Exploring the Perverse Body: 
The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer
Revenge. Obsession. Desire. Death. These are but a few of the dark and forbidding foundations pervading the genre of the Gothic horror. Though they arrive in different disguises and embodiments within the text, each awful trope is explored in ghastly detail by both characters and readers of Gothic stories. In Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis’ *The Monk*, the body centers as the vehicle through which these disturbing issues are brought forth and examined. The body in its various roles and formations serves as a literary device of exploration, being a significant literal and figurative entity. Each novel is a fantastic and overwhelming passage into the darker elements of life, culminating in scenes of bodily destruction and devastation.

Through the threatening narratives of horror, fascination, and supernatural sublimity, the characters of *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *The Monk* undertake journeys of obsessive desire, placing the reader in the position of judge and jury to actions of psychological extremes. These novels are not alone in their field of Gothic revenge and religious ravings, however, as they are in company with works by various novelists such as Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Horace Walpole. Each of these authors explores a literary world full of wonders and intrigue designed to draw the reader into an escape of both fantasy and nightmare. The joy, anger, and other emotions experienced by the reader at the expense of the characters in novels like *The Monk* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* carry with them a deeper sentiment about the role of the body in literature, specifically in the genre of the Gothic. To what purpose does a reader enter into stories of incest, murder, superstition, love, and betrayal? How does the “Other” function for both the characters and readers of these novels of immense intricacy? There is far more than life and death at stake as body, mind, and soul are wrenched apart in exhaustive efforts to discover truth and reason.
The Monk, published in 1796, layers one act of insanity and crime upon another before reaching its climax in a shockingly disturbing frenzy of mob revenge, sadistic and masochistic behaviorisms, and the figure of disembodiment. Death arrives as the only satisfactory ending for a number of characters as deceptions and truths are brought into reader and character consciousness. Twenty-four years later in 1820, Melmoth the Wanderer was published, asking readers to once more enter a world of passion and secrecy. Though violence and deception thrive in Maturin’s text, the story of Melmoth does not reach the same level of sensationalism prevalent in The Monk, retaining a shroud of mystery that even the conclusion does not dismantle for either the characters or the readers. The inherent mystery of Melmoth the Wanderer places the reader’s imagination in a constant state of suspense, never enabling a full entrance into the tangled and incomplete stories.

Lewis and Maturin approach the Gothic from varying depths of terror; both novelists, however, focus upon the essence of the body using the technique of stories-within-stories narration, with frequently shifting central characters and plots. This technique emphasizes a requisite loss of self for both character and reader to inhabit and enact these stories, as the texts imply paradoxically that only through the confusion and obscurity of issues like religion, desire, and notoriety can come clarity. The reader is implicated in the text and becomes Other to himself/herself during the psychological (or psychoanalytic) investigation invited by the act of reading these works. In Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative, Peter Brooks defines the body as “both ourselves and other, and as such the object of emotions from love to disgust. To psychoanalysis, it is the object of primary narcissism” (1). The delicate balance of self and other as it applies to the body is delivered to the reader through the aforementioned narrative techniques. As “the object of emotions,” the body functions in The Monk and
Melmoth the Wanderer as the site of gender distinction as it affects the role of torture and pain in determining self. Torture and pain thus act as catalysts of bodily creation and comprehension in these Gothic novels, moving from the male body to female body and back, through the emotions which emerge from love, religion, betrayal, and violence.

Violence becomes a currency of power in the texts as it dominates the body’s pleasure and pain. The orthodox response to violence and perversion in texts is punishment, enacted in various methods depending upon the intensity of deviance. Michel Foucault explores pain, pleasure, and perversion in The History of Sexuality:

The implantation of perversions is an instrument effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct. And accompanying this encroachment of powers, scattered sexualities rigidified, became stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice. (48)

The categorization of desire implicates the reader in the perverse sexual acts of the texts. The reader vicariously experiences the pleasure of “illicit” desire and the satisfaction of seeing the punishment. The “implantation of perversions” defines and identifies the reader’s knowledge of the body and desire, solidifying the reader’s ability to be implicated in and by the text. Violence is aroused in both the characters and reader by the perversion of desire as it is categorized and acknowledged as transgressive; pleasure and pain are experienced at different intervals to establish the body as the site of power.

Violence figures importantly in The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer, pushing characters to the brink of bodily limits and thus setting up the body as the place from which all significance stems. In many cases, the violence exhibited is directly affected by relationships between the opposing male and female figures of the story. In “The Sacrificial Crisis,” René Girard refers to sacrificial violence as “an agent of purification” (267). He continues, “If the art
of tragedy is to be defined in a single phrase, we might do worse than to call attention to one of its most characteristic traits: the opposition of symmetrical elements” (269). It is in this opposition that the core of a reader’s revenge fantasy can be found and fulfilled; the binary oppositions of good and evil, man and woman, and many more form the heart of the Gothic novel’s exploration of the darker sides of human nature. Furthermore, these oppositions represent the differences between the male and female body as they respond to pain, torture, and desire. The clarification of consciousness written of by Girard is not necessarily the process of expunging the “bad” halves of symmetrical elements but rather recognizing the existence of oppositions. In a perversion of purification, the body becomes a template or metaphor for the mind.

The “opposition of symmetrical elements” can be easily identified within the genre of the Gothic due to the graphic nature of violence within the texts. With each episode of violence comes the separation of the body versus mind, as well as tormenter versus tortured, among many other oppositions. In the act of reading the novels of Lewis or Maturin, the reader is also placed into an opposition of fantasy versus reality. In the novels, the body is figured as something subject to terrifying amounts of pain, each moment of hardship adding to the opposition of the body itself to self and other. Elaine Scarry’s The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World specifically explores the issue of how the physical affects the psychological aspects of the body. She writes, “Even though it [pain] occurs within oneself, it is at once identified as ‘not oneself,’ ‘not me,’ as something so alien that it must right now be gotten rid of” (52). Therefore pain is intimately related to the body in a puzzling contrast of within and without; though the pain comes from the external world, it is reacted to internally and yet pushed away at the same time. As the characters in these novels experience pain,
readers respond in simultaneous and ambivalent acts of reading and comprehending. Pain and torture serve as vehicles through which the bodies of the characters are emphasized and differentiated from one another.

