

Evil in Flaubert's The Temptation of Saint Anthony

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (February 2021)



The Temptation of Saint Anthony (detail), Hieronymus Bosch, 1490

Gustave Flaubert considered *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* his best novel. Many critics believe it to be *Madame Bovary*. This critical assessment is based solely on the subject matter of the two novels, not literary merit.

In several ways, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is a puzzling work. This is the case because *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, or trial of Saint Anthony as the work is often referred to, is a novel about the supernatural realm of evil. Flaubert is hailed as one of the greatest realist writers.

Flaubert published *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* in 1874. The novel is written in the form of a play. Saint Anthony is bombarded with characters that come and go, disguised as demons that continually assault his spiritual and emotional state. From the start, the novel entices the reader to question whether Saint Anthony's moral/spiritual convictions can weather this demonic maelstrom? This is the point of the novel.

Who is Saint Anthony the Great?

The novel tells the story of Saint Anthony the Great (251-356 A.D.), one of the first monastics who is credited with founding monastic orders. Part of what makes the novel a lasting and poignant work of art is the vast amount of research that Flaubert engaged in order to do justice to the historical Saint Anthony.

Saint Anthony embraced solitude as a manner of assuaging the blows and pangs of reality on the human person—what Shakespeare calls “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” in *Hamlet*.

Throughout the novel, Flaubert details the nature of

solitude in relation to Anthony's search for truth and salvation, and his resolve to endure the ever-increasing attacks by the devil.

Flaubert is consistent in his portrayal of Saint Anthony's struggle for existence; a solitary sojourner who could easily give in to temptation at any time, but does not. Solitude is the essence of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. This is why Saint Anthony is the founder of Catholic monasticism. Monasticism, namely monos, meaning alone, is a form of spiritual awareness that demands tremendous sacrifice.

Because Saint Anthony went into the wilderness (the Egyptian desert) to express his love and devotion to God, he is assailed and attacked by opportunistic and predatory demons. This solitary trek signaled turning his back on a life of mundane comfort and worldly pleasures.

What is it about the moral/spiritual equanimity of solitary truth-seekers that threatens demons? Is this Flaubert's subtle foreboding about man's moral/spiritual predicament in modernity and postmodernity?

Flaubert was irked by what he considered to be the advent of an increasingly noisy world. He was a staunch critic of the explosion of newspapers, which he thought of as promoting stupidity.

As a response to newspapers, he wrote *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (*Encyclopédie de la bêtise humaine*), a collection of stupidity and clichés that criticize the spread of stupidity in his time. Flaubert's disdain for newspapers follows the saying that paper holds all the nonsense and lies that writers write on it. That is the kind of mass media noise that Flaubert apparently had in mind.

Flaubert tells the reader in the opening pages of the novel that Anthony's frailty is the result of prolonged

fasting. The Saint's self-doubt keeps him from concentrating on "holy things." Anthony is tormented by "remembrance begetting remembrance." Additionally, his fancy leads him into dangerous territory, where human weakness and cowardice embolden evil.[\[1\]](#) Is there a more appropriate description of postmodernity than a milieu that destroys man's capacity for remembrance?

Saint Anthony the Great came to the attention of modern readers through Athanasius of Alexandria's (296-373) biography. It is interesting that Athanasius was known as Athanasius contra Mundum (Athanasius Against the World). The world in question refers to the secular and heathen anti-Christians that Athanasius refuted.

The Temptation of Saint Anthony, the Novel

The devil shows Anthony contradictory aspects of human reality. It tries to convince Anthony that creation itself is a failure, a bad idea from its inception, thus denying the goodness of God. What God would create a world that defies the wicked logic that the devil presents Anthony with? Flaubert is astoundingly prescient in his grasp of the rising tide of nihilism in Western culture. Saint Anthony's suffering is a symbol of this.

The world as aberration is presented to Anthony by a man named Hilarion, Anthony's former disciple who pretends to seek instruction from the saint. Hilarion is a kind of Judas Iscariot; an opportunistic devil in human clothing who usurps goodness and faith from Anthony, and by implication, man.

Hilarion is the devil in disguise, a malignant being who tries to destroy Anthony's love and respect for the fathers of the church. Much of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is an attack on Anthony by Hilarion; their exchanges throughout the novel cannot be considered a dialogue in the proper sense of a genuine, sincere conversation.

Hilarion puts Anthony under his spell, as the saint begins to doubt his own convictions and faith. Of course, this is the devil's desired effect. Hilarion takes Anthony on a spirited voyage of hatred for all things divine: goodness, innocence and moral/spiritual purity.

In some respects, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is a splendid novelistic example of what today we call virtual reality. The devil prides himself on being crafty and smart, while Saint Anthony is intelligent and displays patient, humble devotion. Simply stated, the latter is the fundamental strain between good and evil.

The devil takes Anthony on a dizzying virtual reality tour of nonexistent forms of the human condition and reality that he cleverly sells as sensual and desirable; and possibilities untold for man to attain worldly pleasure. Saint Anthony is reminiscence of Adam and Eve, when they are confronted with the tempting evil fruits of the tree of knowledge.

The devil guides Saint Anthony thorough a vast catalog of possible sensual pleasures, for the devil's pathological vulgarity advocates for the minutiae of nihilism and its attendant sensuality. Like dishonest merchants, the likes that Jesus tried throwing out of the temple, the devil attempts to convince the saint to grab on to worldly pleasure, given that opportunity rarely knocks twice on our door. How many people can resist that wicked logic? This is why the devil is considered the king of this world and puppet master of the here-and-now.

