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**SUBLIME AND THE THEME OF INCEST IN THE GOTHIC NOVEL  
*THE MONK* BY M. G. LEWIS  
BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Due to a somewhat universal treatment of such controversial topics as incest or even incestuous rape, the reaction or the emotions of any person upon encountering such themes in the fiction should be uniformly tinged with detestation or horror. This paper's purpose was to establish the possible link between the delightful horror or the feeling of sublime with the theme of incest in the Gothic novel *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis. Subsequently, the research question of this paper was formulated as follows: is there a link between the theme of incest in the Gothic novel *The Monk* and the evocation of sublime in the reader?

The first chapter of this paper focuses on the delivery of the main information connected to first of all the period of Romanticism that boosted the popularity of Gothic fiction. Then it proceeds to describe the main feature of one of the centric tropes of Gothic fiction, namely, the theme of incest. And finally, it describes the main features of the theme of incest in *The Monk* and introduces the definition of the notion of Burkean Sublime.

The second chapter deals with the definition of the link between the theme of incest in the novel and Burkean Sublime. To establish this link the close reading of the three fragments of the novel where the mentions of incest are the most prominent was conducted. And the findings were interpreted with the help of E. Burke's theory of Sublime in accordance with the purpose of this paper.

*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* by Burke and *The Monk* by Lewis are the primary sources this paper is based on. Other sources were consulted to make a better understanding of the period the novel was written in, the genre it was written in and the peculiarities of the theme of incest that was used in it.

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## INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis published in 1796 proved to be far less subtle in violent and sexual details than its predecessors. According to Hughes (2012), the critics that have dealt with Lewis's novel generally concentrated on its erotic dimensions, religious subtopics, motifs of transgressions, amongst which are incest, matricide, and rape. Some of the other authors also chose to muse on how the obvious themes of horror and terror in *The Monk* could be connected to the sublime. However, in this paper, I will focus on finding out the possible connection between the theme of incest in the novel and the evocation of the feeling of sublime in the reader.

As Burke (2005) argues in his theory on the Sublime, the evocation of the sublime in the reader is largely connected to fear and terror. In this paper, I will argue that fear or the possibility of danger (in this particular case this danger has to do with incest) inflicted on the character in *The Monk* is capable of producing the sublime in the reader. That is, how the usage of the specific words by Lewis can construct the atmosphere of peril and apprehension connected to the theme of incest and has the potential of arousing the feeling of the sublime in the reader. In this case, it will be possible to argue that the theme of incest in *The Monk* is connected to the evocation of the sublime in the reader.

To define this possible link the three core instances in the novel connected to the theme of incest will be examined in the second chapter of this paper. And the main findings will be interpreted by consulting the Burkean Sublime corresponding to the purpose of this paper.

The aim of this thesis is to identify the connection of the evocation of the feeling of sublime in the reader and the theme of incest in the Gothic novel *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis.

The research question of this paper could be then formulated as follows: is there a link between the theme of incest in *The Monk* and the evocation of the sublime in the reader?

The first chapter will focus on the overview of the period Gothic fiction emerged in and the Gothic fiction and the theme of incest in the novel *The Monk*. The second chapter will deal with the drawing of correlations between the incestuous instances in the novel and the possible evocation of the feeling of sublime in the reader upon encountering such instances in the novel.

## **1. INCEST IN GOTHIC FICTION**

### **1.1. Period of Romanticism**

According to Hughes (2012), Romanticism was a reaction to the previous popular movement, the Enlightenment, in European art, aesthetics, literature, and philosophy that took place between the 1770s and the mid-nineteenth century. Romanticism went in opposition with the beliefs of the Enlightenment and propagated the focus on specific themes such as self-expression and identity, the human's place in nature, imagination, and the divine in the mundane world.

Varner (2014) asserts that the Romantics were increasingly aware that they lived in a period that was altering the foundation according to how the society of their age handled “politics, social institutions, literature, music, art, psychology, philosophy, and economics” (Varner 2014:315). Hughes (2012) explains that numerous writers, including Ann Radcliffe, Lewis, and the Marquis de Sade, were affected by the cultural and political change brought in by the French Revolution in the 1790s. The Marquis de Sade was also the one who drew a fundamental link between the Revolution and the advent of Gothic fiction. Gothic fiction, in turn, brought the representation of a decadent culture, often centred on the consumption of drugs or alcohol, a collapse of sexual boundaries that went beyond incest and homosexuality, and a fascination with the supernatural.

Hughes (2012) claims that the notion of a Romantic wanderer or hero, created by Romanticism was transformed into a Gothic Hero by Gothic fiction. Gothic Hero, although very akin to Romantic hero was less tranquil in his contemplations and if Romantic hero was generally concerned with the sublime scenery during his travels, the Gothic Hero preferred to obsessively ruminate over his sins, temptations, and numerous transgressions like, for instance, incest.

According to Hughes (2012) Gothic, although Gothic originated during the Enlightenment, was reinforced by, and popularized by the Romantic period, which shared the major concepts and aspirations of this new literary movement. Gothic fiction developed as a reaction to the Enlightenment's desire to avoid magic, superstition, and mystique. And although Gothic originated before Romanticism, the survival and enormous success of the former was surely aided by the latter.

## **1.2. Gothic fiction**

In 1764 the term “Gothic” emerged as a critical term due to Horace Walpole applying this word to his novel *The Castle of Otranto*. It is claimed that Gothic fiction took its origin in the 1760s – the period of Enlightenment. But the notion of “Gothic” managed to acquire its immense popularity only by the 1790s, boosted by the period of Romanticism and becoming, according to Tracy (1981:10), “the principal part” of this period’s “darker side”. Hughes (2012) notes that Walpole chose a distant Roman Catholic past as the setting for his first “Gothic” novel, which also exploited the themes of supernatural, tyranny, and religion. These themes were to become the staples of much of the Early Gothic fiction, which end and the beginning of a new period of Gothic fiction was marked in 1818 by Mary Shelley’s Gothic novel *Frankenstein*.

Williams (1995:96) remarks that the transgressions and “disruptions” within the literature order established during the period of Renaissance appeared already in the fiction of Shakespeare and other writers’ works of drama like, for instance, revenge tragedy

(Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). However, it was during the eighteenth century when the authors ended up entranced with the authentic past, and the craving to investigate the alternative never before fully explored themes and concepts started to appear.