In cases of extreme pressure, the mind breaks down nearly completely and all that is left of a character is a shattered body. As characters are imprisoned, lied to, betrayed, and physically punished, bodies bear the psychological pain of the text. Though a strict line is drawn between the constitution of the male and female body, neither is immune to the extreme circumstances of bodily terror located within the Gothic genre. Characters of all ages, religions, and backgrounds risk facing desire, obsession, revenge, and even death. While the male and female bodies are both vulnerable, The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer contain especially striking instances of the perversion of the female mind and body. The female’s ability to carry and bear children strongly affects the depiction of the female body throughout these texts, as does the female’s subordinate societal position. According to Laura Mulvey in Visual and Other Pleasures,

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (15)

From this point of view, the female body is little more than a vessel for male desires, perversions, and inflictions of pain and suffering; furthermore, the male body derives a certain amount of pleasure from the infliction of pain upon the female. As “a signifier for the male other,” the female body as characterized by The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer is not quite complete. Instead, the female body in these texts is recognized as possessed, subject to the whims of the dominating male characters.
According to Michel de Certeau in “Discourse Disturbed,” the possessed woman is an illusion in society. She has no bodily power of her own, only that power given to her through examinations by the men of society, such as judges, exorcists, or religious leaders. A woman cannot speak or write on her own, and only gains these abilities through possession, which changes her body into a vessel of acceptance and a mirror of the outside world. In the mirror, the image is not that of the woman but what the woman is not. The possessed woman fits wholly into the category of the “other” and de Certeau suggests that she cannot be understood until the idea of the “other” is understood. And the “other” is all that is estranged from society; it is unnatural and unknown, a marker of societal oppositions and cultural schisms.

The possessed female body does not have the necessary tools for understanding the foreign elements which it contains, leaving the true language of the possessed an unsolvable mystery; the readers of The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer, however, are privy to the language of female bodies as represented by Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin. The female characters of these novels, subjected to pain, possession, and more, are vividly described and given voices reaching out for listeners. The words of the women direct the reader’s attention to the significance of the body in opposition to both itself and the external world, exploring the effects of desire, revenge, obsession, and more through physical and mental reactions to hardship.

Matthew Lewis wrote The Monk when he was only nineteen years old. Working both with and against the Gothic genre, The Monk became extremely popular upon publication. Its popularity, due to its sinister and radical themes, was both negative and positive, as various social factions either condemned or condoned the shocking novel. Beyond sensitive questions of religious authority and social propriety, Lewis’ novel brought with it an intricate vision of the
body as a struggling, oppositional entity worthy of discussion. The body in Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* undergoes multiple transformations, leading the reader on a wild crusade of darkness and perversion. The schism between acceptable and unacceptable types of desire is brought to the foreground in figures of embodiment as various characters are possessed, punished, and peculiarly affected.

Ambrosio, the title character, is the most significantly affected male of the story, undertaking a journey of terror and destruction that ultimately leaves his body in a horrific state of tortured madness. Antonia, his half-sister, is led from a life of innocence and purity to one in which she is her half-brother’s voyeuristic obsession, kidnapped and raped before being ultimately murdered with her rescuers but moments away. Though both Ambrosio and Antonia lose their life by the end of the novel, ending the corruption of their bodies, Agnes undergoes the most horrific imprisonment and bodily transformation; Agnes, though she survives the punishment inflicted upon her body, suffers the death of her infant. Each of these characters is used by Lewis to portray a different aspect of the body as it identifies the themes of desire, revenge, obsession, and death to the reader. Pain and suffering run rampant throughout the interlocked narratives of Ambrosio, Antonia, and Agnes, drawing the reader into a world where the body functions as the center of life and death.

Ambrosio’s story is one of temptation and fallen grace. Lured by the devil, he falls prey to unquenchable desires and frightening needs. The beginning of Ambrosio’s end comes when he is shown the breast of Matilda: “A sensation till then unknown filled his heart with a mixture of anxiety and delight: A raging fire shot through every limb; The blood boiled in his veins, and a thousand wild wishes bewildered his imagination” (65). This moment of seduction marks the point in the narrative when Ambrosio’s body becomes no longer his own; his mind, body, and
soul now belong to the devil, regardless of his momentary ignorance of Matilda’s true identity. Though his relationship with Matilda later takes on a more physically intimate role, the significantly decisive moment of Ambrosio’s destruction is characterized by sight rather than touch. Ambrosio’s attachment to sight reinforces Mulvey’s notion of the woman as an object of fetishism and obsession. It is the vision before him that brings Ambrosio the bodily sensations of “anxiety,” “delight,” and “raging fire.” Pain and pleasure are in strong opposition as desire wages a war with religious habits within the mind and body of Ambrosio.

Lewis’ description of the “mixture of anxiety and delight” serves to distinguish the body as a source of multiple emotions. Furthermore, in this first instance of temptation, Ambrosio is fully confused and “bewildered.” His body is moving beyond his control and into the territory of the “other.” The “other” is not only completely unknown but also deviant. As the “blood boiled in his veins,” Ambrosio’s mind is aware of his body’s change, and yet unable – or perhaps unwilling – to stop this transformation. In The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle, Kelly Hurley explores the classifications of degenerative deviance: “Deviant sexuality could be classed as ‘degenerate’ in four senses: its recapitulation of the less evolved sexuality of so-called primitives, its hereditability, its deteriorative effect on mind and body, and its general corrupting influence on public morals” (71). The third and fourth signs of deviance are especially applicable to Ambrosio as he is slowly corrupted within the supposedly sacred walls of the monastery.

