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ON SEXUALITY, CARNALITY AND DESIRE:  
PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FILM  
*THE MONK*

ABSTRACT

The eighteenth-century English writer Matthew Gregory Lewis wrote one of the most dramatic Gothic novels, *The Monk*; over 200 years later, a film of the same name appeared, based on the novel and directed by Dominik Moll. The film, a free adaptation of the book, presenting the story of the moral downfall of the monk Ambrosio, has inspired us to philosophical reflections on sexuality, carnality and physical desire. In the context of these issues we have attempted to analyse and interpret this cinematic work of art. The method we have adopted is based on a thorough discussion on the topics developed in the film and related issues. This method, while not pretending to scientific objectivity, enables us to outline an interesting field of research as well as to identify a number of theoretical problems and questions which remain open.

The formula we have adopted is to quote lines from the film *The Monk* which permit the analysis of selected issues related to sexuality, carnality and physical desire. Moreover, these quotes serve to order the text and enable the precise identification of interpretive trains of thought.

KEYWORDS

sexuality, carnality, desire, love, Greek tragedy, European culture

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## Introduction

The eighteenth-century English writer Matthew Gregory Lewis wrote one of the most dramatic Gothic novels, *The Monk*; over 200 years later, a film of the same name appeared, based on the novel and directed by Dominik Moll. The film, a free adaptation of the book, presenting the story of the moral downfall of the monk Ambrosio, has inspired us to philosophical reflections on sexuality, carnality and physical desire. In the context of these issues we have attempted to analyse and interpret this cinematic work of art. The method we have adopted is based on a thorough discussion on the topics developed in the film and related issues. This method, while not pretending to scientific objectivity, enables us to outline an interesting field of research as well as to identify a number of theoretical problems and questions which remain open.

The formula we have adopted is to quote lines from the film *The Monk* which permit the analysis of selected issues related to sexuality, carnality and physical desire. Moreover, these quotes serve to order the text and enable the precise identification of interpretive trains of thought.

We will open the article here with a short summary of the plot, which is necessary in view of the method used. The film presents the

story of the monk Ambrosio, who as an infant is found within the walls of a monastery. He grows up in confinement, raised by monks; he acquires the reputation of a peaceable, God-fearing boy, devoted to the study of sacred books; he takes his monastic vows at a young age. Ambrosio's life passes in daily prayer and preaching, until the moment when the mysterious Valerio, whose face is concealed behind a mask, appears in the monastery. Meeting Valerio completely changes the life of the monk and the entire religious community. The boy turns out to be a woman – who proceeds to seduce Ambrosio. At the same time, the beautiful and pious Antonia appears in the monk's environment. Another significant female character is a young nun who is sentenced to death by starvation by her prioress for breaking her vows of chastity. Ambrosio, involved first in a relationship with Valerio, then seduces Antonia, who turns out to be his sister. After spending a night with Antonia, the monk murders his own mother. For committing this crime, Ambrosio is sentenced to death by his fellow monks.

‘It all began when I saw her slim legs’

In what sense is *The Monk* about sex? It seems that, above all, it talks about the force that drives human lust or desire. Here, the physical dimension of sex is rather marginal. The sexual act is literally the culminating moment of the monk's story, but its real meaning is revealed later, in the sphere of values. The film thus sketches out a system of tensions that denote, symbolise, and present events on a meta-level. Throughout the story, we are confronted with two exclusively carnal encounters: the monk Ambrosio having sex first with the mysterious Valerio, then with his half-sister Antonia. However, carnality in the film remains concealed. The only moment of literally shown, unrestrained nudity is the presentation of a naked Ambrosio following intercourse with his sister. He is then completely exposed, embodying wild, primal eroticism, although the sexual act preceding this scene is not shown in the film. We see only elements of foreplay and the couple embracing after intercourse.

Perhaps the reason for this convention is the setting of the filmic action in a very prudish society and era. The best example of the prevailing austerity is that Antonia cannot meet her fiancé without the pres-

ence of a chaperone. The themes of sexuality, sex, and eroticism in this society are clearly suppressed, even smothered, and forced out of consciousness, something that builds up within the protagonists and ultimately leads to tragedy. Can we, then, interpret Ambrosio's attempt at twofold sexual satisfaction (with Valerio and Antonia) as a result of the excessive sublimation of heretofore hidden and stifled drives? The role of sublimation is, as we know, to bring relief through a transfer of emphasis and redirection of drives. It would seem that such a role in the life of the protagonist could, up to a certain point, be fulfilled by the inspired sermons he delivers. Repetition of the words of Scripture alone, however, does nothing to help him in a moment of weakness, failing to provide the desired relief. Hence the monk finally follows a different, sinful path, but as it turns out, flight through sex is not to be his salvation either. Ambrosio remains insatiable.

‘Ambrosio became an example of diligence and faith to all the  
brothers’

The film's protagonist is considered by the brothers and the faithful to be the model of a virtuous servant of God. Moreover, Ambrosio himself regards himself as a religious authority, and considers himself a man absolutely pure and free from sin. The reason for this attitude is evidently to be found in his story. As an infant, he was abandoned by his mother and at the same time condemned to death. He was found by one of the monks, Father Miguel, who took him into the congregation. Miraculously rescued, the child thus came to the monastery, where he was surrounded by an aura of uncanniness consisting of his miraculous rescue and a birthmark on his arm in the shape of a hand. It seems that Ambrosio believed in his exceptional status, and that he had been anointed by God.

Such an interpretation of the story of the monk's origin seems to fit the convention of the ‘hand of fate’.<sup>1</sup> This convention assumes that whatever happened had to happen, and that the series of events leading to the specific and tragic finale of the story had actually been formed

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<sup>1</sup> J. Schmidt, *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej* [Dictionary of Greek and Roman mythology], transl. B. Sęk, Katowice 1996, p. 102.

at the moment of Ambrosio's conception. A man's story is thus set in motion at birth and cannot be stopped; its course is determined by fate, regardless of how the man struggles with destiny, what he thinks about himself, or what decisions he makes. None of this matters in the face of fate. And it inevitably leads the man to tragedy.