The period of Early Gothic was centred on the two writers Ann Radcliffe and M.G. Lewis, whom Punter (2012:93) claims to be the two most significant Gothic novelists of the 1790s, whom she also calls the ones who “permanently altered Gothic writing”. Punter (2012:93) indicates that Radcliffe’s strive for “poetic realism” and interpretation of the supernatural “as the product of natural causes” stood in stark contrast against Lewis’s irony and acceptance of the supernatural as it is. Their contrasting styles were typified as the difference between horror and terror, and it is asserted that Radcliffe’s fiction is Gothic of sublime terror, when Lewis’s, of horror. Hughes (2012) claims Radcliffe’s fiction and *The Monk* by Lewis to be the main examples of the Gothic terror and horror of the eighteenth century, respectively. Punter (2012) argues that terror is largely if not completely concerned with the mind, the imagination, but when the imaginative takes a physical form, it already yields horror. Terror is obscure, horror, by contrast, is far more detailed and leaves little room for imagination. Hughes (2012) in turn associates the notion of terror with the Female Gothic, and horror with Male Gothic fiction.

Punter (2012:98) asserts that the writings of the early female Gothic authors were principally concerned with the struggle for their rights, their class, and gender, while the writers of the early Male Gothic were more consumed by the exploration of the character’s identity and the disruption of “normative gender patterns”, that is the conventionally all-powerful male and the submissive helpless female. In addition to this, Hughes (2012) notes that when dealing with supernatural Female Gothic chose to unveil and give a logical explanation to its mysteries, whereas Male Gothic preferred to not dwell on such things and accept them as realities within the limits of fiction. In the case with the endings in their

writings again the Male and Female Gothic traditions differ, in a sense that the Male Gothic abound in tragic endings, and Female in happy. The Gothic Hero of Male Gothic is usually destined to either perish or become an outcast. The Gothic Heroine of Female Gothic, on the other hand, having gone through a series of dramatic experiences, comes out renewed.

Tracy (1981:3) describes the world of Gothic fiction as “the fallen world” – a world with no hope. She then proceeds with the identification of the core themes of Gothic fiction. When it comes to the physical environment of the Gothic novel Tracy (1981) asserts that it could be described as utterly desolated. Surrounded by dark trees, castles stand abandoned and destroyed. By use of midnight and twilight landscapes, as well as dark and sinister halls, tunnels, dungeons the Gothic writers intended to create an atmosphere in which any sudden surprise or anxiety concerned with the unknown could occur. The next prominent feature of Gothic is the notion of mortality. Death of any kind: abrupt death, brutal death, and death as a punishment for vileness is a common theme in Gothic novels. Adding to this, the remarks on the decay and burial are prominent too. The protagonists of Gothic fiction are often orphaned or adopted, and the origins of their families remain unknown, sometimes being discovered only at the very end. Monasteries or nunneries for such protagonists become a voluntary or involuntary refuge. Guilt, terror, and threat of damnation as the result of Gothic hero’s wrongdoings are the tropes that pervade Gothic fiction. The most common passion that brings down Gothic heroes and heroines is sexual desire, though there are also examples of rage, greed, interest in the supernatural, and even gluttony. Those who inflict the temptations on Gothic heroes may be divided into three categories: demons, villains, and forbidden cravings. More often than demons, Gothic fiction provides villains. Many of them suffer from overwhelming pride. Murder, renunciation of God, submission to lust, gambling, and lesser crimes like suspicion, rudeness to parents, and character weakness are all examples of the vices characteristic of the Gothic villains. The authors also make it clear that



all of such vices lead to the character's ruin. Another prominent theme in Gothic fiction is the contrast of good and bad, innocent, and corrupt. When confronted with a tempter of any psychological sophistication, natural or supernatural, the feeble defence of the darkened mind of the innocent heroine is very prone to succumb to the darkness. However, due to the fortitude of her ideals and the unexpected outside support, the heroine may occasionally triumph over attempted kidnappings and rapes. Tracy (1981) names the search for one's roots, identity, and familial connections as the final most frequent motif of Gothic fiction. With the reunion of lovers, the moment of discovery is the greatest and, perhaps, the only source of delight in the Gothic world, that is, if it is not preceded by, for instance, incestuous transgression. The Gothic world or the fallen world is perilous, lonely, and miserly. The only possibility of redemption in reuniting with the long-lost relative or sweetheart, in some novels, entails the discovery of sin amongst which are incest, matricide, which yields great sorrow for the characters.

### **1.3. The theme of incest in the Gothic fiction**

Gothic fiction came to power in the eighteenth century and took the family and incest as its focal points. Williams (1995) the repression of incestuous desires would become a cornerstone of the Gothic culture, particularly Early Gothic. Lin (2007), in turn, furthers this argument by suggesting that despite the theme of incest being radical even for Gothic genre, it still holds place as one of the most vital themes in the genre. Gothic fiction is signified by the conflict caused by the hierarchical worldview based on sexual differences and patriarchal tendencies. The interplay of the “masculine signifier” and the “female signified” (Williams 1995:87) is one of Gothic's most distinctive literary motifs. That is, as a rule, according to Gothic literary tradition the Gothic heroines had to struggle against their authoritative and tyrannical male counterparts.

The Gothic novel started to rapidly gain popularity in eighteenth-century English society. Williams (1995) notes that it may have been the case that published accounts of

unusual and even transgressive behaviour within the familial units may have helped to alleviate anxiety brought on by a society that was changing in alarming ways on the verge of the French Revolution. Perry (1998) asserts that in addition to that, Gothic fiction recognized a shift in family relations prominent in this century – a significant rise in incestuous relationships. Perry (1998:261) claims that the eighteenth century saw the shift from the system in which blood relations were the primary foundation for the relation to a particular bloodline to the system where the “conjugal relations” took the priority in the determination of one’s family members. This shift yielded the weakening of familial bonds between brothers and sisters and fathers and their daughters. Which in turn led to the sexual objectification of the female counterparts of the family by their father, father figure, or brother. Perry (1998) also suggests that the Gothic writers, generally women like Redcliffe and gay men, like for instance, Walpole, Lewis, and Beckford or feminist men such as Godwin, used Gothic fiction to criticize this new regime that allowed father figures to impose authority or even tyranny on their family members. Through their writings, they also showed the dire consequences that followed such antics by exposing the dangers of such power. Holliday (1998) adds that both in later and early Gothic novels the main goal of including incest in the Gothic genre was to provoke repulsion and detestation in readers, and to mark anyone who was to become involved in it doomed.