The confusion caused by conflicting desires continues to grow for Ambrosio throughout the narrative. By the time he is attempting to seduce Antonia, his feelings have reached a peak of despair. For Ambrosio, “the impulse of desire, the stings of disappointment, the shame of detection, and the fear of being publicly unmasked, rendered his bosom a scene of the most
horrible confusion” (264-265). His mind and body deteriorate as he ponders the reaction of the public if they knew his secrets. Lewis’ depiction of Ambrosio’s tormented “bosom” brings a bodily image to the mind of the reader as a reminder that Ambrosio’s downfall is not merely psychological. Though many of his symptoms appear to reflect deeper emotions, they physically alter both the interior and exterior makeup of his body. At this point in the narrative, Ambrosio has not fully surrendered to the lure of the devil, but neither has he strongly attempted to fight the forces of temptation. The remorse and shame he feels is not in response to his actions but rather in response to the reactions of his perceived public; living on the fear of exposure rather than genuine virtue has placed Ambrosio into a category of beings unable to be restored to good. The only conclusion available for Ambrosio is thus death, which is delivered in a most ghastly and gruesome manner.

On the last page of The Monk, after at least five pages of torture, helplessness, and pain, Ambrosio’s life comes to an end. Sparing no details, Lewis writes, “Blind, maimed, helpless, and despairing, venting his rage in blasphemy and curses, execrating his existence, yet dreading the arrival of death destined to yield him up to greater torments, six miserable days did the Villain languish…” (442). Ambrosio experiences the pain described by Scarry, attempting to distance himself from the physical elements of his torture through language. The ultimate failure, however, is that of language, and as Ambrosio becomes unable to successfully use language, he simultaneously loses the power of his body. His final “blasphemies and curses” demonstrate his collapse into incoherence and inevitable death as the psychological effects of pain override the physical.

At last the Monk dies and with his death comes the end of the novel; due to the privileging of the male body, the extinction of Ambrosio’s body allows the body of the text to
come to an end in a way that the conclusions of the other characters do not. The privileged masculine realm of the text makes Ambrosio’s body the governing trope in which the female body can only bear meaning; the conclusions of the females thus transmit rather than create meaning. While Antonia dies, she is destined for Heaven, and thus her bodily extinction is incapable of carrying the same message as the death of Ambrosio; Agnes’ fate is similarly painless in comparison to the eternal damnation of the Monk.

As sight was the first sense to lure Ambrosio into the darkness, so is it the first sense mentioned in his final punishment. Broken bones and other bodily infractions are meaningless next to the loss of vision inflicted upon the character, leaving the reader and not Ambrosio with the “sight” ultimately granted by the end of the text. Torture and pain are carefully constructed alongside anger and blasphemy so that Ambrosio remains the villain throughout the end, rather than being transformed into a victim of the devil. In “Virtue and Terror: The Monk,” Peter Brooks writes, “What does lie hidden there is always the product of erotic drives gone berserk, perverted and deviated through denial, a figuration of the price of repression” (259). Repression has led Ambrosio to the figure of the devil and then to death, with perverted desire, obsession, voyeurism, rape, and murder filling in the spaces between. While the notion of repression and denial could relieve Ambrosio of full responsibility for his actions, his inability to claim that repression places complete responsibility on himself. Ambrosio’s continual conflict with life and death does not leave his body even upon torture; the utter destruction of his body, in which the torture of mind and body is marked upon the body, is thus the only available option for Lewis to end his text. Ambrosio’s body, shown in various states of devastation, vividly depicts the unrelenting affect of conflict: only in death, when the body loses all vestiges of power, does the cycle end.
In opposition to the ruined Ambrosio is Antonia, the embodiment of a woman as object. Antonia is a fairly flat character, acted upon by outside forces rather than acting out her own desires and needs. She is the fetishized woman, becoming the object of Ambrosio’s domineering male gaze and obsession. Young, superstitious, and innocent, Antonia struggles to live up to the expectations of society. As the recipient of deviant desire, Antonia’s body is depicted as pure and lovely rather than detestable and villainous; once she has been violated by the physical advances of Ambrosio, however, Antonia’s body must come to an end to prevent the dissolution of her mind.

The rape of Antonia is brutal and disturbing as she loses dominion over her body. As she vainly struggles against the advances of Ambrosio, he “wounded and bruised her tender limbs. Heedless of her tears, cries and entreaties, He gradually made himself Master of her person, and desisted not from his prey till He had accomplished his crime and the dishonour of Antonia” (383-384). According to Laura Mulvey, Antonia, who was formerly a victim of fetishistic scopophilia, becomes a victim of sadism in this moment of bodily transformation. Mulvey writes, “Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end” (22). Antonia is changed and defeated in the hectic timeframe of Lewis’ multi-faceted climax. Her story is hurried by the external circumstances of the narrative, as characters search to separate the truth from the many lies that pervade the text. Though Antonia is obviously mentally distressed, as evidenced from her “tears, cries and entreaties,” the primary focus of her rape is in the reaction of her body to Ambrosio’s brutality.

Bruised and battered, Antonia’s body has been beaten and destroyed. The physical pain does not end on the outside, however, as the penetration of Ambrosio goes both literally and
figuratively deeper. Imprisoned in a world of pain, Antonia’s body becomes that of the “other,”
a double created through defense. Ambrosio’s deviance affects Antonia in the same way that it
destroys his own body: the mind and body deteriorate as the only possible outcomes of such
horror. Ambrosio’s body is paralleled with Antonia’s as each become separate entities of
themselves; Ambrosio becomes the dominant force in Antonia’s body and yet at the same time
Antonia becomes the dominant force within the mind of Ambrosio. The addition of incest to
the plot deepens the mutability of the bodies of these two characters as they become inextricably
intertwined. The self is lost and the “other” settles in, forcing Antonia out of life and into death.

