

How is madness portrayed in gothic texts and what link does madness have with the concept of repressing your sexuality?

Despite being written over two hundred years apart, *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis (1776), and *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier (1937) share a few similarities. For instance, they both share aspects of suppressing sexualities, although it is more explicit in *The Monk*. In both novels, the harm that it did to their psyches is evident, which eventually leads to their mental decline and eventual madness. The character from *The Monk* in question is Ambrosio; Mrs Danvers from *Rebecca* is also one I will be discussing. I will dive slightly into the history behind the understanding of sexuality and madness and why that relates to how Lewis and Du Maurier wrote their characters the way they did. I will also explain the differences that they share as well as the similarities, more specifically in the aspect that by repressing their sexualities, they slipped into insanity. For *The Monk* I will focus on how the lack of education given to him by those around him, as well as the constraints from his religion, leads to Ambrosio's downfall. However, for Mrs. Danvers, I will examine how social pressure from homophobia in the 1930s might play into her madness. I will explain the different approaches Lewis and Du Maurier adopt to convey Ambrosio and Mrs Danvers's mental decline, among the aspects of social expectations from society.

Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* is a scandalous novel written in the late 1790s which caused a stir with its themes. *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier, however, is written much later in the 1930s, yet they share similar themes in terms of suppression, sexuality and madness. In the original release of *The Monk*, Lewis and the novel itself was heavily criticised 'for its explicit content; sexual desire and fulfilment'.¹ The topic of sex was gradually becoming more open during the eighteenth-century; the critic Tim Hitchcock states that 'the discourse around sex in general became, over the course of the eighteenth century, more widely distributed'.² However, the topic of sex was still not fully accepted; this led to a censored version being released afterward. However, despite societal expectations, Lewis explores these shocking topics of sex and sin in great detail in the original copy of *The Monk*. In doing so, he draws to light out how dangerous the suppression of sexuality can be, as well as how dangerous it is to lack knowledge and awareness. In *Rebecca* however, there is more of a hidden focus on the topic of sexuality, especially in terms of same-sex attraction, and especially between the characters of Mrs Danvers and Rebecca. Unlike in *The Monk*, the possible act of love is never portrayed directly, Denise Noe wrote in an article that 'although the novel is frank about Rebecca's heterosexual "sins," it could not in the 1930s be explicit about what was still an unmentionable topic'.³ The idea of not being 'explicit' and hiding is a concept that could be seen in *Rebecca* for if the novel could not display homosexual attraction outwardly. This is due to the fact that homosexuality was illegal in the 1930s as people viewed it as immoral and unnatural. If Du Maurier could not portray homosexuality clearly, then neither could the characters.⁴ Moreover, an indication to Rebecca's possible bisexuality is hinted through Mr. de Winter's comment on how Rebecca 'was not even normal'.⁵ Furthermore, if Mr de Winter felt that Rebecca was not 'normal', then he might also feel that way about Mrs Danvers if she were to reveal her possible feelings for Rebecca.⁶ However, the feelings Mrs Danvers has for Rebecca is evident

¹ Wendy Jones, "Stories of Desire in the Monk." *ELH* 57, no. 1 (1990): 129–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2873248>.

² Tim Hitchcock, "The Reformulation of Sexual Knowledge in Eighteenth-Century England." *Signs* 37, no. 4 (2012): 823–32. <https://doi.org/10.1086/664467>.

³ Denise Noe, "The Buried Longing in du Maurier's *Rebecca*." *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, September-October 2020, 28+. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed January 19, 2025). <https://link-gale-com.bcu.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A636217346/LitRC?u=uce&sid=summon&xid=97cdac73>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 304.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

and most critics agree, the critic Nicky Hallet goes into length on how the character of ‘Mrs Danvers’ portrayal and her relationship with Rebecca... is rich with lesbian overtones’.⁷ Contextually, Du Maurier also had feelings for women, although her own ‘antipathy to her own same-sex inclinations is well documented’.⁸ So the potential warnings that are present within *Rebecca* might be unintentional or accidental as it could reflect how Du Maurier had to suppress who she was as well.