According to DiPlacidi (2018), a model of Gothic father-daughter relationship was established by Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* and the model of sibling incest was established by Radcliffe in her first two novels *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* and *A Sicilian Romance*. Radcliffe’s two novels set a paradigm that romanticized the figure of a brother by making him a hero. Some of the subsequent Gothic writers chose to adhere to this paradigm and others chose to depart from it. Lewis and his Gothic novel *The Monk* was one

of the instances of the writers who opted for departure from the “Radcliffean model of sibling incest” (DiPlacidi 2018:100).

DiPlacidi (2018) argues that the in the Gothic fiction male counterparts are usually the ones to initiate or impose the incestuous relationship on their daughters or sisters. They are also the ones to feel the “underlying incestuous desires that are expressed as hidden subtext or explicit incestuous love” (DiPlacidi 2018:95). DiPlacidi (2018) juxtaposes sibling incest to father-daughter incest, claiming the brother as equally as dangerous to the heroine as the father or an uncle. Both fathers and brothers pose equal danger to the female protagonists in Gothic fiction as they begin to see their female relatives “as possessions in their power and hence possible sex objects” (DiPlacidi 2018:25). DiPlacidi (2018) also claims sibling desire to be as, perhaps, the most dangerous and complicated of all the incestuous relationships represented in the Gothic.

DiPlacidi (2018:101) remarks that the theme of incest is used in Gothic fiction as “the visible or secret or absent centre of forbidden desire” and this desire should be eventually regarded as a terror convention. Nevertheless, Female Gothic, especially Radcliffe present the sibling incest as “potential for equality” (DiPlacidi 2018:95) rather than ascribing such relationship to the notion of terror. Nevertheless, by writing his Gothic novel *The Monk* Lewis effectively disrupted such conventions.

#### **1.4. The theme of incest in *The Monk***

DiPlacidi (2018) points out that Lewis’s novel *The Monk* and its representation of brother-sister incest dynamics and eventual sibling rape was a fresh take on the romanticised version of Radcliffean “equal” incestuous sibling love and was eventually taken as paradigmatic of sibling relationships in the Gothic genre. This interpretation of Lewis' text as creating a paradigm of violent brother-sister sexuality was novel in its revolutionary distortion of Radcliffe's model of sibling relationships.

The plot of *The Monk* mentions several different Gothic narratives such as the story of the Bleeding Nun and the Wandering Jew. It also has multiple plotlines like a longer narrative of the doomed love of Raymond and Agnes, Lorenzo and Antonia, and the transgressive relationship of Ambrosio and Antonia. However, Smith (2013) inclines that essentially, the story revolves around the incestuous relationship of monk Ambrosio and his long-lost sister Antonia as even the ending of the novel is concerned with this plotline, specifically.

Smith (2013:27) refers to Lewis's use of brother-sister rape as a deviation from the sibling incest Gothic tradition established by Radcliffe. *The Monk* can be considered as a parody of Radcliffe's earlier writings and her sensibility, by transforming the Gothic setting of this novel into a visually explicit, "semi-pornographic" and violent way. Punter (2012:106) remarks that Radcliffean "'Virtue in distress' is scandalously inverted, as the outraging of Antonia's modesty stirs not Ambrosio's chivalrous conscience, but his lust". Despite all this, according to DiPlacidi (2018), Lewis's portrayal of rape aided by Matilda – "a subordinate but crafty spirit" (Lewis 1996:321) sent by Lucifer in a mortal woman's disguise – portrays sibling desires as much less transgressive than Radcliffe's depictions, according to which the male counterpart of the sibling incest is given the role of a lover (the positive marker) without regarding this as a social taboo.

DiPlacidi (2018) remarks that scholars view the feelings of horror and aversion provoked by Lewis's use of the incest trope in *The Monk* as characteristic of Gothic brother-sister incest. She then quotes Alan Richardson who claims that the model of Gothic sibling incest in *The Monk* is an even further perversion of distorted and idealised Romantic incest, which is prone to produce disgust and terror in the reader and which is concerned with brutal power struggles and abuse (generally of the female counterpart by the male). Male writers depicted violence more easily in ways that Female Gothic writers were not able to

accomplish. Lewis succeeded in displaying violence in *The Monk* with more ease than Radcliffe with her timid femininity in her writings. And although according to DiPlacidi (2018) he failed to evoke true ‘terror’ in the reader, Lewis succeeded in producing ‘horror’. Due to the aggressive and violent portrayal of sibling rape in *The Monk*, this Gothic novel is believed to have been written as a critique against patriarchal power and values that were prevalent in that age.

Jones (1990:133) concentrates on love narratives in *The Monk*. He distinguishes between two types of sexual desire represented in the novel, namely “good desire” and “bad desire”, associating “good desire” with the love line of Raymond and Agnes and “bad desire” with Ambrosio’s incestuous desire towards Antonia. Ambrosio was raised by the monks who restrained his instincts, that is, his violent sexuality. Jones (1990:133) asserts that bad desire is a repressed desire, because it is incapable of satisfaction and ultimately destroys the person; and that one of the most dominant themes in *The Monk* is the danger of ignorance of vice and one's sexuality. Being unleashed after many years of repression, Ambrosio’s sexual desire proves to be destructive and leads him to his downfall. In addition, Antonia’s chastity and sexual ignorance supported by her mother serve to her being easily manipulated by inexperienced Ambrosio. Brooks (1973) in turn chooses to focus on the theme of transformation of virtue and chastity into taboo in *The Monk*. In his desire to corrupt her, Ambrosio is drawn to Antonia, the epitome of innocence. The rape of Antonia, thus marks the imminent destruction of the world, determines Ambrosio as its main annihilator, and secures his doom. Ambrosio's newly acquired disrespect and refusal of God are spurred by his prevailing sexual desires. Brooks (1973:259) points out that “Ambrosio's story is most centrally a drama of conquest by a desire made terrific by its freight of repression”. Throughout the novel, driven not by virtue but by fear, he is in terror of God’s unavoidable vengeance. However, this does not stop the monk from following in the lead of his lust,

which results in him breaking the commitment to celibacy, incest, and murder. Punter (2012) claims that *The Monk* can be characterised by featuring a large variety of vices, unnatural acts, and illicit passions. But, the worst acts of inhumanity are connected to Ambrosio, who revels in matricide, incestuous rape, and sibling murder.