Antonia’s body is pushed completely over the edge into the male patriarchy of power,
being imposed upon by the obsessions and desires of Ambrosio. In her final moments, Antonia
is reunited with her love, only to tell him that “had She still been undefiled She might have
lamented the loss of life; But that deprived of honour and branded with shame, Death was to her
a blessing: She could not have been his Wife, and that hope being denied her, She resigned
herself to the Grave” (392). The horror of Antonia’s rape is further duplicated in death by the
method of penetrating in the fatal stab wounds. In each instance, her body is invaded physically
by the psychologically deviant desire of Ambrosio, leaving her with no choice but to surrender
happily to death. Death, at least, could do her no more harm, as she was surely destined for
heaven.

The final moment before Antonia’s death assures the reader of her ascent to heaven, as
her eyes “sparkled with celestial brightness” and “her frame seemed to have received new
strength and animation” (393). Though she has been little more than an object for men during
her life, her death brings new freedom to the body of Antonia. Antonia is assuredly destined for
ascension to the patriarchal and Christian vision of Heaven and yet the emphasis of her
ascension is on her uniquely achieved agency. Her sparkling eyes depict an agency and control in death that the male characters lack, thus creating a triumph over the patriarchy faced during her life. She is no longer a possessed woman, incapable of ruling her own body; though death may typically remove the individual will, in the case of Antonia, it strengthens her overall self-possession.

The process of separation between her pained life and future happiness in death created by Antonia during her last moments of life allows her body the necessary freedom to leave life. Without having undergone the process of transformation between pain and pleasure, Antonia would have been unable to gain a significant claim over her own body and her body would thus remain in the tortured realm of life as an “other.” Ironically, it is only once Antonia has become fully integrated into the patriarchal system of deviant sexuality that she can work against it, triumphantly leaving behind life and effectively damning her tormenter to hell; this is the ultimate display of the female body’s power. Desire itself is active, containing agency if only to displace itself into resistance. Antonia’s desire, an arousal of revulsion, thus saves her from absolute destruction.

In contrast to both Ambrosio and Antonia, who are embroiled in their plots with one another, is Agnes’ narrative. One of the many heroines of Lewis’ story, Agnes, suffers from a possession resulting from an obsession with the death of her infant while the two are imprisoned. Even before this bodily and mental possession overcomes her, however, Agnes is engaged in a premarital sexual relationship, using her body in ways unacceptable to society. Feeling that her body belongs to herself, as well as to her lover, Agnes is taught otherwise when she is impregnated and subsequently imprisoned in the crypts beneath the monastery. During this time, she is kept like an animal, facing horrific treatment day after day, becoming a
withered body beyond human recognition. In the moment of Agnes’ discovery, even her brother has difficulty comprehending the sight in front of him as the body of his sister.

Agnes becomes defined by lack during her imprisonment, expressing her possession through speech and the written word. By the time Lewis formally introduces the character of Agnes to the reader, her reputation is in shatters and she has undergone the torturous punishment inflicted by the nuns of her abbey. Agnes displays the lack of purity so central to Antonia; her survival in the face of Antonia’s death hints to the reader that she is able to overcome the hysteria of her possession. Antonia uses death to overcome her body’s objectification, but Agnes defies death to reclaim power over her body.

While possessed, Agnes is portrayed in a state of repression, denial, hysteria, and grief, which she can only relate to the reader through conversations with her dead child. She is not possessed by a demon like Ambrosio, but by the enormity of being imprisoned and losing her infant. Upon her rescue, Agnes clutches her bundled baby, speaking in despairing exclamations that run together. She strongly declares, “I will forget what it is: I will only remember what it was, and love it as well, as when it was so sweet! so lovely! so like him! I thought, that I had wept away all my tears, but here is one still lingering” (370). Agnes cares only about her baby and is obsessed with the past, the time when her baby was still alive and well. Her mind continuously forces her back into a happier time when the baby was alive, looking for a relief from the pain of the present, but relief cannot be found, for the memory by necessity cycles back around to the baby’s death. Trapped in a world where even regression to a better time leads to heartache, Agnes tricks herself into believing that she can consciously “forget what it is” and create a new understanding for herself through words.
The refusal to pay heed to her body’s physical pain in comparison to the psychological pain of loss eventually enables Agnes’ recovery. Scarry writes,

A fifth dimension of physical pain is its ability to destroy language, the power of verbal objectification, a major source of our self-extension, a vehicle through which the pain could be lifted out into the world and eliminated. Before destroying language, it first monopolizes language, becomes its only subject: complaint, in many ways the nonpolitical equivalent of confession, becomes the exclusive mode of speech. (54)

Agnes speaks to her baby, but since the infant has died, her language has been destroyed for it reaches no human ear but her own within the story. For the reader, Agnes’ language is meaningless due to the repetitious nature of obsessive speech. In the disembodied state of being left alone with the dead body of her child, Agnes struggles to overcome her physical pain, psychological pain, and loss of enabling language. She attempts to recall herself to a time of bodily control, but is unable to rise beyond her body’s present state of imprisoned dissolution. Agnes tries to speak to herself to move past pain, but since pain itself obliterates one’s ability to use comprehensible language, she is caught in a cycle of failure.

After the commotion of the death of Antonia and rescue of Agnes, the narrative moves into yet another segmented portion of the novel, identified as “Conclusion of the History of Agnes de Medina” (402). It is during this story that the reader learns all of the details of Agnes’ imprisonment, told in her own words, filling in the previous gaps of the narrative. Agnes’ story truly uncovers the role of the body as significant to the Gothic narrative as she struggles with the memory of her ill treatment in the past. Remembering what the Prioress of the Abbey told her near the beginning of her imprisonment, Agnes recalls the hallowing and near fatal judgment forced upon her: “Food shall be supplied you, but not sufficient for the indulgence of appetite: You shall have just enough to keep together body and soul, and its quality shall be the simplest and coarsest. Weep, Daughter, weep, and moisten your bread with your tears” (408).
Pain becomes the primary focus of both Agnes and the Prioress as this sentence is provided, overwhelming the narrative with the idea of the pained physical body.