‘Will you pick me a rose to remember you by?’

One source of perplexity is the question of free will in the context of the problem under study, as well as the question of the exact part Ambrosio plays in entering into this sinful liaison. It seems that the monk spends very little time making conscious decisions. He is led into the developing situation somewhat involuntarily. His first conscious decision is an attempt to break with Valerio (i.e. the verbal command to turn women out of the monastery), the second his request for a sprig of enchanted myrtle. These events, however, are linked from the very beginning to the motif of a mysterious dream. In one scene, the monk talks about it to Antonia in the monastery garden. Ambrosio confides to her that he has a recurring dream in which he sees a woman concealed by a red cape. He observes her from afar, and then approaches her, but can never see her face. The dream breaks off whenever the monk nears the hooded figure. Ambrosio wonders about the meaning of this dream. Is the crux of it that the monk follows only what he has already dreamed – what has already happened? Can we, therefore, in the context of the Greek theory of fate, object here and speak of the hero's free will?

It seems that the only occasion when his free will operates is the admission to the monastery of the burned boy Valerio. Superficially, this is not a bad decision. There are no negative consequences at first; on Ambrosio's part, it is merely a noble act of mercy to a poor boy. The next example of a free decision on the part of the monk would appear to be the moment of revelation of the pregnant nun's secret. This time Ambrosio shows no mercy, and the proceedings are intended to emphasise his authority. The monk again appears to be clean and sinless, a moral authority with the right to decide about the consciences of others. What is more, Ambrosio is convinced that evil and sin do not concern him, that he is above all weakness. The young monk acts in these situations as a harsh judge.

However, in our opinion, the road to Ambrosio's downfall begins exactly at the moment he issues his moral judgments on other people. The beginning of this road is symbolised in a scene in the monastery garden, where the monk is praying and contemplating. One day a lone woman approaches him; she turns out to be the burned 'boy', Valerio. With a touch she relieves the monk's headache: the first physical contact between Ambrosio and Valerio. Their relationship develops up to the moment when the monk decides to break contact with her. But just as he wishes to end the relationship with Valerio, he is bitten by a centipede. In this scene, Valerio asks him to pluck a rose in memory of their final encounter. Here, the classic literary theme of temptation and punishment is revealed. Ambrosio reaches for a rose and is severely punished: he is bitten by a centipede, whose venom is highly toxic to humans. Ambrosio's fate is, at this point, symbolically sealed. The centipede appearing in a rose garden is thus similar to the biblical serpent that tempted Adam and Eve and led to their exile from Paradise.

This scene is very interesting in the context of myths operating in our culture. In the book *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont points to the myth of Tristan and Isolde as one of the foundations on which our Western European notions of sexuality, love between man and woman, and passion are built.<sup>2</sup> A significant moment within the myth is the beginning of the story of the two title characters, whose passionate relationship is initiated by the accidental ingestion of a love potion. From this perspective, the subsequent story of the lovers appears not as the result of completely free choices and conscious decisions, but as a possible effect of the introduction of poison into their bodies.<sup>3</sup> Thus the motif of a love story in which the main characters do

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<sup>2</sup> We read in the work cited: 'A great European myth of adultery exists: the story of Tristan and Isolde [...] It is like a great and simple picture, a kind of basic scheme of our most complex afflictions'. Compare Denis de Rougemont, *Miłość a świat kultury zachodniej [L'amour et l'occident, or Love in the Western World]*, transl. L. Eustachiewicz, Warsaw 1999, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Rougemont explains the introduction of the magic love potion to the story of Tristan and Isolde thus: 'The real significance of passion is so frightening and so little conducive to sincere confession that not only those who experience it, who cannot fully realise it, but also those who want to paint it in all its astounding suddenness, feel compelled to use the misleading language of symbols'. Compare Rougemont, *Miłość a świat*, p. 35.

not act in a free, independent, or even conscious manner is strongly inscribed in our thinking about love, sex and passion.

‘Instead of fearing punishment you should you want it with  
all your heart’

The decisions made by the monk Ambrosio from the moment the action begins (the first scene of the film, the moment the mysterious man is confessed by Ambrosio) seem based on pure intentions. However, they ultimately lead him to break all his eagerly professed rules and to experience a complete fall from the moral and religious heights upon which he has placed himself. Bad things begin to happen systematically around him. The first to sense this is his guardian, Father Miguel, who warns Ambrosio of impending evil. It seems that evil penetrates the walls of the monastery along with Ambrosio’s subsequent decisions: when, against the will of the majority of the monks, he takes the burned ‘boy’ Valerio into the monastery, or when he reveals the secret of the pregnant nun, which leads to her death. However, these decisions of the monk seem based on legitimate, righteous premises. Moreover, they also fit in with the rules and strict religious atmosphere prevailing at that time: the burned Valerio is shown mercy, the nun who has committed the sin of breaking the vows of chastity and adultery receives a well-deserved punishment.<sup>4</sup> Here, however, an essential paradox is revealed in Ambrosio’s behaviour. As a result of his decisions, theoretically correct and in accordance with the strict ecclesiastical code of the day, the nun was starved to death, while the ‘boy’ was admitted to the monastery – which, though it seems to be an expression of compassion and mercy on the part of the monk towards Valerio, leads to sinful behaviour on the part of both Valerio and the monk himself.