On the other hand, the warnings that are in *The Monk* are significantly more apparent and purposeful. For instance, at the beginning of *The Monk*, Lewis presents Ambrosio as an example of an upstanding member of the church, a clergyman who was the embodiment of the Catholic faith so when he falls the contrast is glaring. When Ambrosio is first presented Lewis presents him to be ‘sparkling’, ‘uncommonly handsome’ and ‘the man of holiness’.⁹ Everyone in the room during this scene is so enamoured by him that ‘even Lorenzo could not resist his charm’. The choice for the adverb ‘even’ is significant because it suggests that this is unusual behaviour for Lorenzo.¹⁰ However, despite public opinion, Ambrosio is not a saint, he is a man who was raised to be above the average man and ‘separated from the world’ in religious piety.¹¹ It is stated that in his education Ambrosio taught to shun the world the church and taught to suppress who he is. Because of this, it is arguable that he became susceptible to corruption, for he did not have the skills to recognise it due to being sheltered. In contrast to Mrs Danvers, it is highly likely that she was aware of her feelings for Rebecca. This can be inferred from the moment the unnamed narrator was caught by Mrs Danvers in Rebecca’s room. Mrs Danvers explains to the narrator that it was she who took care of Rebecca and all her needs, and in doing so, reveals the depth of their relationship. Mrs Danvers states that they were so close that Rebecca allegedly stated how she ‘won’t have anyone but you’ to tend to her needs.¹² Another indication of their closeness is revealed when Mrs Danvers states how she ‘use to brush [Rebecca’s] hair every day’.¹³ Despite the act of brushing ones hair being normal for a maid, in the context of *Rebecca*, it becomes more of a sensual act, Hallet further suggests that ‘the relationship between Mrs Danvers and her mistress was mediated erotically via hair brushing’.¹⁴ In *Rebecca* the act of brushing ones hair is shown to be an intimate act. In a dazed, crazed rant, Mrs Danvers reveals that ‘Mr de Winter used to brush’ Rebecca’s hair. Further adding the intensity of the moment by quoting Rebecca as she would say ‘harder Max, harder’, which suggests that this was a way for them to show how passionate they were for one another. Even though Mr de Winter’s true feelings for Rebecca were revealed to be hatred and contempt, Mrs Danvers taunting the narrator with the idea that he would brush Rebeccas hair suggests that they equate hair brushing with passion. Furthermore, Mr de Winter brought a set of brushes for the narrator as a wedding gift further insinuates that the characters equates brushes to love. So, while the novel does not outwardly state the feelings she has towards Rebecca, the fact that she engaged in this intimate act makes it evident that she did have feelings for her. Therefore, Mrs Danvers was aware of her feelings and most likely freely displayed acts of affection for Rebecca behind closed doors before she died. This leads into another way of repression, the form of grief. Mrs Danvers is no longer able to brush her hair, attend to her, or express her love for Rebecca outwardly, for she is dead. Even so, she shows her love in little ways such as dressing in ‘deep black’, which is a mourning colour, and not washing Rebecca’s clothes ‘since she wore it for the last time’.¹⁵

⁷ Nicky Hallett, “Did Mrs. Danvers Warm Rebecca’s Pearls? Significant Exchanges and the Extension of Lesbian Space and Time in Literature.” *Feminist Review*, no. 74 (2003): 35–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395950>.

⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

⁹ Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, (Wordsworth Editions, 2009), 15, 15, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 15, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 16.

¹² Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 189.

¹³ *Ibid*, 190

¹⁴ Nicky Hallett, “Did Mrs. Danvers Warm Rebecca’s Pearls? ,” 45.

¹⁵ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 74, 189.

Despite these acts of mourning, it appears to not be enough. When Mrs Danvers was at last able to outwardly express her affection and admiration for Rebecca via the narrator discovering Rebeccas room, she explodes in a mad verbal rampage. The narrator specifically mentions that she was ‘excited in a strange unhealthy way’ which displays how far Mrs Danvers’ psyche had slipped.