Hughes (2012) notes that, when writing his novel, Lewis additionally took his influence from the Burkean sublime developed by the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke.

### **1.5. Burkean Sublime**

According to Hughes (2012), the earliest study that was concerned with the topic of Sublime titled *On the Sublime* by Cassius Longinus dates back to antiquity. Though this work appeared in English translation as early as 1652, its influence on Gothic writers and fiction was relatively minor. The predominant work based on Gothic sublimity was provided considerably later in 1757, by Burke and was titled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. In his enquiry, Burke (2005:111) defined the sublime or delightful horror as an artistic effect deployed in fiction that can produce “the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling”.

In his study Burke (2005) distinguishes terror from the horror which he refers to as a state of excess, in which the character is exposed to the apparent threat or some sort of risk. The terror, on the other hand, is described in his study as something suggestive, something that leaves the reader with incomplete information, always wondering, trying to solve the secret. When the danger, or any kind of threat is only hinted at but not explicitly shown, when the hints of potential danger left by the author make the imagination of the reader start producing any sort of new images or scenarios of future fearful events based on these hints, is connected with obscurity and terror and thus sublime. Burke (2005) states that when any danger or suffering is pressing too near or is too explicitly stated or described they are incapable of producing anything but pure fear, but at certain distances, they may be and they

are, delightful or sublime. Terror and ultimately sublime have always to do with imagination and with self-preservation which, according to Burke (2005), is the strongest of the passions.

## **2. SUBLIME AND THE THEME OF INCEST IN *THE MONK***

### **2.1. Words as the best conveyors of Sublime**

Even though all people are different in their tastes, reasoning and the subjects that move them, there are still some universal matters that should and do cause the uniform reaction or evoke the same emotion in the majority of humankind. Even nowadays there are constant debates connected to sexuality, race, culture, religion but such matters as incest or abuse of power, or rape are considered taboo and frowned upon, and thus are viewed in the same way by the majority of people. I would argue that Lewis in his novel *The Monk* upholds the same opinion and effectively represents it in his horrific depictions of an abusive and aggressive incestuous relationship and eventual incestuous rape.

Fiction and words as Burke (2005) notes are the best conveyors of the passions and consequently the best stimulants of passions in the readers. It can be then said that the better the person's writing skills are the better they can convey the passions they want to evoke in their readers. Burke (2005) explains that the imagination works universally for all the people and that the pleasure and pain depicted in the writings can have the same powerful (I would say the degree of power depends on the delivery) impact on almost every perceiver of the text. The imagination is concerned with people's fears, hopes, desires, and pleasure and if delivered in the right manner (in this case by word) such emotions should be universally provoked in every person who comes in contact with the subject, topic, or theme that was meant to do so. So, it could be logically concluded that if executed in the right way the fear, terror, or delightful horror that is sublime could also be evoked in the reader if the writer chose to do so, meaning if it was their goal.

I would suggest that the perception of the topic of incest must be universal in all men not only because this topic is frowned upon on a social level but also because it, in my opinion, has something to do with the subconsciously negative treatment developed over the many centuries in almost all humankind. The abuse of power, the helplessness or inability to escape connected to Gothic incest, especially in the case with *The Monk* cannot be associated with anything other than fear or similar negative sentiment. Burke (2005) claims that all passions such as grief, love, fear, anger, joy affected the mind of any sane person at least once. So, I would assert that if the writer is willing to convey some message or stir some of such or any kind of passion in the mind of their readers, they just have to use the right words to do so. As Burke (2005:133) says “it is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination.” Even supernatural matters like God, angels, demons, Lucifer that are not present in real life, cannot be possibly perceived, experienced, or fully realised with the right wording and command of language can be presented in such a way that will affect the reader regardless. Thus, such an understandable notion as incest, abuse of power, and incestuous rape that come along with the theme of incest in *The Monk*, presented in a right way, I claim, must evoke the appropriate sentiments in the imagination of the reader.

Burke (2005) explains that literature is also the best way to produce the effect of terror and subsequently the feeling of sublime, as the sublime has to do with anything obscure, or in this case, the confusing images described in a piece of text. The mind tries to grasp them, the curiosity is peaked, and the agitated reader tries to solve the mystery the author presented them with. The sublimity itself is rooted in the obscurity of images presented in some sort of mystery or uncertainty. And although Lewis’s Gothic novel is mostly considered to contain the depictions of horror and the Gothic Sublime is more connected to terror, I will nonetheless try to trace the possible link between the several



instances of incest in the novel with the feeling of sublime that may be evoked upon reading them.

## 2.2. Power dynamics and Sublime

DiPlacidi (2018:98) points out that the eighteenth-century Gothic novel frequently made use of the tropes that had to do with the hidden identities of the siblings that had “either strikingly similar or opposite traits”. In this period’s fiction siblings were depicted as either strikingly similar in appearance, name, and personal characteristics or as diametrically opposite. Further, I will examine the differences in the appearance and personal characteristics of Ambrosio and Antonia. The difference that will be pointed out in their characteristics will serve as the basis for the link to the evocation of the sublime.