It should, of course, be pointed out that, from the contemporary viewer’s vantage point, Ambrosio’s decision in connection with the unfortunate nun appears to be an evident departure on the part of the monk from divine law. We also observe that Ambrosio acts here as

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<sup>4</sup> For interesting comments on the relationship of Christianity to issues of sexuality and physicality, see Rougemont, *Mity o miłości* [*Les mythes de l’amour, or Myths of love*], transl. M. Żurowska, Warsaw 2002, pp. 9–14.

a man who believes that he has the right to judge others and forget grace and mercy, that is, the main principles of the Christian faith. In addition, we already note some inconsistency in his behaviour, since, if all his decisions were actually dictated by the religious severity of the time, they would be characterised by a uniformly unyielding attitude, which, however, clearly breaks down in connection with the adoption by the congregation of the burned Valerio. Therefore, it seems that the key to understanding the emerging contradictions in the actions of the monk lies precisely in his attitude to Valerio. This is extremely symbolic, because the burned boy in the mask turns out to be a woman, a temptress, perhaps even a messenger of Satan, and the personification of impure forces.

In this context, a number of important questions naturally appear: is Ambrosio's decision in regard to the 'boy' actually a conscious choice and the result of his free will? Or perhaps, at the time he makes decision, the monk is under the influence of impure forces hiding behind the mask, thus becoming a mere puppet in the hands of Satan?

‘Satan only has as much power over me as I allow him’

This significant line is uttered at the beginning of the film, which states that Satan has only as much power over a man as is entrusted to him by the man himself. This quote is a motif in the monk's story; in fact, it serves as the opening of Ambrosio's tale (the scene in the confessional) and, in a paraphrased form, also serves to bring the action to a close (the scene in the desert). Are we inclined to agree with this statement?

Ambrosio seems to be subjected to Satan quickly and to a significant degree. The monk does not see the evil he encounters and cannot resist it. The evil around him is irrelevant and thus the monk retains the impression that he is doing the right thing. Perhaps this is because Ambrosio has lived for many years in seclusion, essentially until the moment when the masked Valerio knocks at the monastery gate.

All of the elements of the monk's story seem to refute the idea that the power of Satan over the soul of a man depends only on the man himself. The significant words about the limited power of Satan over man are spoken in the first scene of the film, when Ambrosio is con-



fessing an older man. The same sinner appears at the story's final moment, in the desert (which could be non-existence, purgatory or hell) and serves as the personification of the devil, whom the monk so blindly challenged with his proud declaration. Or vice versa: the words that fall in the confessional from the mouth of an Ambrosio convinced of his own moral superiority may contribute to the challenge posed in response by Satan himself. The demon seemingly puts the monk on trial, merely to prove that his words are meaningless. Man ultimately has no power over evil. Rather, it is evil that governs man and directs his fate.

'I want to hide from the world and to get closer to God'

In the context of the present analysis, the concept of purity, understood in a very strict and definite sense, is important. It means the total absence of contact with members of the opposite sex: in the case of the monk, with women. Ambrosio lives in an isolated monastery. He sees women only in the course of his sermons preached from the pulpit. But even early scenes showing him during Mass reveal the tension between him and women. Women stand and listen to the monk as if enchanted, in a state of tension, almost of mystical rapture. It is appropriate at this point to ask whether an element of sexual tension appears here. The impression Ambrosio makes on women is primarily religious. The sermons he gives are so wonderful and spiritual that they attract crowds. But is it possible in this context to ignore the element of sexuality? Antonia faints while listening to one of Ambrosio's sermons, which seems to be a literal, physical reaction to his presence. In fact, an assessment of someone's attractiveness is often made suddenly and in completely the same way: *I find this priest physically attractive*. Such a judgement is not immediately verbalised, but is rather an automatic reaction. The same thing happens when we see a handsome man walking with his wife in the street: the obvious accompanying context of marriage and family does not change the fact that we see him as a handsome man who draws our attention. How, then, does this happen? Extraintellectually, or preintellectually? Or on the basis of a primitive reflex that makes our body react before we manage to determine whether a man is 20, 30 or 40 years old, a priest, a father or single? This is biology, which

we continually deprecate and struggle to rationalise. Genes coding our behaviour and pheromones stimulating corresponding centres in the brain work on the biochemical level.<sup>5</sup>

‘Let these thorns penetrate into my psyche, erasing any  
thoughts other than the thought of God’

Let us ask ourselves whether the profound piousness of Ambrosio, so strongly emphasised from the opening scene of the film, can be authentic in a situation which has been created, and continues to function, outside the context of evil? In other words: does the problem with his spirituality consist in the fact that from the very beginning it appears false and hypocritical? For it seems that knowledge of evil is indispensable for one to be able to consciously choose good. In addition, the austere religiosity embodied by the monk is suspicious and deficient from the beginning. Such religiosity and purity result only from complete ignorance of evil, and therefore from the impossibility of making a choice. Living in complete isolation, Ambrosio has no opportunity to commit sin and choose evil, because in his hermetic world, up to a certain point, temptation is completely lacking. In seventeenth-century Spain, monasteries were closed places. The only contact monks had with the faithful occurred during Holy Mass, confession or rare visits to the homes of the faithful. Monks lived on the margins of ordinary life. Ambrosio therefore exists in the monastery as in a closed Garden of Eden. But the story presented in the film seems to convince us that a return to that garden is not possible for us within the limits of earthly reality.

From this perspective, the confession scene opening the film, which, as has already been said, symbolises the moment of the intrusion of evil within the monastery walls, is of extreme importance. This moment seemingly disrupts the homogeneous character of the sacred place. The fact that evil pervades the monks’ world seems to suggest that in truth the monastery was not completely secure or consistent: a place for

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<sup>5</sup> Considerations concerning love as physical infatuation can be found in José Ortega y Gasset, *Szkice o miłości* [*Estudios sobre el amor*, or *Studies on Love*], transl. K. Kamyszew, Warsaw 1989.

evil and sin could be found within it. Until then the monastery had been a lifeless, vacant space where there was no possibility of choice. Here a significant role is played by Ambrosio, who is somehow predestined to commit sin and thus to throw the monastery open to evil. His impurity began with the commingling of the genes of his father and mother, since it was at that moment that the hand of fate appeared. Ambrosio might therefore be, for some time, isolated in a monastery, and thus free from sin, but eventually evil is bound to appear in his adult life.