The Temptation of Saint Anthony is the perfect antidote for postmodernism's exaggerated claims to knowing objective reality, especially in the form of scientism.

In essence, the devil informs Anthony of his reductionist desire to level human existence to its mechanical

scaffolding—the universe as a sterile machine that has no room for metaphysical conceptions of good and evil and the soul. The novel ends with the devil telling Anthony that he is science:

My kingdom is vast as the universe; and my desire knows no limits. I go on forever, freeing minds, weighing worlds—without hatred, without, without pity, without love, and without God. Men call me Science![\[2\]](#)

In *Intimate Notebooks:1840-1841*, Flaubert admits that he disdains science not in itself, but because it makes man arrogant, always expecting history to be a linear progression of promised progress. He writes: “perhaps there will come a fine day when all modern science will collapse and we’ll be laughed at—I hope so. I love to see humanity humbled. That spectacle cheers me when I am tired.”[\[3\]](#)

Hearing that science is the work of the devil, Anthony becomes shaken by this revelation. He recoils from the devil and answers, “Say, rather, that thou art...the Devil!”[\[4\]](#) This admission by the devil may horrify some postmodern readers, but it ought not to, especially when we pay careful attention to the devil’s logic.

In order for Flaubert’s descriptive language to be effective in conveying Anthony’s faith and goodness, the author must make the devil’s discourses—dare I say, point of view—the driving force of the novel. This is ironic, only because Flaubert assumed that his readers would not side with the devil at the time of the novel’s publication.

So, what is so alluring about the devil’s power to confuse man about human reality? Flaubert’s answer to this question is the devil’s insistence that only appearance and becoming, not being and truth, motivate human action. Thus, it is not difficult to see why the devil camouflages itself in order to become all things to all people. The devil, Flaubert

point out, is a sinister master of ceremony, a tricker and ever-changing source of appearances. Sinister merely means knowing better.

Flaubert shows up the devil at the end of the novel through Anthony's vision of the order of creation. While the devil demonstrates its prowess as a shape-shifter, turning into beautiful women and the Egyptian Sphinx, among other disguises, Anthony finds the moral resolute to turn away from the dazzle of the sensual pleasures that he is offered.

Anthony comes alive to the permanence of creation at the end of the novel, because – to cite William Blake in “Auguries of Innocence” – Anthony has learned to “see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower Hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.” [\[5\]](#)

The devil's raison d'être is exposed as annihilation of innocence and goodness. This is achieved by flooding the market, as it were, with the promise of easy pleasures that make day-to-day life tolerable for many people.

Never does the devil appreciate creation. That would mean to approve of God as the absolute power. Much less, the devil never says why creation, that is, being, is a higher value than non-being. That is, life over death.

Eventually, the devil's hedonistic gallivanting from one pleasure and temptation to another wears the reader down. This has the effect of jading readers that might otherwise never reflect on the nature of evil. This is one of the great accomplishments of *The Temptation of Anthony*, and establishes Flaubert as a writer who possesses poignant perspicuity.

A Menagerie of Demons and Other Grotesque Aberrations

The demons are incessant in their pursuit of Saint Anthony's soul. They couple their assault on the saint with ever-increasing imaginative forms to tempt him. Ironically,

the most effective forms of persuasion that they employ are not sensuality and the flesh. Instead, they are appeals to Anthony's intellect and imagination.

Flaubert's subtle depiction of the ways that thought, reason and science can become perverted is consistent with his criticism of the many ways that man fanatically builds an altar to reason. Apollonius tells Anthony:

Above all forms, further than the ends of the earth, beyond the heavens themselves, lies the world of Idea, replete with the splendor of the Word! With one bound we shall traverse the impending spaces, and thou shalt behold in all his infinity, the eternal, the Absolute, the Being! Come! Give me thy hand! Let us rise. [\[6\]](#)

The Temptation of Saint Anthony can be considered a horror novel in the postmodern sense of the word. Flaubert puts together a formidable collection of grotesque and aberrant creatures, and demons that defy logic. Some are pygmies, others have no head, one eye; others are "fettered" to the earth by their long hair.

Flaubert's demons work in collusion with slimy, writhing creatures that walk over each other; monstrosities that destroy innocence and beauty. They torment Anthony incessantly. These include: The Astomi, Nisnas, Blemmyes, Pygmies, Sciapods, Cynocephali, Sadhuzag, Martichoras, Basilisk, Griffin's and Catoblepas, the latter is a combination of black buffalo and pig that crawls on the earth. Catoblepas were first described by Pliny the elder. Jorge Luis Borges mentions them in his work *Book of Imaginary Beings*.

Anthony is assaulted by evil in addition to the prospect of endless pain, suffering and strife; the gyrating nature of becoming that does not allow man to gather the fruits of his own being.

The nightmare ends with a vision of the symmetry and

minutiae of creation. Anthony peaks into the beauty and complexity of reality that cannot be corrupted by man's passions and dastardly whims. At daybreak, Anthony witnesses the face of Jesus Christ on the rising sun. He crosses himself and calmly turns his attention to his devotions. The dark night of the soul has mercifully come to an end.

[\[1\]](#) Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. (New York: The Modern Library), 1.

[\[2\]](#) Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. (New York: The Modern Library), 1.

[\[3\]](#) Gustave Flaubert, *Intimate Notebook: 1840-1841*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 49.

[\[4\]](#) Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 231.

[\[5\]](#) William Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*. Edited by David V. Erdman. (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 490.

[\[6\]](#) Gustave Flaubert, *Ibid.*, 163.

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