In *The Monk*, the counterparts of the incestuous relationship – Ambrosio and Antonia are far from similar as they are the stark opposites both in appearance and, as far as it could be judged, personality. Lewis (1996:15) describes Ambrosio as “a man of noble port and commanding presence.” Ambrosio has uncommonly handsome facial features, an “aquiline” (15) nose, and large black sparkling eyes. His complexion is “of a deep but clear brown; study and watching had entirely deprived his cheek of colour” (Lewis 1995:15). Lewis makes it clear that although tranquillity reigns his countenance, still it is only at the first glance, as there is “a certain severity in his look and manner that inspired universal awe, and few could sustain the glance of his eye at once fiery and penetrating” (15). On the contrary, Antonia’s complexion “though fair was not entirely without freckles” (10), her hair is light and eyes blue. Her overall stature and figure are petite and delicate. Nevertheless, her appearance still is described as “rather bewitching than beautiful” (10). Her facial features are not described as handsome as her brother’s but rather just lovely or sweet. “An arch smile, playing round her mouth, declared her to be possessed of liveliness” tinged with “timidity” (10). It must be noted that although these characters were far from alike both

Ambrosio and Antonia were powerfully attracted to each other (although in a different way). In addition to that, the adjective “bewitching” used by Lewis to describe Antonia, I would suggest, in a way makes her just slightly linked to Ambrosio.

Deprived of his parents Ambrosio is given into the care of his relatives, who in turn redirect him to the supervision of monks, who eventually raise him. Granted that Ambrosio’s nature drastically deviated from the qualities one living in a Convent should have possessed, the Abbot of Capuchins and the monks make sure to deprive him of them. As Lewis remarks Ambrosio’s nature is in no way timid “he was naturally enterprising, firm, and fearless: He had a Warrior’s heart, and He might have shone with splendour at the head of an Army” (172). However, his supervisors at the time repressed the virtues he possessed that were fit for the outside world but not for the monastic one. This transforms the inherently positive characteristics of Ambrosio into the negative ones making him a Monster. Lewis emphasises that in eliminating his natural virtues and “narrowing his sentiment” (172) the monks happened to exacerbate all the “vices” (172) of Ambrosio’s character. “He was suffered to be proud, vain, ambitious, and disdainful: He was jealous of his Equals, and despised all merit but his own” (172). The qualities that were imposed on him by his education and his natural passions were in a constant battle with each other. Before Ambrosio gets exposed to the sexual pleasure by Matilda these passions lay dormant and were repressed by his ardent monastic practices. But after the exposure to the pleasures of the outer world, his natural characteristics burst out and he no longer can repress them, which leads to his complete corruption, incest, and doom. In the case of Antonia, little emphasis is made on her personal characteristics besides the fact that she is, as have been already mentioned “possessed of liveliness” (10) tinged with “timidity” (10). We are also aware of her personal background and the fact that her every move is being supervised by her controlling mother, whom Antonia nevertheless adores. Lewis, I suggest, used Antonia to showcase the stark difference

in powers between a stronger and powerful male figure and a helpless, weak, and a rather clueless female, which is characteristic of Gothic fiction.

This opposition of stronger and weaker powers, or as I would call it, power struggle, yields the evocation of sublime following the theory of Burkean Sublime. Burke (2005) establishes the ideas of pain and death, so affecting that they cannot be divided from terror and, thus sublime. Pain contrary to pleasure is always inflicted by power in some way superior, and strength, violence, pain, terror, and sublime are all connected. So, in the case of Antonia and Ambrosio, Ambrosio undoubtedly is superior to Antonia in both knowledge and physical power and he, thus, serves as the inflictor of pain. I assert that the feeling produced by Antonia's attempts and struggle to win over and free herself from the superior Ambrosio serve as the evocation of terror and the feeling of sublime. The following examination of the core instances will serve as the exemplar of the constant power struggle between Antonia and Ambrosio, in which Ambrosio will always have the upper hand.

### **2.3. First encounter**

The first encounter of the characters takes place in the Capuchin Cathedral where Ambrosio receives auditors of "all the chief families in Madrid" (174) as their confessor. Antonia is smitten and completely occupied with the grief caused by the sudden severe illness of her mother Elvira. Upon seeing Antonia for the first time she momentarily piques Ambrosio's interest with "the melody of her voice, of that voice to which no Man ever listened without interest" (175). He proceeds to compliment the sweetness and harmony of her voice on several occasions. By this time Ambrosio is already tired of Matilda's explicit affections and the "heavenly" (175), virgin-like, innocent countenance, voice, and manner of Antonia make a major impact on the monk.

Even after returning to his cell, Ambrosio cannot stop thinking about Antonia who excited in him "a thousand new emotions" (176) that "were totally different from those

inspired by Matilda” (176). It is important to note that in the very beginning the nature of Ambrosio’s feeling is not anything close to lust, sexual desire, or passion. Initially, the monk finds himself not experiencing any “provocation of lust” (176). On the contrary, what he feels is “tenderness, admiration, and respect” (176). Antonia has an impact on Ambrosio so major that now even his thoughts become “gentle, sad, and soothing” (176). This, however, will not last long.

Lewis calls the emotions that Ambrosio experiences at this moment “romantic enthusiasm” (176). To me personally, the choice of such words by Lewis sounds like mockery. Because, if we consider the several transgressions that Ambrosio has done by this time, and the animalistic thoughts that occupied Ambrosio’s mind when he was in pursuit of Matilda, the word “romantic” could not sound anything but ironic in application to the monk. In his cell, Ambrosio proceeds to praise Antonia’s countenance and voice and to lament his fate and inability to make Antonia his wife. He complements Antonia’s modest grace and criticizes Matilda’s corruptness:

Happy Man, who is destined to possess the heart of that lovely Girl! What delicacy in her features! What elegance in her form! How enchanting was the timid innocence of her eyes, and how different from the wanton expression, the wild luxurious fire which sparkles in Matilda’s! (Lewis 1996:176)

From the abundance of exclamations Ambrosio produces next we can conclude that the emotions that he is experiencing are truly strong. “To sit for days, for years listening to that gentle voice! To acquire the right of obliging her, and hear the artless expressions of her gratitude! To watch the emotions of her spotless heart!” (177) The monk is even ready to sacrifice everything to pay the greatest price possible just to be able to openly express his affections. He envies whoever will be lucky enough to become Antonia’s husband “Yes; If there is perfect bliss on earth, ’tis his lot alone, who becomes that Angel’s Husband” (177).