In the context of fate, the the question of Ambrosio's free will also seems essential. The monk, in fact, often reveals his weak will and lack of ability to make independent decisions. From a wider perspective, this reveals the whole story of his life: Ambrosio was introduced to the monastery not as a young man with a vocation, but as an unconscious child. He was raised in a convent by his brethren, apart from the whole world, in order to decide in the end to accept ordination as a monk. Could a decision made in such circumstances be in any way conscious?

‘God, I assure you, condemns every sin’

Still worthy of consideration is the question of the action of fate in the monk's life. In the final scene of the film, the dying Ambrosio seems to make a conscious decision: the choice of goodness and the way to God. How does this decision appear in the light of the action of fate, from which, as we know, there is no possibility of escape?

Here is the place for free will, which always appears at the moment when fate is fulfilled, that is, when everything that had to happen has come to fruition. The dying monk's choice of goodness takes place precisely at the point of resolution of the action. The completion of the story also marks the appearance of another ancient theme, the moment of purification, or *katharsis*.<sup>6</sup> This is when everything returns to the natural order and man is reconciled to the nature of reality. Everything falls back into its place, and man himself returns to God. All the cards are on the table, showing clearly

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<sup>6</sup> The ancient concept of *katharsis* is addressed by G. Baudler in *Bóg i kobieta. Historia przemocy, seksualizmu i religii* [*Gott und Frau. Die Geschichte von Gewalt, Sexualität und Religion*, or God and woman: a history of violence, sexuality and religion], transl. A. Baniukiewicz, Łódź 1995, p. 73.

what was good and what was bad, who thought and acted rightly and what the truth was. This is the essence of Greek tragedy.

The concept of free will is also deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. In the film, in a monastic setting, we become acquainted with the story of a monk, a clergyman, and therefore we naturally expect in this story spirituality and moral purity, associated with the clarity of free choices. However, despite this specific setting (the monastery, the Mass, the monks, the praying faithful, etc.), such spirituality is not seen for some time. Moreover, nothing and no one stands in the way of the evil that appears: dishonesty, pride, impurity and even murder steal into the monastery. It appears, therefore, that evil had to appear, regardless of the gift of free will that man paradoxically received from God. Let us refer here to Georg Hegel, who wrote about Greek tragedy in a very interesting manner.<sup>7</sup> The philosopher argued that human decisions, unless taken in accordance with divine law, are doomed to failure. An illustration of this rule may be found in the story of King Creon, who waged an unsuccessful struggle with his fate, up to the moment when he had killed everyone around him and was left completely alone. Antigone and her brother had been killed, but nevertheless, as long as Creon failed to act in accordance with the plan of the gods, all his actions were doomed to failure. At the same time he was unable to abandon the path he followed, and so went on to complete self-destruction. It was not until he had reached the absolute bottom, when he could create no more destruction around him, than Creon understood that he was unable to change reality, in which nothing operated but divine law, which was always victorious in the end.

Is there also a place in the Christian world, then, for the actual operation of divine fate? What kind of Christian God would destroy everything? At this point we must stress that it is possible to come away with the impression that God, in this film, is completely silent. Of course, one can accept that everything that happened to the monk was necessary, and that God Himself directed it all. But basically God remains distant and transcendent with regard to the world of humans, in some respects like a watchmaker who winds up the mechanism, after which

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<sup>7</sup> Compare G. W. F. Hegel, *Wykłady z filozofii dziejów* [*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, or *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*], transl. A. Landman, J. Grabowski, Warsaw 1958, vol. II, p. 22.

the hands work completely by themselves. God appears moreover as the force driving the activities of Satan; Satan himself becomes a tool in his hands. It is God who has set Satan onto man, for man to ultimately be able to return to his Father. We return in this point to the existing thread: that the appearance of evil was necessary for Ambrosio to be able to truly choose God and goodness. Indeed, if someone lives in a closed world, isolated from reality, in, as it were, a 'bubble', then it is necessary to destroy the world for him to see the truth. By himself, he is not likely to want to turn his head towards the light – as is so well described by Plato in the metaphor of the cave.<sup>8</sup> There is always a need for someone to lead us out of this cave. In the film, this would be Satan: that is, the one who leads man, contrary to all appearances, in the direction of light, truth, and, paradoxically, God Himself. It is worth noting in this context that one of the names of Satan, Lucifer, means precisely 'the light-bringer'.<sup>9</sup>

### 'Love is like a poison'

In interpreting the behaviour of the monk from the point of view of e.g. psychology (especially the theories of Sigmund Freud), we might say that the power of the libido is, for human beings, the most important – in relation to which, of course, we agree that it can be sublimated. On the other hand, it is worth noting that although in the film all threads lead to the sexual act, which is simultaneously a symbol of the blackest sin (it is not enough that the protagonist sleeps with his sister; he also kills his mother!), it seems that sex is treated here only instrumentally. Presentation of the sexual act is accompanied by extensive symbolism, leading us directly to reflection on the already mentioned Freud<sup>10</sup> or

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<sup>8</sup> See Plato, *Państwo* [The Republic], book VII, transl. W. Witwicki, Kęty 2003, pp. 220–50.

<sup>9</sup> W. Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury* [A dictionary of myths and cultural traditions], Cracow 1991, p. 613.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. S. Freud, *Objaśnianie marzeń sennych (Dzieła, t. II)* [*Die Traumdeutung*, or The interpretation of dreams (Works, Vol. II)], transl. R. Reszke, Warsaw 1996.

Carl Gustav Jung<sup>11</sup>; however, sex seems to be shown here above all as a tool for the destruction of man.