Mrs Danvers declining mental state mirrors Ambrosio in *The Monk* as he also starts to lose himself. And in the same fashion of Mrs Danvers, one of the first indications of Ambrosio’s declining mental rate is his erratic movements. This is shown through his actions after he falls for the maiden Antonia, a naive young woman who is later revealed, much to his surprise, his biological sister. The more Ambrosio starts to fall for Antonia, the more his affection for her becomes twisted and corrupted. Jones goes further and describes Antonia as someone Ambrosio ‘obsessively longs to possess’, and in the process of claiming Antonia for himself he slips deeper into insanity, committing violent acts that no good man, let alone monk, would commit.¹⁶ As Ambrosio's obsession with Antonia increases, the more he feels that he needs to have her physically. While at first, he tells himself that ‘he felt not the provocation of lust’ and that her ‘virtue runs no risk from me’, the actions that he takes suggest otherwise to his claim.¹⁷ For instance, at the moment where he assures to himself that his feelings for Antonia are pure, he is simultaneously pacing his room in a frenzy, which mirrors Mrs Danvers frenzy when she talks about Rebecca. One instance has Ambrosio ‘pace his cell’ with ‘disordered air’ and another state that ‘he paced his chamber hastily’.¹⁸ The repetition of the word ‘pace’ suggests that Ambrosio is disorganised and restless; he is not in his right mind. Therefore, when Ambrosio exclaims how he must ‘seize every means with avidity of infusing corruption into Antonia’s bosom’, it does not come as a surprise as he is already in a deluded state, as well as the fact that he has broken almost all the vows he has sworn thus far.¹⁹ Moreover, the unease and mental distress that he is showing suggests that his psyche is slipping, allowing him to give in to his desires. This aligns with another theory that Jones suggests that Ambrosio becomes ‘so overwhelmed with passion that he decides he must possess Antonia whatever the cost to his body and soul.’²⁰ Ambrosio's erratic movements certainly suggest that the cost of his soul is a large one. By the end of *The Monk*, Ambrosio has become an entirely different person to who he was at the beginning. His sexual escapades and mad episodes have transformed him, evident in the switch in his character description. While at first, he is the depiction of holiness, his corruption is outwardly shown in his treatment of Antonia once he had achieved what he set out to do. Lewis in this moment describes Ambrosio as a ‘barbarian’ and a ‘monster of cruelty’, depictions that relate to savagery and animality.²¹ A barbarian is someone that is uncivilised, something that is often dehumanised, much like that of a monster. In these moments Lewis is drawing the reader’s attention to how much Ambrosio has fallen from grace, so much so that he is no longer human in the way he behaves. This, in turn, mirrors Mrs Danvers characterisation in the way that she, too, looked like a monster in the eyes of the narrator. The narrator states that after Mrs. Danvers successfully humiliated her during the costume ball, she looked ‘loathsome, triumphant’ and had ‘the face if an exulting devil’.²² In this instance, the act of repression has changed both characters into monsters; they have become mad.

¹⁶ Jones, “Stories of Desire in the Monk,” 131.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Monk*, 197, 180.

¹⁸ Ibid, 197, 197, 180.

¹⁹ Jones, “Stories of Desire in the Monk,” 131.

²⁰ Ibid, 131.

²¹ Lewis, *The Monk*, 281, 282.

²² Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 240, 240.

In *The Monk* Ambrosio is an unredeemable figure in the eyes of everyone he comes across, even to Satan. His madness has caused him to become a monster. Ambrosio's actions towards Antonia, especially after he assaults her, clearly presents him as an unredeemable figure. After assaulting Antonia, Ambrosio is now filled with 'aversion and rage', he mocks her, calls her a 'wretched girl' and a 'fatal witch'.²³ He treats her with contempt and hatred and finally kills her; these are not actions a guilty man would take; he no longer feels guilt for what he has done. His actions have led him to become completely irredeemable and his repression might have led to this moment. Michel Meyer states further that 'Ambrosio's story is most centrally a drama of conquest by a desire made terrific by its freight and of repression... its liberation will have to be equally terrific'.²⁴ Although, unlike Ambrosio, Mrs Danvers is somewhat redeemable as she is pitiable. The notion that she acts the way she does out of extreme grief and not an inherent evilness can be seen from when she is found in Rebecca's room. The narrator notes that 'her eyes were red and swollen with crying' with 'dark shadows' on her face. In this instance, the narrator notes that she is still human, she 'remembered that [Mrs Danvers] was a living breathing woman like' herself.