“To keep together body and soul” is Agnes’ punishment, strengthened in cruelty when she learns she is unable to provide for the body and soul of her infant. Agnes’ baby, dying within hours of its birth, transforms the level of pain from using language to destroying language. The language of pain becomes no longer sufficient once it fails to restrict the pain in the physical realm; in other words, once the pain of torture and death touches Agnes’ soul, the physical pain of her body ceases to carry importance because it loses the power of language. She is no longer able to justify or comprehend the pain satisfactorily to herself or the reader. In her prediction of the preservation Agnes’ body and soul, the Prioress becomes untruthful to herself and others, forcing the other nuns into a lie. As one of the few characters to undergo torture and survive in *The Monk*, Agnes represents the mutability of the body and the various effects of desire upon pain, happiness, and language. Her bodily desire led her astray, but in the end, since her desire came from a pure and true love, Agnes’ life – body, soul, and mind – are saved and she is able to provide some sense of satisfaction for Lewis’ readers.

The satisfaction generated by both the deaths and survivals of characters in Lewis’ novel is noticeably absent from Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*. With a confusing conclusion and even more confusing general narrative, *Melmoth the Wanderer* is incapable of providing a reader response similar to that of *The Monk*. While Lewis’ story moves from one narrative to the next with little transition, it still makes sense and loose ends are wrapped up during the conclusion; this is not the case for the crazy wanderings and mismatched tales running amok in *Melmoth the Wanderer*. The reader’s inability to become fully engrossed in the winding tales of Maturin’s novel has the advantage of making the main two characters,
Immalee and Melmoth, more accessible and desirable functions of the narrative. Unable to care for everyone else, the reader can focus on this intense and intricate couple.

The title character appears sporadically throughout the novel, making bizarre appearances across various places and times. Though he appears often, Melmoth is never fully explained, remaining a mystery from start to finish. Rather than being the subject of physical pain, however, Melmoth is decidedly different from the characters of *The Monk* due to his character’s innate dissatisfaction; he indirectly and directly causes psychological pain, but is not immune from his own desires to find a true match in the world, which is realized in his attraction to Immalee. While the body and mind of Melmoth are thus shrouded from the reader, Immalee, as the projection of male desire, is open to complete examination. Her life and death are at the crux of the novel’s exploration of the role of the body as she experiences love, hate, obsession, and loss.

Almost midway through *Melmoth the Wanderer* comes a scene with the newly introduced heroine of the novel, Immalee. Immalee is the focus of yet another of Maturin’s deviations from his original narrative, eventually becoming the focus of the entire narrative rather than just a short tale of lovers. As she ponders her evolving relationship with a character known by the reader as “the stranger,” Immalee reflects,

> I begin to comprehend what he said – to think, then, is to suffer – and a world of thought must be a world of pain! But how delicious are these tears! Formerly I wept for pleasure – but there is a pain sweeter than pleasure, that I never felt till I beheld him. Oh! who would not think, to have the joy of tears? (384-385)

Immalee introduces the reader to the masochistic dichotomy of pleasure and pain through the eyes of a woman who has never before experienced pain, bringing with her thoughts a new dimension to an old emotion. The perversion of pain is entertained and enjoyed as she rejoices in her ability to feel more than one aspect of life, urging the reader to feel the same way; beyond
the lure of Immalee’s purity, however, the reader is subject to textual misgivings and distressing
doubts about the mysterious “stranger” being cited as the source of true pleasure and joy.

Immalee’s bodily conceptions of pleasure and pain are questionable because of her lack
of experience; having nothing to compare her feelings to, even the language she uses is cast in
doubt. By placing herself in the role of student to the “stranger’s” teacher, Immalee gives away
some of her innate female power to define and control her reactions to pleasure and pain.
Rather than retaining the independence that is key to her solitary upbringing, Immalee willingly
attempts to understand the motives and culture of her “stranger,” becoming completely
embroiled in his needs and desires. Her own pleasure or pain is reduced in significance, her
language becomes that of the “stranger,” and her body becomes a vessel of her lover’s pleasure
rather than her own.

As Immalee’s story continues, her character is carried further into the dark world of
deception, obsession, and desire brought by the “stranger.” Using her ruthlessly, the “stranger,”
eventually revealed as Melmoth the Wanderer, is the hero-villain of the novel for bringing both
pain and pleasure to Maturin’s heroine. Under his influence, Immalee becomes a woman
possessed through a process of doubling herself into a new being, an “other.” Immalee attempts
to leave behind her possession upon entering Spanish society, but the reappearance of Melmoth
makes this change impossible. Though he does not, or cannot, offer her all that she wants and
needs, Immalee is drawn to her lover with only death as an escape from possession.

Immalee’s feelings towards Melmoth on her island depict an intense form of curiosity.
Laura Mulvey describes curiosity as “a desire to know something secret so strongly that it is
experienced like a drive. It is a source of danger and pleasure and knowledge. Its pleasure is
derived from the fulfillment of a desire to know…” (X). As his identity can be guessed at by
the reader but is still uncertain, Immalee’s curiosity is doubled within the mind of the reader and her actions, though possibly detrimental to her body, are strongly desired by all. To experience curiosity as a form of desire is to place the mind and body at risk, intensifying psychological arousal; Immalee’s need to uncover the “stranger’s” true identity makes this risk completely acceptable despite the danger. At the same time, that danger is also thwarted by the intense thrill of knowledge that comes with the end of curiosity.

Immalee’s curiosity leads to her imprisonment, torture, and death eventually, but before that happens, she experiences the ecstasy of her mind, body, and soul as her relationship with Melmoth grows. During this time of excitement and newly discovered pleasure on the island, Immalee becomes obsessed with her strange visitor, unaware of nearly everything about him. This obsession is partially due to her complete ignorance of the outside world, and partially due to Melmoth’s shroud of secrecy. He disappears for months without notice, leaving behind an unfulfilled and miserable Immalee, who has opened her eyes to a life without solitude and cannot bear to be by herself. The conflict within Immalee’s body begins each time Melmoth leaves her, having a doubling effect later duplicated when Immalee leaves her island for Spanish society.