Passion and sex appear in the film as a tool differentiating femininity and masculinity. Moments of silence between the main characters in selected scenes of the film emphasise the subtlety of women and their strong tendency to close themselves off, arousing curiosity as well as desire on the part of men. The portrayal of woman as an absolutely pure entity also tends to inflame passion. The world depicted in the film is a romantic and sensual one, which is, however, also marked by a certain lack, one that causes passion and desire to grow ever stronger. When the moment of the theoretical satisfaction of desire appears, that is, the moment of the sexual act, the desire is left completely unextinguished. The libidinous force is so great that it cannot be silenced. This can be compared to the plucking of the first apple from the tree, which, however, fails to satisfy our longing. The result is that our desire to eat these apples grows greater and greater. Another expression seen in the film is the moment of insatiability, when Ambrosio moves from the realm of desire, from the sexual sphere, into the realm of crime, directed precisely by this mysterious force of passion, which is associated with complete lack of self-control.<sup>12</sup>

‘I give you my soul. I renounce all rights and blessings.  
I recognize only your power. I curse my Creator.’

We can imagine Ambrosio’s relationship with God, because the monk states, shows, and feels that this relationship exists. But God does not show Himself, nor is there any trace of His interference. One might

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. C. G. Jung, *Archetypy i symbole. Pisma wybrane* [Archetypes and symbols. Selected writings], transl. J. Prokopiuk, Warsaw 1976, as well as *O naturze kobiety* [On the nature of women], transl. M. Starski, Poznań 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Zofia Rosińska, in her article ‘Sztuka: sycenie pragnień’ [Art: a brew of desires] writes in regard to this mechanism that ‘the physical act of sex can at best satisfy a sexual need, but it is not able to soothe the resulting desire. Moreover, desire finally quits the regions of sexuality and, still unsaturated, leads to crime and ends in the death of the subject-objects’. Cf. Z. Rosińska, ‘Sztuka: sycenie pragnień’ [in:] *Estetyka pragnień* [The aesthetics of desire], J. Brach-Czajny (ed.), Lublin 1988, p. 135.

think that the story of the monk is one of deeply religious, pious people who, paradoxically, live in a world without God. Even at the end of the film, Ambrosio is left completely alone, and we, the audience, are still left with this question about God, about His presence and grace. The film ends with the monk's whispered prayer, the words of the sixth Psalm: 'Have mercy upon me, Lord; for I am weak: O Lord, heal me; for my bones are vexed. My soul is also sore vexed [...] Return, O Lord, deliver my soul: oh, save me for thy mercies' sake'.<sup>13</sup> Thus we assume that this may be the end of his journey, meaning forgiveness, rest and return to God. But we still do not see this God, or any sign that would indicate His presence. Neither do we see that Ambrosio has regained peace; neither God nor the nun to whose death he contributed come to him. No one says that he is forgiven.

It seems, therefore, that the spirituality symbolising the presence of the divine element appears only as a hope on which we can feed after watching the film's final frame. It is also typical of Greek tragedy that there is no literal moment of forgiveness. Someone dies and there is no longer any chance to forgive or to receive absolution. For when the action is brought to an end, one turns to reality, completely defeated. There is only this moment, as in the quoted psalm, when one has to surrender completely. That is why we said earlier that sex is used here only instrumentally, as a tool to destroy Ambrosio's consciousness and disturb his monastic, walled-in, hermetic world. Sex in itself is therefore neither bad nor good. Interestingly, at the very end, when our hero is in the desert, Satan holds him accountable not for having sex with women, but for his guilty conscience and for his killing of a human being.

In terms of the images which are shown to us in the film and simultaneously conform to what is characteristic of Western culture, adultery is a symbol of sin. This is the sin Ambrosio allows himself to commit with two women, Valerio and Antonia. Meanwhile, we assume that the chief sin represented in the film is false, empty spirituality; but its tangible, physical expression is, to be sure, sex. Without a doubt, the film thus certifies certain attitudes operating in our culture: even, for instance, the idea that sin is very strongly linked with sex, a connection

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<sup>13</sup> Psalm 6: 3–5, in: Czesław Miłosz, *Księga Psalmów* [The Book of Psalms], Paris 1982, p. 61.

which is often made before anything else. Interestingly in this context, we sooner think of sex, rather than a lack of spirituality, as a sin, even in a place like a monastery!<sup>14</sup> According to this line of thought, Ambrosio is held accountable not for a lack of pity or for the excessive religious strictness he shows in regard to the pregnant nun. The monk is judged and condemned only when he seduces Antonia and breaks his vows of chastity.

### ‘Perhaps you are dreaming of the Holy Virgin’

In Western European culture, not only is an act of adultery considered a sin, but woman herself is also, in a certain sense, regarded as a symbol of sin. The biblical Eve tempts man and is the first to fall victim to Satan in Eden. We may therefore assume that the homogeneous, hermetic monastic world begins to disintegrate at the moment when a woman appears within it. First of all, the man who comes to the confessional in the opening scene of the film confesses a sin he has committed with a woman. In his story appears a young niece who stimulates his imagination and who has intercourse with the man. Next, the burned and masked Valerio appears in the monastery; she turns out to be an attractive girl. We also have the mysterious woman in a red coat from Ambrosio’s dream, as well as Antonia and her mother.