In the end, Ambrosio concludes with remorse that there is no hope for him. He realizes that due to his occupation the marriage would never be possible for him. And even now, still his mind is not occupied with any real lust, but his thoughts already start wandering

in this direction, when he suggests that “to seduce such innocence...would be a crime, blacker than yet the world ever witnessed!” (177). Ambrosio even goes to such great lengths as to reassure Antonia that her chastity will by any means remain intact “Fear not, lovely Girl! Your virtue runs no risque from me. Not for Indies would I make that gentle bosom know the tortures of remorse” (177).

From the exploration of this particular instance in the novel we can conclude that already by the end of Ambrosio’s rumination his thoughts started to take a completely different turn in comparison to the beginning. At the beginning of his rumination, Ambrosio’s thoughts were occupied with the countenance of Antonia, her “heavenly” voice, her modesty. Ambrosio enjoys the new emotions Antonia has inflicted on him in comparison to the ones that were caused by Matilda. But when the monk realizes that Antonia would never be his, such words as “seduce,” “torture,” “remorse,” “risque,” “crime” (177) start to emerge. And even though the monk reassures Antonia, the reader, and even more so himself that he would never cause any harm to Antonia, we perceive this as highly doubtful.

This doubt is reinforced by the two predictions made at the beginning of the novel. Namely, the Gypsy fortune teller who reads Antonia’s hand and predicts her unfortunate fate: “But Alas! This line discovers, that destruction o’er you hovers; Lustful Man and crafty Devil will combine to work your evil; and from earth by sorrows driven, soon your Soul must speed to heaven” (29). And Lorenzo’s dream in which Antonia is snatched by the Monster from Lorenzo’s hands, and who “springing with her upon the Altar, tortured her with his odious caresses” (22). The dream ends with the Monster taking Antonia to hell together with him.

Taking all this into consideration, I would argue that at this point in the novel the reader may start to experience some sort of terror, as we are not sure whether the future events will necessarily take such a dreadful turn, but we still fearfully anticipate such

possibility. Although slight, the possibility of danger based on all things mentioned is still present. At this point in the novel, the reader is not yet aware that this relationship is incestuous, as it is only revealed at the very end of the novel. However, the anticipation of the character's doom could still be suspected already at this point. The terror is concerned with obliqueness, mystery, the possibility of danger and ultimately leads to sublime. Thus, I would claim that this instance in the novel is capable of producing the feeling of sublime in the reader. And this sublime stems from terror more than anything in this case.

#### **2.4. The point of no return**

Admitted to Antonia's house as Elvira's confessor Ambrosio seizes this opportunity, and enjoys its possibilities fully, paying their house many visits. His visits only serve to feed his affections towards Antonia and these affections start to transform into something less sentimental. At first, Ambrosio only entertains the idea of becoming Antonia's friend but "the innocent familiarity with which She [treats] him, [encourage] his desires" (186). So, after a while, as was feared, the monk starts to pursue Antonia to make her his lover. Having "grown used to her modesty" (186), he tries to seduce Antonia, however, due to the limitedness of her knowledge concerning physical pleasures, her excellent morals developed by her mother's care, and her innocent nature, it turns out to be a difficult task. And even though Ambrosio is aware of how "highly criminal" (187) his attempts are, his passion by this moment is already far too strong, to let the idea go. Further, I will examine the scene that, in my opinion, serves as the turning point in the relationship of the monk and his long-lost sister.

The words that Lewis employs in this scene already imply Ambrosio's changing attitude towards Antonia. In this scene, Ambrosio approaches Antonia from behind when she is sitting on the sofa alone and startles her: "she [starts], and [welcomes] him with a look of pleasure" (188). When she tries to conduct the monk to the sitting room, he takes her hand

“by gentle violence” (188) obliges her to stay where they are. Such words as “violence” and the first mention of fear, when Antonia “[starts]” because of Ambrosio’s sudden approach, I suggest, direct the thoughts of the reader in a certain way. They create an atmosphere of uneasiness as we begin fearing the possibility of danger being inflicted on Antonia.

This fear is even more so reinforced by Antonia’s complete obliviousness towards Ambrosio’s approach that rapidly turns into a rather suggestive and explicit one. Her cluelessness majorly stems from Elvira’s excessive desire to guard her daughter against evil and the exposure to earthly pleasures that are not, in her opinion, suited for a young girl. Antonia’s mother even goes to such great lengths as to make an edited copy of the Bible for her daughter, as even such holy text as the Bible contains the passages that are straightforward about sex. I would like to note that a certain pattern could be traced here that relates to Lewis’s apparent criticism of the religious system and Church. Both siblings’ desires and knowledge were repressed by, in the case with Ambrosio the monks, and, in the case with Antonia, her mother. If we take into consideration how similar both Ambrosio’s and Antonia’s upbringing were with their many limitations connected to religion, we may consider this upbringing to be the ultimate root of the fall of both characters. The limitation of knowledge in Antonia’s case led to her ignorance and vulnerability. It also made her an easier target for Ambrosio’s seduction. And the repression of Ambrosio’s sexual drive and passions turned him into an uncontrollable sexual maniac. With the help of this storyline, Lewis proves how dangerously wrong the religious system was at the time.

The discovery that proves Antonia’s ignorance does not stop Ambrosio from continuing his seduction. He starts by enquiring whether Antonia is aware of the concept of love. The manner in which he does it: “tell me, my lovely Daughter,” “answer me with sincerity: Forget my habit, and consider me only as a Friend” (189) produces, I suggest, fear and even hints of terror as we feel where his conduct may lead to. We dread the possibility

of the unfortunate heroine succumbing to the monk's criminal advances that she is so unaware of but alas we cannot possibly warn or help her. Antonia misinterprets the question of the monk as the concept of sexual love, in contrast to platonic love, is, indeed, unknown to her: "Oh! yes, undoubtedly; I have loved many, many People" (189). Ambrosio realises this misinterpretation but still tries to investigate whether Antonia has experienced any serious feelings towards someone. He effectively and with much vigour pushes her to the answer that he so wanted but still was surprised to receive. He again very passionately, evidently in agreement with his nature, describes the love that he so wishes Antonia felt for him:

The love of which I speak can be felt only for one... Have you seen no Man, Antonia, whom though never seen before, you seemed long to have sought? Whose form, though a Stranger's, was familiar to your eyes? The sound of whose voice soothed you, pleased you, penetrated to your very soul? In whose presence you rejoiced, for whose absence you lamented? With whom your heart seemed to expand, and in whose bosom with confidence unbounded you reposed the cares of your own? Have you not felt all this, Antonia? (Lewis 1996:190)

