts and bewitchery elements drag The Monk to horror side rather than terror. Subsequently, it causes a moral deterioration on the readers’ minds according to the definition of Radcliffe. Because horror repels fostering ideas from the events within the work, which creates an opposite effect. Instead of taking lessons from the event, the readers indulge in the horror of the events. All in all, this study will shed light on the gothic features of The Monk by comparing Tzvetan Todorov’s and Ann Radcliffe’s ideas over the Fantastic literature.

Keywords: *The Monk*, Gothic, Fantastic Literature, Todorov, Ann Radcliffe

1. Introduction

As known, *The Monk* by Mathew G. Lewis has been regarded as one of the most pinpointed works of the Gothic era. Both because of its uniqueness in terms of how it developed the understanding of Gothic literature when it became popular at its time and surely because of its fantastic elements within the novel, *The Monk* has been criticized and studied by many

critics and authors. As the work renders itself as a fantastic novel, its components are within the boundary of fantasy, imagination, and familiarity. With this feature, *The Monk* will be analyzed under Tzvetan Todorov's definition of "fantastic" and interpreted through its fantastic elements. Also, Ann Radcliffe's assertions of terror/horror will be evaluated on the novel together with questioning where *The Monk* stands in the gothic literature in this sense.

Todorov's idea of fantastic is based on the uncertainty of the events that carry an ambiguity in the sense that if what happens is real or not. Todorov, thus, relates fantastic to uncertainty and how long it is prolonged. His link between real and imaginary constitutes his understanding of fantastic. "The Fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting a supernatural event. The concept of the fantastic is, therefore, to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary." (Todorov, 25). In this sense, fantastic requires both the text and reader to exist together. It is a must for the reader to waver between the supernatural events and what is real. If the reader happens to be convinced by the narration in the view that the events are supernatural or real with no doubt, then the reader finds himself/herself within the sub-genres of fantastic; marvelous, and uncanny. Yet, the narration should also be designed in such a way that it should not give an exact definition of supernatural or real all the time. Todorov highlights as such "The fantastic implies, then, not only the existence of an uncanny event, which provokes a hesitation in the reader and the hero but also a kind of reading, which we may for the moment define negatively: it must be neither "poetic" not "allegorical". (Todorov, 32)

2. *The Monk* And Definitions Of Fantastic

Concerning how *The Monk* stands on the fantastic features as a horror gothic novel, the setting, and the events are in full cohesion with gothic horror elements. Tzvetan Todorov's concept of "uncanny" is provided by the author through some elements such as the convent, which represents the uncanny so that it can allow unease to emerge and evoke terror.

In gothic literature, benefiting from the uncanny via setting is a prerequisite. Botting indicates the significance of the architecture of the novels as follows "The marvelous incidents and chivalric customs of romances, the descriptions of wild and elemental natural settings, the gloom of the graveyard and ruin, the scale and permanence of the architecture, the terror and wonder of the sublime, all become important features of the eighteenth-century Gothic

novel.” (Botting, 16) Through the feeling of unease, in a way, it encapsulates the reader under the dome of uncertainty. Ambrosio, the protagonist, is reflected to be a religious, decent, and respectable monk at the beginning. His portrayal in the novel is logical and reasonable on the readers' mind until the reader confronts with supernatural events. The part where “Bleeding Nun” is depicted is the threshold of uncanny and marvelous for the reader. Todorov’s concept of hesitation, or in other words vacillating between what is real and supernatural begins to rot in the part. Glimmering emergence of Agnes demolishes the balance between the reader’s reason and the supernatural event. Another point that should be noted is that Todorov’s prerequisite of hesitation also calls for contradictions in logic and inexplicable to some degree. “...Todorov tacitly assumes that concepts contradictory in logic must also oppose one another in literature. To his mind, there can be nothing paradoxical about the "apparently supernatural” (Phlimus, 72). Therefore, the reader loses control over the inexplicable event, which subsequently causes another transition: terror to horror. Because the reader goes beyond experiencing the terror and they end up starting to witness horror because of the clear description of the supernatural element rather than the suggestiveness of it. At this very point, Ann Radcliffe’s critic of terror versus horror comes to the forefront to determine where *The Monk* stands within the definition of “fantastic”.