With the knowledge that Matilda is a demon whose goal is Ambrosio's downfall and his inability to see Matilda's true goal, Ambrosio becoming irredeemable would be inevitable. It is clear that Matilda would take advantage of Ambrosio in the best way she could in order to achieve Satan's goal of corruption. The most sufficient way for Matilda to take advantage of Ambrosio is through his naivety. Throughout the text, it has been stated multiple times that Ambrosio had been sheltered from the world and told to suppress who he is, which includes his sexuality. One could argue that if he had not suppressed these aspects of himself, he would have been able to thwart Matilda's schemes and continue on the path of prosperity. It is revealed that in Ambrosio's education, he was isolated from the world and taught only in the confines of the church. This isolation had blurred his vision of life so much so 'that his long absence from the great world... made him form of them an idea far more dismal than the reality', this shows the deluded view he has of the world.²⁵ Arguably, this prospect lends a hand in the argument that repression of sexuality and the absence of knowledge of sexuality can be damaging as suppression of any kind can lead to an explosion of emotions. The critic Wendy Jones argues that 'the violence of suppression both prevents it and adds fury to its pent-up force', and that one's sexuality can take 'twisted and destructive forms'.²⁶ This concept can be directed to Mrs Danvers as well through the act of arson that she committed at the end of the novel. Just like in *Jane Eyre*, a text that *Rebecca* is heavily influenced by the home in which the ghost of the previous wife is trapped in is burned down. However, unlike *Jane Eyre*, it was not the wife who caused the fire, but potentially the wife's lover. As Mrs Danvers realised it was Mr de Winter who murdered Rebecca, she begins to feel enraged by him. This can be seen from the narrator noticing that there was 'hatred mixed' into her face as she 'went on staring at Maxim' therefore it is likely that it was Mrs Danvers who burned down Manderley.²⁷ Hallett also suggests that 'as in *Jane Eyre*... the 'happily married' gothic couple cannot continue to inhabit the home where a mad woman haunts... so the house has to burn'.²⁸ Due to the fact that it was potentially Mrs Danvers who burned down Manderley, it is Mrs Danvers who takes the role of Bertha, the mad woman who burned down Thornfield Hall. Unable to express her feelings and silently suppresses who she is, she takes the role of the mad woman.

²³ Lewis, *The Monk*, 281, 282, 282

²⁴ Michael Meyer, "Let's Talk About Sex: Confessions And Vows In 'The Monk.'" AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik 20, no. 2 (1995): 307–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43025472>.

²⁵ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 175.

²⁶ Jones, "Stories of Desire in the Monk," 133, 133.

²⁷ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 392, 392.

²⁸ Nicky Hallett, "Did Mrs. Danvers Warm Rebecca's Pearls?," 46.

Similar to Mrs Danvers, the idea that suppressing one's sexuality causes destruction is further presented by Ambrosio's destructive and violent actions that begin to take shape after he fell for Matilda's schemes. Not only did he brutally attack Antonia in a 'lustful delirium', but he also murdered Elvira, Antonia's mother, in order to have her.²⁹ There is a pitiful irony in this act as Elvira is revealed to be his own mother as well, something that is not revealed to him until the end. The violence Ambrosio exhibited towards Antonia and Elvira is potentially foreshadowed by his education. Ambrosio's education is presented to be quite violent in of itself in *The Monk*, so much so that 'his education has impressed his mind with fear so strongly, that apprehension was now become part of his character'.³⁰ Lewis might be suggesting that the strict education that he undertook has reformed his character, clouding his judgement and potentially making him more susceptible to sin and more susceptible to committing acts of violence himself. Furthermore, because he had suppressed who he truly is, he might have been more susceptible to Matilda's trickery. And taking full advantage of Ambrosio's naivety, Matilda had successfully corrupted him. This is presented by Ambrosio's complete lack of reflection and his denial of thinking that he will be saved. Ambrosio becomes deluded in thinking that Matilda wants only the best for him and this delusion allows his character to become twisted and corrupted. Delusion also seems to be a common theme in both novels as Mr. de Winter had deluded everyone into thinking that he had truly loved Rebecca. This delusion cracking is what potentially pushed Mrs Danvers to commit her final act of revenge on behalf of Rebecca. While Mrs Danvers already started to express her anger through tormenting the narrator, the fire is the first act of revenge that is directed towards Mr de Winter as he loses his ancestral family home.