The process of doubling is a psychological effect of being torn into and between multiple parts of oneself. The creation of Immalee’s other identity, Isadora, exemplifies this fracture. At different times during her story, Immalee suffers the pain of being torn between two bodies and two minds, never quite becoming a whole, functioning entity. In _A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature_, Robert Rogers writes,

An individual suffering from internal conflict often attempts to deal with contradictory impulses by developing separate personality constellations, fairly well defined ones in the case of autoscopic vision and multiple personality. In literature these separate constellations take the form of characters representing manifest or latent doubles. (109)
While Immalee does not physically separate into two bodies, various facets of her personality come into focus during specific moments in her narrative, depending upon whether or not Melmoth is nearby. Having nearly no concept of her body on her own, Immalee’s “individual suffering from internal conflict” only comes into existence once she begins a relationship with Melmoth. Her exclamation distinguishing between life before and after the ability to think represents the impact of external factors on her personality; before she knew Melmoth, she had felt neither true pleasure nor pain. Torn between the impulse to move into a world full of suffering or to retreat into her island paradise, Immalee’s body collapses into the defense mechanism of doubling itself to handle the pressure of society. She longs to be what others want of her, not realizing until the end of her story that she is neither the Immalee of the island nor the Isidora of Spain; self-awareness can come to Maturin’s heroine only through death.

Kept in a prison cell, mourning the death of her infant, the tortured Immalee/Isidora faces hysteria and illness. Though the reader may have believed that Immalee would eventually be happy, tricked by the deceitful Melmoth, instead she is fated to die. Maturin writes, “Isidora was dying of a disease not the less mortal because it makes no appearance in an obituary – she was dying of that internal and incurable wound – a broken heart” (688). The death of Immalee is heart-wrenching and painful, but must be accepted by the reader as the natural course of the narrative. In order to claim control over her own body, Immalee needs to move beyond the reach of Melmoth; moving away from her island and becoming trapped in a prison cell of the Inquisition could not be enough to bring Immalee to safety. Death is thus the only available alternative to a broken woman possessed by love. The greatest torture imaginable for a woman, from the male perspective, is demonstrated by the death of an infant. Both Agnes and Immalee suffer the loss of a child in a perversion of maternity and womanhood. The natural outcome of
life is destroyed in these novels as infants are killed in efforts to deconstruct the power of the female body.

The distinction made for the natural cause of Immalee’s death is significant due to the mysterious nature of her lover; had she died of unnatural causes, Melmoth could have been held directly responsible but that is not Maturin’s intent. Melmoth’s character carries more weight when implicated in supernatural, inexplicable deeds than when events of the narrative can be explained naturally. Immalee’s fatal heartbreak is important because it depicts the nature of psychological and physical aspects of the body, specifically of the female body. Immalee’s seeming transcendence in death portrays the necessity for a power beyond existence on earth; her death brings hope to the reader for happiness in the world beyond.

In sharp contrast is the character of Melmoth, destined to bodily dissolution and lack of control over present circumstances and future possibility. Though he seems to have the power to move throughout time and space, a second look at Melmoth’s situation during the entire narrative demonstrate his complete inability to do as he wishes. Melmoth carries a seemingly unavoidable curse that cannot be shared with anyone and cannot be accepted in his own mind. Rather than coming to terms with his situation, Melmoth suffers throughout the narrative and attempts to compensate for his lack of control through efforts to dominate others. His relationship with Immalee goes awry when she is able to escape his grasp through death, reclaiming her mind, body, and soul at the same time as proving to him that he shall never have that same privilege.

Near the beginning of Melmoth the Wanderer is a general introduction to the story with a horrific shipwreck and a description of fear and death. As explained to the reader, “Terror is very fond of associations; we love to connect the agitation of the elements with the agitated life
of man; and never did a blast roar, or a gleam of lightning flash, that was not concerned in the imagination of some one, with a calamity” (108). In this moment, Maturin specifically appeals to his readers, drawing them into his narrative and forcing them into the same terror felt by the characters of the novels. In their desire to comprehend an especially chaotic novel, the readers of Melmoth the Wanderer continuously latch onto one character after another, hoping for the best yet fearing the worst. The body becomes intertwined with the words of the book, both rising and falling in time with the twisted narratives of Maturin’s imagination. As the characters struggle to overcome their terror and confusion, so do the readers, caught in the same trap of ignorance.

Only Maturin’s hero-villain, Melmoth, is immune to the sense of the incomprehensible pervading the text, since his character is at the center of all confusion. Melmoth’s immunity in this case, however, makes him prey to circumstances beyond the reach of all others, since he is a completely separate entity to himself. Impervious to his ignorance of his own character, Melmoth is instead a victim of his cursed fate; he has no one to share his burden and is left suffering alone for all eternity. The terror felt by others is both a reaction to the deeds of Melmoth and a reflection of the horror he feels day after day, year and year, throughout the ages. Never changing himself, Melmoth seeks for an end to his curse, knowing all the while of the extreme difficulty of his task to find someone willing to lose his/her soul. Melmoth’s power comes through his deviant desire to change those around him for his own nefarious purposes.

Immalee appears to be the only character in the narrative with a responding power to sway Melmoth. With her, he is different than he is with this rest of the world; rather than focusing completely on finding a victim, he is depicted as a man desiring only love and happiness. In one of the few moments when Maturin paints a gentler picture of Melmoth, he
writes, “Perhaps this extraordinary being, with regard to whom the laws of mortality and the feelings of nature seemed to be alike suspended, felt a kind of sad and wild repose from the destiny that immitigably pursued him, in the society of Immalee” (398). Melmoth’s conflict with Immalee is centered on his desire to save his body and his desire to be in a loving relationship with such a pure, innocent creature. Hardly even human when he finds her, Immalee is a creation of Melmoth’s tortured state of being; they create and affect each other in unexpected ways as each changes to adapt to feelings of loneliness, desire, and affection. Maturin’s use of “extraordinary being” to describe Melmoth is significant because it also describes the character of Immalee, setting them up as semi-doubles of one another and themselves at the same time.