Although the exact definition cannot be made between the role of horror and terror, Radcliffe proposes one of the most credential distinction that is widely accepted. Radcliffe’s notion of terror is for the purpose that it would be a fostering element for the reader to coalesce with the text through terror. Because terror prepares a sentimental milieu where uncanny happens and leads readers to benefit from the text. In short, terror is good for the reader. “Terror” is something that can be useful for the reader. It could be morally fostering. It can boost the integration of the readers to the text. According to her, it has a good function to perform and terror; or the descriptions of terror do not show “horrific” things explicitly, but it is only suggestive of them. Under the light of this idea, Ambrosio’s initial description by Lewis seems to endorse the idea of “terror” until the horror is depicted in the “Bleeding Nun” comes to the stage. In a jiffy, both moral and function of the text of *The Monk* is undermined from the aspect of Radcliffe’s idea. Because the explicit description of Agnes in the form of a ghost drives the reader off. As this explicit demonstration of spirit corrodes the senses of the reader, the value of the gothic is degraded if *The Monk* is analyzed by Radcliffe’s standards.

Ambrosio's initial reaction to Matilda when he learns that she is not a man is harsh and decisive as expected from him as a monk. He does not even consider welcoming her as she lies to him. He is a trustable and respected monk, who is known by most of the village. Ambrosio tries to retain his dignity and caste whatever happens. When he is beaten by an insect, Matilda cured him and takes his chastity when he tries to heal. However, it does not last long for Ambrosio to realize that they have done something sinful. Ambrosio gets so lost in temper that he curses to Matilda,

“Dangerous Woman!’ said He; ‘Into what an abyss of misery have you plunged me! Should your sex be discovered, my honor, nay my life, must pay for the pleasure of a few moments. Fool that I was, to trust myself to your seductions! What can now be done? How can my offence be expiated? What atonement can purchase the pardon of my crime? Wretched Matilda, you have destroyed my quiet forever!’ (Lewis, 2008).

Ambrosio is aware that he gets into such a trouble that he can potentially lose all his reputation and dignity if what they have done is unveiled. This part is where the course of Ambrosio's life drastically changes until his death. Because he has tasted an enjoyment that he had never experienced. He has tasted such a pleasure, even though he objects to how it happened for the time being, that he would feel more desire from this moment on.

As a representative of Satan, Matilda tries to deviate Ambrosio from what he has believed until now. She strives to make him believe that what they have done is the axiom of future pleasures if he follows what she suggests to him. As a respond to what Ambrosio said to her, Matilda utters,

“To me these reproaches, Ambrosio? To me, who have sacrificed for you the world's pleasures, the luxury of wealth, the delicacy of sex, my Friends, my fortune, and my fame? What have you lost, which I preserved? Have *I* not shared in YOUR guilt? Have YOU not shared in MY pleasure? Guilt, did I say? In what consists ours, unless in the opinion of an ill-judging World? Let that World be ignorant of them, and our joys become divine and blameless! Unnatural were your vows of Celibacy; Man was not created for such a state; And were Love a crime, God never would have made it so sweet, so irresistible! Then banish those clouds from your brow, my Ambrosio! Indulge in those pleasures freely, without which life is a worthless gift: Cease to reproach me with having taught you what is bliss, and feel equal transports with the Woman who adores you!” (Lewis, 2008).

Matilda's insistence seems impotent and pointless for Ambrosio at the beginning. However, one side on his mind and soul finds her suggestion worth trying. Ambrosio's deviation from his strict normative belief does not last so long. He begins to see Matilda as a means to a pleasure. If he totally turns her down, there will not be another reliable way to satisfy himself. This deviation is the proof that his initial opposition toward Matilda is not caused by his sincere commitment to his belief, but outburst of his repressed desire. Moreover, this repression is the outcome of his fears. "He is unclear about the premises of morality in the post-sacred universe in which he has chosen to live. These Matilda proceeds to elucidate: Ambrosio's refusal is motivated not by virtue but by fear; he no longer respects God, he is in terror of his vengeance." (Brooks, 1973, p. 251)