In her obliviousness, Antonia proclaims her "love" to Ambrosio, but she still does not mean this "love" to be anything more than just the platonic, friendly feeling. This moment serves as the point of no return for both characters, as the monk interprets Antonia's confession in his own way and his passions for the heroine are getting excited with even greater force. Overwhelmed with joy, Ambrosio clasps the heroine into his hands. And after another confirmation of Antonia's "feelings," he can no longer contain himself. It is for the first time that we see his desires being fully expressed when "wild with desire...he [fastens] his lips greedily upon hers, [sucks] in her pure delicious breath, [violates] with his bold hand the treasures of her bosom, and [wounds] around him her soft and yielding limbs" (190). Lewis applies such words as "wild," "greedily," "[violates]," "bold" (190) to Ambrosio and "pure," "delicious," "treasures," "soft," "yielding" to Antonia. The contrast in the mentioned words showcases the stark difference in powers of Antonia (weak) and Ambrosio (strong). At first, startled and then desperate to escape Antonia pleads the monk to let go, but overcome with



lust Ambrosio proceeds to “take still greater liberties” (190). “Antonia [prays], [weeps], and [struggles]: Terrified to the extreme, though at what She knew not, She [exerts] all her strength to repulse the Friar...” (191). This instance marks the first emergence of the actual power struggle between these characters. Such words as “[prays],” “[weeps],” “[struggles],” “terrified” emerge in this particular scene for the first time in connection to the theme of incest in the novel. These words used to describe the power struggle of the characters, in which Ambrosio overpowers Antonia also, in my opinion, reinforce the feeling of terror that is created by the constant threat of Ambrosio corrupting the heroine. Thus, this instance is capable of the production of the sublime in the reader based on the power struggle of the characters and some hints of terror.

## **2.5. The dreaded outcome**

Finally, I will examine the last instance concerned with the theme of incest in the novel. It takes place in the dungeon, in the private vault where Antonia is buried after Ambrosio poisons her with Matilda’s opiate. In this scene, Ambrosio comes there to at last take possession of the heroine. Matilda’s plan with poison has worked and Ambrosio is assured of the success of his endeavor. Antonia is considered dead by the outer world and no one, it seems, can help her as even Elvira, Antonia’s only support falls victim to the monk’s evil design.

The setting of this scene is typically Gothic. “The melancholy shriek of the screech-Owl,” the wind rattling...loudly against the windows,” “the faint notes of the chaunt of Choristers”. (275) All such sounds create an apprehensive, eerie atmosphere. After entering into the vault of St. Claire, Ambrosio treads “the long passages” “guided by his Lamp” and descends into Antonia’s vault where she lays beside “three putrid half-corrupted Bodies”. (275) This description produces the image of the dimly lit narrow passageway through the vault and the image of disgusting decaying bodies. It all the more intensifies, I would say,

the uneasy, horrid atmosphere. While waiting for Antonia to awaken, Ambrosio thinks back on the murder of Elvira and this memory reinforces his “resolution to destroy Antonia’s honour” (275). The thoughts and exclamations that he produces in this scene are so very different from the ones he produced in the first one we examined. Now, he accuses Antonia of making him commit a murder and selling himself to “eternal tortures” (275) calls her a “Fatal Beauty!” (275) and “The produce of [his] guilt” (275). Lewis insists that Ambrosio’s fondness of Antonia, at this point, has already transformed into nothing but lust, and the lust in turn has transformed into madness. That is why it did not matter for the monk where or how was he to enjoy Antonia: “He longed for the possession of her person; and even the gloom of the vault, the surrounding silence, and the resistance which He expected from her, seemed to give a fresh edge to his fierce and unbridled desires” (276).

At last, Antonia awakens, and the monk begins the execution of his desire. He instantly starts “folding her in his arms, and covering her bosom with kisses...,” “...and [permits] himself the most indecent liberties” (277). Antonia constantly struggles against his embrace and tries to free herself but to no avail. The setting in which this scene takes place also appears to “[freeze her] with horror!” (277). “Resistance is unavailing...,” “I possess you here alone,” “You are absolutely in my power” (277) are the phrases that follow in sequence and that Ambrosio uses to ensure himself superior to Antonia, not only physically, but also verbally. These threats reinforce his superiority in the eyes of the reader too. Ambrosio intensifies the already strong feeling of disgust by the erotic descriptions of Antonia’s body: “Can I relinquish these limbs so white, so soft, so delicate; These swelling breasts, round, full, and elastic!” (278) Antonia resolves to shrieks, cries, and pleas but this does not move Ambrosio and only excites him even more. He throws himself on Antonia who is, by this time, “almost lifeless with terror, and faint with struggling” (288). Lewis describes the extremely rude and violent manner in which Ambrosio treats Antonia, leaving

the bruises on her body, and calls him “an unprincipled Barbarian” (279). In the end, Lewis employs the terms “Master” and “prey” (279) to describe Ambrosio and Antonia, respectively. They consolidate the status of the characters, according to which, Ambrosio is unanimously considered much superior to Antonia. They also signify his ultimate victory over her.

This instance compared to the two previous ones is the most abundant in the description of violence, abuse, and the power struggle between the characters. It also features the mentions of such words as “terror,” “lust,” “desire,” “horror,” “fear,” “resistance” which in addition to the oppressive setting in the scene create an atmosphere filled with explicit horror. I would suggest that this episode has more to do with horror than terror. Terror is the notion that has to do with obscurity. But the explicit actions, exclamations of the monk, and the rape itself cannot be anything further from obscurity. The first two scenes examined, provided the reader with the possible danger that could be imposed on Antonia, but we could not be sure whether such dire consequences would follow, there was still hope, and thus some extent of terror and sublime. It could be argued that prior to the rape there still was the possibility of Antonia being rescued by, for instance, Lorenzo but it was faint. In addition to that, the senses of the reader were likely too strongly overwhelmed by the momentary danger Antonia got exposed to, so the terror was rather substituted by horror. However, the power struggle that is, according to Burkean Sublime, also capable of causing sublime, could have provided the reader with this feeling, at least to some extent.