At times on the island, Melmoth is able to relax his guard around Immalee, but once they reunite in the middle of Spain, he is unable to resist the temptation of saving his body by destroying Immalee. Melmoth’s soul is at the crux of Melmoth the Wanderer but since his affliction is kept largely secret from the reader, it is his body that conveys messages of need and desire. His body is extraordinary due to his lost soul yet Immalee’s body is extraordinary to him for the reason that she still possesses her soul; her soul and healthy mind and body are irresistibly attractive and alluring. Though in pledges of love Immalee continuously says that she is the complete possession of Melmoth, only he can feel the true bitterness of what it means for those statements to be false.

When he discovers in Spain that his precious Immalee has taken the name Isidora, Melmoth angrily lashes out. During the course of their ensuing argument, each vowing love for the other, Maturin writes, “I cannot weep,” said Melmoth, fixing on her his dry and burning eyes, strikingly visible in the moonlight; ‘the fountain of tears has long dried up within me, like
that of every other human blessing’” (458). Melmoth’s eyes are at the center of his demonic state, separating him from the rest of mankind as they burn and flash with the fire of a lost soul. Similar to the eyes of the devil in The Monk, Melmoth’s eyes are repeatedly noticed by other characters of the narrative, forcing their way into reader consciousness as a clue into his deeper, darker identity. His pitiful statement about the inability to weep is spoken in a forlorn and desperate tone as he attempts to reach out to his love, never quite reaching the point of successfully rescuing himself.

As Melmoth becomes more deeply involved in feelings of passion and desire for Immalee, he realizes how horrible it would be to sacrifice her soul at the price of saving himself. In his situation of double loss, Melmoth laments the fact that he is no longer capable of demonstrating pain through tears or feeling pain at all. He also alludes to pain as a “blessing,” a comment that distinctly separates him from all other characters in both The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer. With knowledge beyond that of the typical human, he is in the correct state to assuredly speak on the topic of pain, using his own voice to define pleasure, pain, and the bodily accompaniments of each. Yet Melmoth does not rejoice in human suffering, for despite his difference he is still able to remember what it was like to be ordinary. Immalee’s presence burns a hole in his heart due to the mere fact that he can never give her the love she deserves and is destined ultimately to break her heart and force her to choose death.

Immalee’s last thought and statement before death revolves around her love for Melmoth, questioning whether she will meet with him in Paradise. The reader knows that she is destined for “better places” and yet Melmoth’s fate still remains a mystery. As at last the disjointed narratives return to the present time, Melmoth, the common thread throughout each convoluted tale, appears in the flesh. His great secret, hinted at but never explicitly spoken, is at
last revealed to both the reader and the men who have been tracing his story: Melmoth wanders
the earth seeking a mortal willing to relinquish his/her soul. Just after this moment of extreme
revelation comes the shocking twist to the narrative that the reader can hardly expect: instead of
a fulfilling and conclusive ending, Melmoth the Wanderer abruptly and strangely closes with an
indecisive final moment concerning Melmoth’s fate.

Maturin teases his readers with a conclusion of cryptic sentences appearing shortly after
an even more cryptic narrative exploit titled “The Wanderer’s Dream.” He writes, “Through the
furze that clothed this rock, almost to its summit, there was a kind of tract as if a person had
been dragged, his way through it – a down-trodden track, over which no footsteps but those of
one impelled by force had ever passed” (702). Physical violence is at least inflicted upon the
body of Melmoth and yet the reader is only privy to this information through a secondhand,
incomplete report. No longer is Melmoth the story’s hero-villain; in these final pages he has
become nothing more than another character to be supposedly killed off in a mysterious fashion.
Melmoth’s character no longer has substance, having become a remnant. In the end, there is
only a shadow rather than a human being. The pain for the reader in these final sentences is
located in the ambiguity of this ending; whether Melmoth dies is left completely to the
imagination rather than being explicitly drawn out.

Immalee’s certain death enables her character to restore bodily power at the end of her
narrative; Maturin’s treatment of Melmoth, however, suggests that without the power of a soul,
the body becomes a meaningless vessel prey to confusion and inconclusive plots. Melmoth the
Wanderer presents its readers with the possibility that the body is not whole without the mind
and soul, and that the three entities must remain together in order to retain significance. As
Immalee’s balance wavers throughout the novel, her body becomes a possession of Melmoth,
but this imbalance only exists until she reclaims body, soul, and mind with her powerful death. Refusing to give in to the lure of eternal life, Immalee resists the curse of Melmoth and demonstrates the ultimate power of the body when treated correctly. Maturin takes Lewis’ depiction of the power of the body one step further by showing what happens when strength and possession is not restored to a human being; even bodily torture and death is not available to one with no hope of a future.

With its emphasis on the darker elements of humanity, the Gothic genre is the perfect place to locate a discussion grounded in and around the human body. The revolving themes of desire, obsession, pain, and death center the body at the crux of all character narratives, acting as vehicles through which the body is explored and examined in depth. The suspension of the narratives leaves perversions and torment foremost in the reader’s imagination, never resolving the psychological conflicts of the texts. On the surface level of The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer are the easily spotted arguments about the struggles of forming relationships under the pressure of a watching brotherhood of society, religion, and family. To delve deeper, however, reveals the intricate role of the body in each and every relationship of the novels. The delicate play between the body, mind, and soul is the vehicle through which all else is driven; it engages in an especially significant role in the manifestation of desire and pain in the novels.

The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer take different approaches to the body, despite the fact that Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin are both writing within the same genre. Lewis focuses more heavily on deviant sexuality and the subsequent role of punishment from society and the reader, while the body in Maturin’s text is exhibited through a lens of possession and altered fate. The character of Agnes crosses the boundaries of the two authors, firmly
entrenched within Lewis’ punitive system of torture and yet stretching towards the future representation of the body, soul, and mind as an issue of the innate power of possession.