Finally, one more example of Ambrosio's corrupted mind and his naivety that Lewis presents can be seen from the feelings he holds for the young maiden Antonia. Jones describes Antonia as someone Ambrosio 'obsessively longs to possess' and this obsession of claiming Antonia for himself allows him to slip deeper into insanity, leading him to commit violent acts that no good man, let alone monk, would commit.³¹ While this shows his corruption, it further shows his naivety. For example, Ambrosio is aware that his 'heart throbbed with desire', there is a lot that he is unaware of, one being that 'he perceived not, that his vanity was flattered'.³² This not only suggests that Ambrosio lacks self-awareness but also suggests that his desire might stem from his pride, but without him having this self-awareness, he was able to fall into Matilda's trap. Ambrosio then gives into temptation and breaks his vow of chastity, eventually becoming what Lisa Naomi Mulman describes as a 'sexually ravenous monk'.³³ As the novel progresses, lust is not the only sin that Ambrosio commits, he also commits many acts of crime. And the more heinous acts Ambrosio commits, the more he is consumed by his greed, pride and lust; and the more he gives into his sins, the more his sanity starts to slip. Eventually becoming the very antithesis of the man, he was in the beginning, no longer the example of a man of God, but Satan's toy. This insanity and corruption that is revealed over time is also presented in *Rebecca* with Mrs Danvers. While at first Mrs Danvers was cold and unemotional, by the end she had completely unravelled. One final example of Mrs Danvers' madness is through eye contact. While staring at Mr de Winter after discovering the true cause of Rebecca's death, Mrs Danvers continuously stared at him which could indicate the slipping of her psyche. This is possibly foreshadowed earlier from the verbal rampage the narrator was subjected to from Mrs Danvers. During the whole tirade, Mrs Danvers had stared at her for the majority of it. On multiple occasions the narrator expressed how 'her eyes [was]

²⁹ Lewis, *The Monk*, 281

³⁰ *Ibid*, 175.

³¹ Jones, "Stories of Desire in the Monk," 131.

³² *Ibid*, 48, 48.

³³ Lisa Naomi Mulman, "Sexuality on the Surface: Catholicism and the Erotic Object in Lewis's 'The Monk.'" *Bucknell Review* 42, no. 1 (1998): 98-.

never leaving my face' and how her eyes were 'searching mine'.³⁴ This could imply that when her psyche is slipping, she obsessively stares in a possible fixated compulsion that she might not be aware of. Shortly after the realisation with Mr de Winter did Manderley burn down.

To conclude, because they had to hide who they were for so long they became unable to control how they respond to those around them which led to severe consequences for not only them, but those around them as well. Mrs. Danvers had to hide her potential relationship with Rebecca and the strong feelings that she felt for her and Ambrosio had to suppress who he truly was as a person as well as his desire for sexual acts. In the case for Ambrosio, because he held back who he was for his entire life, once he was finally able to let go of the restraints religion had placed upon him, we went out of control and displayed behaviour that condemned him. Which is similar in the case for Mrs Danvers, her repression potentially distorted her to the point where she would burn down Manderley and harass the unnamed narrator. These novels are written almost one hundred and fifty years apart, yet they hold the similar themes and similar consequences to someone suppressing who they are.

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³⁴ Du Maurier, Rebecca, 191, 191