The horror created by the scene examined is even more reinforced by the last scene of the novel in which Ambrosio meets Lucifer. And in which we discover the true incestuous nature of his desire and ultimate rape.

## 2.6. Distress of others, pleasure, and Sublime

Burke (2005) implies that people generally experience a big degree of delight mixed with uneasiness in the misfortunes and pains of others. This delight is even more emphasised if the sufferer happens to be a person of some grandeur or virtue. Burke (2005:119) asserts that the human nature was devised in such a way that “we should be united by the bond of sympathy” and this sympathy to the grievances of others should cause some sort of delight intertwined with apprehension in almost everyone. Burke (2005) effectively justifies that if the feeling caused by the misfortunes of others was simply painful, we would have avoided coming in contact with them. And this delight is the reason that hinders us from doing so as “the pain we feel prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer” (Burke 2005:119). If the causes of danger press too nearly, they cannot be delightful they are just terrible. But these same causes are delightful when we have only the idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances. Whatever excites this delight, according to Burke (2005), is concerned with sublime. If we apply this theory to *The Monk*, then it can be argued that the reader also experiences the delight mixed with uneasiness when coming in the contact with the theme of incest in the novel. I suggest that the reader takes pity in Antonia’s fate and hopes until the very last moment that she will evade it, that she will escape the monk and survive. And this compassion and dread of the inevitable mixed with hope creates the evocation of sublime in the reader.

After examining the given instances from *The Monk*, I would conclude that they have little to do with terror. As the evocation of the sublime is primarily rooted in the terror it may be suggested at first glance that the theme of incest in this novel is not linked to the arousal of the sublime.

If we take into consideration the two secondary causes of sublime, namely, the distress of others and power struggle, then it could be suggested that the theme of incest has to do with the evocation of this sentiment, at least to some point. Perhaps, the power of this

kind of sublime is not that apparent or strong, as it would have been, if the narrative had more to do with terror and less with horror, as horror generally overpowers the senses and leaves little room for such feeling as sublime.

By including the theme of incest in his novel Lewis pursued the goal of criticizing the existent at that age patriarchal model of the society. So, I would argue that it was more important for him to cause horror rather than terror in the minds of his audience at the time. The last scene in the dungeon is a great example of that.

Although it was not his intention to produce the feeling of sublime in the reader with the inclusion of the incest trope of his novel Lewis still managed to do that. Thus, I assert that the theme of incest in Lewis's Gothic novel *The Monk* is still, to some extent, capable of producing the feeling of sublime in the reader.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to explore the possibility of establishing a link between the theme of incest in the Gothic novel *The Monk* by Lewis and the evocation of the sublime in the reader. Thus, the research question of this paper was formulated as follows: is there a link between the theme of incest in *The Monk* and the evocation of the sublime in the reader?

The first chapter of this paper dealt with the overview of the period Gothic fiction emerged in, the Gothic fiction, and the theme of incest in the novel *The Monk* by Lewis. In the second chapter, the drawing of correlations between the incestuous instances in the novel and the possible evocation of the feeling of sublime in the reader upon encountering such instances in the novel was conducted.

As the result of the examination conducted in the second chapter of this thesis, it was concluded that the theme of incest in *The Monk* has to do with the evocation of the sublime, however, only to some extent. Thus, the research question of this paper could be answered

as follows: there is a link between the theme of incest and the evocation of the sublime in the reader in *The Monk* by Lewis.

I would suggest that this thesis serves as the addition to the series of works that have already been written on the topic of the sublime, incest in Gothic fiction, or Lewis's novel *The Monk*. It signifies the returning interest that starts to again be taken in Gothic fiction and its many aspects and issues.

By compiling this paper I would want to encourage the scholars to take better notice of Gothic fiction and its many peculiarities and to especially further research the ways in which the feeling of sublime is evoked in Gothic fiction.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Anna-Liza Veresenko**

**Sublime and the Theme of Incest in the Gothic novel *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis.  
Sublime ja intsesti teema M. G. Lewis gooti romaanis „Munk“.**

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 31

Annotatsioon:

Selliste vastuoluliste teemade nagu verevalam või vägivaldne vägistamine mõnevõrra universaalse käsitlemise tõttu peaks ilukirjanduses selliste teemadega kokku puutudes iga inimese reaktsioon või emotsioon olema ühtlaselt taunitav või õudne. Selle kirjutise eesmärk oli luua seos veetleva õuduse või üleva tunde vahel M. G. Lewise gooti romaanis „Munk“ intsesti teemaga. Seejärel sõnastati selle artikli uurimisküsimus järgmiselt: kas gooti romaanis „Munk“ on intsesti teema ja lugejas üleva esilekutsumise seos?

Selle artikli esimene peatükk keskendub põhilise teabe edastamisele, mis on seotud ennekõike gooti ilukirjanduse populaarsust suurendanud romantismiperioodiga. Seejärel kirjeldatakse gooti ilukirjanduse ühe kesksema tropi peamist omadust, nimelt intsesti teemat. Ja lõpuks kirjeldatakse selles intsesti teema peamisi jooni ja tutvustatakse Burke Sublime'i mõiste määratlust.

Teine peatükk käsitleb seose määramist romaani intsesti teema ja Burke Sublime'i vahel. Selle seose kindlakstegemiseks viidi läbi romaani kolme fragmendi lähedane lugemine, kus kõige olulisem on intsesti mainimine. Ja leide tõlgendati E. Burke'i Sublime'i teooria abil vastavalt töö eesmärgile.

Burke'i filosoofiline uuring „A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful“ ja Lewise romaan „Munk“ on peamised allikad, millele see töö tugineb. Romaani kirjutamise perioodi, žanri ja selles kasutatud intsesti teema iseärasuste paremaks mõistmiseks oli pöördutud ka teiste allikate poole.

Selle teesi peamiseks tulemuseks sai seose loomine Gooti romaani „Munk“ intsesti teema ja Burke'i sublime esilekutsumise vahel lugejas.

Märksõnad:

Inglise keel ja kirjandus, inglise kirjandus, Gooti romaan, intsesti teema kirjanduses, Burke'i sublime.

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