Agnes both suffers the loss of her baby’s life as a result of her premarital sexual experiences and the loss of her own language through bodily pain and extreme separation from society. The role of language thus serves as a connecting force for the portrayal of the body between these two novels of betrayal, loss, and triumph. Lewis and Maturin each demonstrate the strength of language as a force dependent upon the strength of the body; as pain increases and the body loses its power, the power of language similarly lapses. The relationship between body and language is especially poignant in the narratives of Agnes and Immalee as both women suffer from imprisonment and the death of their infants. The similarities between these women is striking, for each learns the lesson of the hardships of love and the effect an overwhelmingly intense relationship can have upon the strength of body, soul, and mind. The texts participate in the dissolution of language for readers as the women move to an immanent realm of pure meaning uncorrupted by body or language; the reader is left with an unresolved text, a suspended imagination, and an implication of inextricability.

Ambrosio and Melmoth, the villains of the stories, face many more differences than the reader may expect from stories with such similar surfaces. While both engage in sexual relationships in their respective texts, the perversion of each is located very differently within the vehicle of the body. Ambrosio’s body is viewed through a lens of demonic influence, ruined by the temptation of curiosity and fetishism in an unquestioned patriarchal order. Melmoth, on the other hand, faces the influence of his own deviant mind as he futilely struggles with the fate of overcoming his eternal wandering. Melmoth is in the unique position of being in complete control over his body but lacking any direction over his soul; furthermore, his mind
is constantly saturated with the need to find a victim despite his desire to simply rejoice in a loving relationship with Immalee.

In *The Monk* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* the female body is significant due to its appearance as an object of male desire, obsession, and deviance. In many cases, the physical suffering of the female body is depicted more graphically and violently than that of the male body as the surrounding characters decide to exact punishments and needs upon others. Interestingly, it is not only the male characters that have the ability to inflict pain; in Agnes’ case, for example, it is the Prioress of the Abbey who treats her cruelly and withholds forgiveness. The Prioress, however, is acting as an Overseer of the Church, a patriarchal institution. The female body is described in greater detail due to its location in the genre as an image rather than fully developed character. Lewis and Maturin fall into the trap of depicting their females as vehicles of dark Gothic themes, giving the female a function similar to that of the body in these novels.

Rather than creating female characters full of depth and meaning, Lewis and Maturin choose to describe archetypal female types that can fall into any number of categories such as virgin, whore, or demon. Antonia is good and thus reaches Heaven through death because to remain alive would be detrimental to her body’s purity, as evidenced by her abduction and rape. Agnes is impure but since she engages in sex in a loving relationship rather than promiscuously flaunting her body, she is redeemed with a punishment limited to the death of her infant and bodily dissolution rather than death; Agnes serves the purpose of warning both characters and readers what may happen if the female body is out of control. Finally, Immalee is the naïve character designed to provoke thoughts about solitude, obsessive love, and the path to finding oneself. Immalee is an example of what happens when the warning of Agnes goes unheeded:
when a female is left to her own devices in an obsessive, deviant relationship, the only
redeemable path becomes death so that body, mind, and soul can be reclaimed and forged
together once more.

In each case of narrative suffering, character is forced into a divided position of self and
“other.” Pain causes a defensive retreat from the self in pain to the inflicting of torture on
(an)other. This internalization of pain into separate categories can lead to the process of
doubling, in which the characters create a completely new part of themselves to deal with pain,
or it may lead to an external expression of anger. Ambrosio’s actions towards Antonia are
manifestations of this second kind of reaction to pain as he responds both internally and
externally to the devil’s prodding. Internally he appears to struggle minimally, attempting to
retain a social poise and covering up his misdeeds from others; but externally Ambrosio beats
and rapes his sister, eventually penetrating her so deeply on so many levels that she gratefully
expires. Before the devil tempted him, his undeviating “self” was doing well, but as he curses
his way into death shortly following this episode, Ambrosio attempts to force his “other” into
taking blame for his many misfortunes.

Melmoth is similarly torn between who he wants to be around the other characters.
Though his role of inflicting death and insanity upon others is easier once Immalee is gone, in
his initial moments with her, Melmoth becomes greatly conflicted. It is only once Immalee
mutates into the character of “Isidora” that it becomes somewhat easier for Melmoth to
unsuccessfully attempt to lure away her soul. The physical body of Melmoth, constantly
depicted through the image of “burning eyes” is representative of a lost soul. As a man
incapable of finding Paradise, the absence of Melmoth’s soul becomes a strong presence in his
story, constantly reinforcing to the reader the significance of balance and bodily peace. Beyond
that, Melmoth lacks the words necessary to restore his life to what it formerly was, before he accepted the terms of eternal wandering in exchange for heightened powers; the idea of lack is even stronger in Melmoth’s story than in that of Agnes, for at least she has the power to cry whereas he has long ago lost nearly all vestiges of humanity.

Why is death so satisfactory an ending for so many of Lewis’ and Maturin’s characters? Why do the conclusions of *The Monk* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* leave the reader dangling with questions and confusion? These novels create an inevitable sensation in the reader that focuses on the significance of the body as it moves through time, space, and beyond. In the natural world, the only true ending for a human being is death; thus death is presented to the readers as an ending. The significance of death in these Gothic novels, however, is that they come with a warning of what is to continue after death. The body as it is represented in these novels is not something to be destroyed with pain, torture, obsession, desire, or revenge; instead, it moves beyond even the bounds of death to prove that the paths taken in life are more significant than one may realize.

Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin use death easily in their novels to prove to the readers that the body has much more at stake than life. The body is confirmed as a constant work in progress, balanced between the mind and soul. In narratives where the reader is constantly kept at a distance, never knowing what will happen next, the body becomes the sole constant to follow and recognize. The body becomes the grounding of the text, the characters, and the readers. On its own, the body is simply a vessel. Once signified in language and thought, however, it becomes not a vessel but an actual entity in and of itself. The body is revenge. The body is obsession. The body is desire. The body is death. Ultimately, the body is the Gothic.
Works Cited