All of these female characters play key roles in the story of the monk as presented in the film. They surround Ambrosio and become the causes of his actions, leading ultimately to the monk’s complete downfall. We can ask, however, whether the impact of women on Ambrosio’s life is completely clear and direct, or whether in truth their presence only contributes to his sinful choices – in other words, whether the sin is Ambrosio’s having sex with Valerio and Antonio *per se*, or whether it can be identified with any contact he has with a woman whatsoever. In this context, though, is it at all possible to look at a wom-

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<sup>14</sup> About this astonishing rule functioning in Western culture, Rougemont points out: ‘In our time, sin means to the average Christian (if I may say so), mainly immorality, not a lack of a sense of spirituality; above all, the first example of immorality that comes to the mind of the average Christian is a violation of the ‘laws’ of sexual life. One sees here the weakest aspect of the West’. Cf. Rougemont, *Mity o miłości*, p. 212.



an asexually? Seemingly, the sin referred to here need not be a sexual act; it may be ‘merely’ impure thought, emotional involvement, or addiction to women. The presence of women disturbs the calm and tranquility within the monastery walls and deprives Ambrosio of his inner convictions regarding his own moral purity and integrity. Contact with a woman, therefore, is in no way neutral. Indeed, this the monk’s story seems to suggest this to us from the very first moment: the man in the confessional talks about his niece, about her comely calf in its stocking, the sight of which suffices to entice him to sinful thoughts and deeds. This is a Gombrowiczian theme in the story of the monk Ambrosio.<sup>15</sup>

‘And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked’<sup>16</sup>

In the context of the temptation posed by the female body and its nudity, it is worth recalling Giorgio Agamben’s essay on the latter theme. There we find a fragment in which the author cites an eleventh-century bas-relief depicting the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, as well as God changing their clothing, from fig leaves to leather.<sup>17</sup> The woman, however, does not want to conceal her body by donning the leather covering. As Agamben writes, she defends herself in this way against expulsion from Paradise. Adam dresses himself without protest and waits for the God-defying woman. Eve, defending herself against the divine order, has crossed her legs and covered her face by pulling her dress over her head. It seems that Eve, as opposed to Adam, wishes to remain naked and uninhibited. This nudity, however natural for her as

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Calf’ is one of the key words that appear in Witold Gombrowicz’s novel *Ferdydurke*. ‘Calf’ is connected mainly with the world of the *Młodziacy* [Youngbloods], whose leader is the liberated schoolgirl Zuta, also a symbol of modernity. ‘Calf’ also indicates youth, vitality, openness, and above all freedom of morals and sexual promiscuity. See Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, Cracow 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Bible, *Genesis 3:7*, in: *Biblia Tysiąclecia: Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu* [The Millennium Bible: The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament], Poznań 2003.

<sup>17</sup> G. Agamben, *Nagość* [Nudity], transl. K. Żaboklicki, Warsaw 2010, pp. 71–6.

a woman, becomes fatal to man. The nudity of a woman awakens his desire, and desire is a straight road to sin.

Agamben subjected this matter of sinful nudity to an interesting analysis. When Adam and Eve were still in Paradise, they wore no clothing, but even so, they were not naked, but covered in the grace of God. It was God himself who clothed them in this grace, and therefore there is no mention of nudity until the moment of commission of the original sin. Thus people became naked when they were stripped of the grace of God as a result of Eve's violation of the sole divine prohibition. From this perspective, nudity in the Judeo-Christian culture is closely linked to sin. But one thing remains a mystery: why did Eve want so badly to remain naked after the expulsion from paradise? This instance very clearly explains the difference between feminine and masculine nature. Adam donned clothing without protest, hiding his nakedness from the world; in contrast, Eve refused to obey. Agamben writes about Eve, as depicted in the bas-relief, a 'slender, silvery figure, desperately defending herself against the donning of the garment, becomes an extraordinary symbol of femininity, making woman the vigilant guardian of paradisiacal nudity'.<sup>18</sup> Eve, therefore, was not ashamed of nudity; rather, it emanated from her. Why? Perhaps because as the first woman she already knew what an impact an exposed female body has on a man. In addition, nudity is the natural state of man, in which he is dominated by drives associated with the sphere of libido, unrestricted by any cultural or social norms or prohibitions. Eve, therefore, wanted to remain free and unfettered, even if it was God who first decided to curb this aspect of human nature.

How, then, is the difference between man and woman represented in the context of the biblical story? Symbolically – for in our culture, it is man who uses reason, while woman remains a sensual entity. The man accepted clothing, as instructed by God, because according to the laws of reason, a human being owes obedience to God. The woman, on the other hand, from the beginning did not want to be subject to the divine commandments and wanted to return to her natural state, that is, to a state of nudity – but the nudity that existed prior to sin. Thus, we can assume that the biblical Eve, in fact, despite her flight into nudity, evaded sin, for he who wears clothing can sin, while he who has none

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

is not yet capable of sin. The conclusion is that as long as a human being chooses not to cover his body, there is no potential for sin, because the category of sin does not yet exist.

On the subject of nudity in the context of this film, we see it only after Ambrosio's sin of breaking the vows of chastity. The monk has intercourse with his own sister, and this is the significant moment of consummation of his whole story. When Ambrosio is reaching the end of his sinful road, nudity is revealed. Earlier, we see no nudity, as everyone is fully clothed: nuns, monks, women, the faithful; even Valerio, who tempts Ambrosio, is clothed, her face hidden by a mask. Only at the moment of two terrible crimes (incest and matricide) does nudity appear. We see the monk naked and exposed, along with the truth about his life, the true meaning of which is revealed.

### 'Why must Ambrosio be so cruel to me?'

Let us now consider the question of the motives directing the actions of the main characters. An interesting example is the character Valerio. At some point, the woman learns that she is not the monk's real object of desire, but she is still subject to him. How can we explain the motives for her conduct? There is no question of any kind of revenge, or jealousy of the other woman. Perhaps the reason for her attitude is that Valerio is essentially the embodiment of the evil force forming part of the fate that operates throughout Ambrosio's story. As has already been mentioned, however, Valerio also embodies femininity, in which form evil entered the monastery. Satan takes the form of a woman precisely to make it easier to overcome physical and psychological distance and take possession of Ambrosio's body and soul. Valerio offers the monk her help in the conquest of Antonia and does not feel jealous of the other woman. It seems that this is only possible because femininity is not Valerio's true nature, but only diabolical nature clothed in a robe of femininity. Valerio's behaviour also seems quite comprehensible in the context of the power she acquires over the monk. The woman knows exactly what he is doing and even directs his activities, giving him the sprig of myrtle which enables him to conquer Antonia.