When Ambrosio is tempted by Matilda, he begins to foster the feeling of violence and erotic impulses. These impulses get over the religious and moral restraints of Ambrosio and his society. From this moment on, the sensations of the reader, together with the protagonist, is strengthened, but through ambiguity. The description and Matilda's affiliation with Ambrosio form kind of a process of elusion from the norms to which Ambrosio is accustomed. Because the vagueness of his decisions and the emergence of his erotic desire in the face of his afore norms cause both him and the reader to shock for some time. Once Ambrosio gets into debauchery world, violent sensations, rather than transgressive ones, engulfs all of his reason and normative ideals. In this process, Ambrosio actually is defeated by his imaginary world, to be more correct to "sublime". Ambrosio's desire for Antonia transcends his reason so much that he becomes vulnerable to the irresistible force of his desire. The greatness of his desire and what he can do for the sake of reaching to Antonia displays, in a way, a choice of desire over his dignity and prior personality. His mind is indulged in his desires, which represents his sublimity. "The imagination desires not only "to be filled" but to be overfilled by "the great," something (anything) "too big for its capacity." The sublime acts upon the imagination with irresistible force, so that we "are flung into a pleasing astonishment." (Sandner, 287)

Even though the reader does not witness the supernatural until Matilda gives the Talisman to Ambrosio, the reader remains in between the supernatural and uncanny for a long time, which makes the novel one more step close to the fantastic of Todorov. As much as the elements of supernatural broaden the astonishment in the mind, through natural sublime, the reader can transcend the borders of imagination or even taboos. Botting highlights on this topic as such

“The vastness that had been glimpsed in the natural sublime became the mirror of the immensity of the human mind. Elevating and expanding mental powers to an almost divine extent signified the displacement of religious authority and mystery by the sublimity of nature and the human imagination.” (Botting, 27) Hence, in a way, inexplicable details and depictions of Agnes ghost functions on the sublime.

Toward the end of the novel, the explicit depiction of Demon is a precise proof of fantastic of the novel. The depiction of Agnes and the Talisman had already hinted the likelihood of fantastic, but it could have been reversed one way or another. However, the Demon is the ultimate threshold of the balance of supernatural and uncanny. The reader experiences horror not only by the depiction but also through the conversation of Demon to Ambrosio. *The Monk* admits the power of the Fiend and surrender his body and soul to him. The utterances of the Fiends is so powerful that the reader inevitably surrenders himself to the supernatural power in the novel. While Ambrosio is powerless and about to die, the Demon asserts and proves his power over Ambrosio and his feeble belief as such, ““Hark, Ambrosio, while I unveil your crimes! You have shed the blood of two innocents; Antonia and Elvira perished by your hand. That Antonia whom you violated, was your Sister! That Elvira whom you murdered, gave you birth! Tremble, abandoned Hypocrite! Inhuman Parricide! Incestuous Ravisher! Tremble at the extent of your offences! And you it was who thought yourself proof against temptation, absolved from human frailties, and free from error and vice! Is pride then a virtue? Is inhumanity no fault? Know, vain Man! That I long have marked you for my prey: I watched the movements of your heart; I saw that you were virtuous from vanity, not principle, and I seized the fit moment of seduction.” (Lewis, 2008) After Ambrosio surrenders his soul and body to Demon, the reader loses all of his possible expectation of uncanny. Hence, as the novel progresses, the uncanny is reversed to supernatural although there is a short period where the balance of uncanny and supernatural is sustained.

In conclusion, *The Monk* by Lewis renders plenty of points that contribute to gothic literature. It has been a work of study and criticism by many critics and authors. As to Todorov’s coding of “Fantastic”, *The Monk* possesses many features that concord with his ideas. Ambrosio's initial depiction and the setting of the novel and the emergence of Demon are fair enough for readers to be carried from uncanny to supernatural, which endorses the integration of the reader to the novel and the notion of it. Together with this, explicit demonstration of ghosts

and supernatural entities fosters the idea of horror, which opens a gate to the criticism of Ann Radcliffe's proposal of fantastic and gothic value of the novel.

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