Moreover, Valerio knows where her actions will lead Ambrosio. The woman is aware that the monk is discarding her because he wants

another. Therefore she seems to say: go to her, because I know where it will lead you. Valerio knows that total annihilation awaits Ambrosio, and that only afterwards can the return to God take place. The monk offers her sex, but it is she who refuses, and does so because he really loves another woman, whereas Valerio will never be the object of his love. And women are not jealous about sex, but about love, about a man's feelings. True jealousy is thus jealousy about feelings.<sup>19</sup> The monk has never loved Valerio; perhaps he was merely fascinated when the prospect of sexual intercourse opened up in front of him. Thus it seems that Valerio has manipulated him from the very beginning. She exploited him, used him, even raped him in the delirious scene of intercourse following the bite of the centipede. But didn't she, in this way, save his life? After all, she sucked the deadly venom from his finger and thus at that moment rescued him; this may be the main reason that Ambrosio ultimately has mercy on her. Mercy, however, is the only feeling on the monk's part that Valerio can count on.

### 'Save me. The meaning of my life is your love'

Love. In this story, are we dealing with love at all? Of God? Of women? Of a mother? Of a child? Of another human being? Is there love here in the Christian sense, or, perhaps, only in a purely sexual sense, between a man and a woman?

It seems that there is love between the betrothed couple: Antonia and the rich young man applying for her hand. One significant scene, in the context of the feelings linking them, is the one in which the couple takes a boat ride on a beautiful sunny day. However, it seems that everything in this scene is artificially arranged. We have the necessary ingredients: the woman, the man, a pleasant afternoon on the boat, an umbrella, a love song. But the whole scene, apparently saturated with the innocent love of two young people, appears to be nothing more than a convention. This is a courtly, picturesque love: young people in a boat, flirting with each other, in the indispensable company of a chaperone. Hence this topic seems to be a mere ironic treatment, not an ex-

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<sup>19</sup> I. Primoratz, *Filozofia seksu* [The philosophy of sex], transl. J. Klimczyk, Warsaw 2012, pp. 123–5.

ample of true love between two people. Only moments earlier the drama between the main characters had been played out, and meanwhile the young man serenades his beloved.

Perhaps love appears in the story of the pregnant nun. We can only guess that her child was the fruit of love, since it could also have been conceived under the influence of a momentary desire. Does the young girl really love her unborn child? It seems that here we cannot yet speak of true love. The child is still unborn, and the nun is very young, and like a frightened child. Thrown into the dungeon, she screams that she is pregnant and that they are killing her child, but really it is she who is starved to death in the cell. Is she really thinking at that moment about the child? Certainly she is, but the child is not yet the object of her love.

However, in speaking of the love of a mother for a child, we cannot overlook Antonia, Ambrosio and their mother. In the case of the monk, his mother cannot love him because she does not actually have him with her, but only an idealised image of him, which, in this context, seems to be the real object of her affection. Yet another sad love story is associated with the figure of the mother of the two main characters: her youthful misalliance ruined her husband's happiness, and, as it seems, he returned the favour; she was left alone, passive and resigned. This love, then, bore no positive fruit. Even their child, Ambrosio, was abandoned and condemned to death. Perhaps that is why the mother warns her daughter against feelings of love.

Another kind of love still resounds in the background: love of God. Antonia speaks of her love for Him, sings psalms, and is fascinated by the monk because, thanks to him, she experiences a feeling of closeness to God. The mediation of the monk clearly indicates, however, that the feeling is not, in fact, pure love of God, because the accent is shifted to the stimulus represented by her contact with Ambrosio. The proximity of the monk seems more important than her feeling for God in itself.

One overall conclusion forces itself on us: love is always present in conventions: courtly love, vague love for God, sexual relations (i.e. carnal love), or the satisfaction of desire. This means that in a world in which there ought, theoretically, to be love – between a man and a woman, between a mother and child, between a human being and God – we do not find it anywhere. The clearest thread seems to be the mother's love for Antonia, but in the end it turns out that her daughter

does not have an easy life with her, because the mother is sick, passive, and shut away in her sorrow. She loves the one who is absent rather than the one who is at her side. Perhaps this display of love, or the lack of it, reveals, in the most painful fashion, our conception of it. We seek it, desire it, and talk about it, but ultimately, perhaps, we are incapable of love.

So, then, is there really no hope for any pure and lasting feeling in the world of human beings? In reality, is everything aimed only at sex? Are all our activities directed towards sexual fulfilment? What we call love seems to be a convention and a kind of game: we sigh to each other, we win one another's love, we spend romantic afternoons on a boat, we write love letters, we visit our mothers, simply in order to play the game – all in the context of the unceasing operation of fate. Interestingly, though, this game, which we play throughout our whole lives, is often not even pleasurable. There is no place in it for pleasure; what is more, our participation is paid for with sin and suffering. All this to attain physical fulfillment or sex itself. This is a mockery of the pleasure which, as it turns out, is inaccessible to mankind. Nor is there any such thing as healthy carnality, since nudity is always ultimately an expression of sin.

In this context, we can wonder whether Ambrosio feels pleasure lying in bed with Antonia after sex. The answer, however, leaves no doubt: momentary physical pleasure is immediately paid for with suffering, in the form of the tragedy played out between mother and son. Specific sins are involved here: matricide and the motif of an incestuous relationship with his sister. We don't see the moment of erotic fulfillment. The same is true in the case of the film's first act of physical intimacy. The sexual relations between Ambrosio and Valerio are shown in snatches, in a kind of delirium. Afterwards, Ambrosio even thinks that all of this intimacy was only a dream. The sexual act is, in this case, unconscious. The monk's lack of awareness during intercourse is the result of the centipede's fatal bite, after which Valerio saves him by sucking out the venom. The first instance of intercourse therefore represents Valerio's assumption of twofold control over Ambrosio: first, the girl saves his life, second, she exploits him sexually. Ambrosio thus becomes doubly dependent on the demonic woman.

In our analysis of love and its role in Ambrosio's story, an unusually important role is played by the very place where the monk's fate

unfolds. Seventeenth-century Spain was in fact a country marked by an unusual degree of strictness and even fundamentalism in matters of sexuality. Dating back to the time of Ferdinand II and Isabella (Los Reyes Catolicos), Spain had been one of the most Catholic countries in Europe. Those rulers completed the long process, begun in the seventh century, of the Spanish *Reconquista*, or reconquest of land from the Jews and Moors, by introducing very strict and fundamentalist Catholicism. It might be claimed, therefore, that the fates of the monk, Antonia and Valerio, unfolding in the atmosphere of Spanish severity, do not fit the realities of the modern world.

Paradoxically, however, it turns out that in reference to our hedonistic, liberal and pluralistic modern times, the fates of the characters are surprisingly up to date. Let us look for a moment at another contemporary film, directed by Steve McQueen, entitled *Shame*. The story takes place in contemporary New York. Sex is in the forefront of the story of the main character, a lonely man named Brandon Sullivan; he is totally addicted to it. Sex dominates him and ultimately destroys him. Why does this happen? Why does constant desire destroy man, both in seventeenth-century Spain and in a great contemporary metropolis? Here we reach the conclusion that times change, but people remain the same. *Shame* is in fact a completely different story, depicting the fate of a sex addict struggling with unpleasant experiences from childhood. It is the story of his downfall, because Brandon is so entangled in his addiction that even when he tries to really fall in love, he is unable to complete the sex act: his body refuses to obey him. Full of lust and regret, he loses himself in the big city, landing in a gay bar and having sex on the street with women he meets accidentally. Ultimately, however, we see him alone, crying in the street from a feeling of complete helplessness. Desire destroys him completely.

‘Satan has more power over us than we allow him’

In *The Monk*, there are attempts to convince the audience that Satan has only as much power over us as we ourselves allow him. This would mean that sex destroys us only to the extent to which we value it, for whatever we ascribe great importance to inevitably degrades, weakens and destroys us. Ambrosio sinned because he acknowledged sex as a sin. If he

had not considered physical intimacy a sin, it is likely he would have never committed it and would not have experienced a complete downfall. Ambrosio's driving force, however, was the urge to satisfy his desire.

The question, then, is: what, when we are creating a value system, do we place on the other side? Thus we have sex, but what, then, is the point of reference? In the case of Ambrosio, it was religious values and, as an absolute priority, the value of purity. The monk was taught as a child to strive for the ideal of purity, and therefore, in breaking the rules, his fall was all the greater. Had he lived closer to what he really was, a man of flesh and blood subject to emotion and desire, he would not have fallen at all. It seems that a key issue for our culture appears here: to accept our condition before we cover up our flesh. But it can be done? It seems that it cannot, because none of us is in paradise any longer; we have left it behind; we have sinned. We have managed to tame life outside paradise in various ways (films in the style of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, love stories about vampires, etc.) but the problem still exists, and it seems insurmountable. One can, for example, give up sex, but this is an absurdity that leads us nowhere. Lack of sex fails to liberate us; rather, it is a struggle against our own human nature. Freud suggested here the theory of sublimation of drives as one of the possible solutions. Thus, in reference to our film, the example of Antonia and her love of God might be a form of Freudian sublimation. But we might continue to ask: where does all this sublimation ultimately lead us? To eccentricity? To inevitable submissiveness?

‘We’re always searching to discover the meaning of things.

But there comes a point when everything becomes clear’.

Let us return finally to the scene which, in the final minutes of the film, takes place in the desert. There is nothing there. Reality, revealed in all its truth, is absolutely nothing: a desert, nonexistence, nullity. But there is one thing: hope. The end of the story seems, then, to leave us with the hope that God will forgive Ambrosio. The audience's task is to reflect on whether he receives this forgiveness or not. But even assuming a positive conclusion and thus assuming that Ambrosio dedicates his life to Antonia and that God forgives him, what are we left with regarding the question of sexuality?



It seems that in the story of Ambrosio there is no room for a positive approach to the problem of human sexuality. It is likewise impossible, however, to reject it, and attempts to block out or deny sexuality are doomed to failure. Sexuality is the foundation of our human condition and there is no way to return to childhood. And when we enter the realm of puberty, the sexual sphere, we become naked, and remain so for life. Studies on the human psyche have shown that shame is the first experience of the awakening of human consciousness. We wake up to consciousness, to the world, through being ashamed. Along with original sin was born the consciousness of Adam and Eve, and with it, shame.

*The Monk* does not show us, in the last analysis, what is important in life. All the values it refers to are deconstructed and discredited, including love itself. Ambrosio's story leaves us with a sense of defeat and the consciousness that most of the things that happen around us depend on us only to a small extent. Consequently, we are faced with the need to come to terms with naked reality.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the story presented in the film offers us a partial justification, saying that our bad decisions are often dictated by a higher force, fate, over which man has no control. However, this also means that we only seem to make decisions, because they relate to things that are independent of us. And here, perhaps, lies the real and enduring effect of fate, even if nowadays we do not accept its real presence.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel: 'The movement in which the unfeeling heart softens and is elevated to the level of generality is identical with the movement of consciousness which has confessed to what it is. The wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind. The act is not everlasting; the spirit withdraws it back to itself; and that which disappears directly is the individuality contained in the deed, whether as intention or as existing negativity and boundaries of action'. In: Hegel, *Fenomenologia ducha* [*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, or *The Phenomenology of Spirit*], transl. A. Landman, vol. I–II, Warszawa 1963–5, p. 274.

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