The church of Rome stands guilty, and glories in the crime of binding down young and inexperienced girls by a vow which can never be shaken off to a life which they may find, when their woman’s nature develops itself, they are unfit for.

Tonna, *Nuns and Nunneries*, p. 306

S.J. Abbott secretary of the Convent Enquiry Society, writing at the end of the nineteenth century about the danger of the rise in popularity of convents warned the British public of the terrible goings-on in these establishments. He relates tales of depravity, cruelty, corruption and suffering which he presents as true accounts from behind the closed doors and high walls of Catholic nunneries. Abbott stresses the idea that a convent life is ‘unnatural’ for women and therefore leads to terrible consequences. Not only will they suffer from being immured and secretly disciplined, but they may be changed forever by the experience:

In the secrecy of a convent many tenderly reared girls, accustomed to be waited on by willing servants, find themselves painfully out of place when, for discipline’s sake, they are imperiously ordered by some ‘Reverend Mother’ fiend in petticoats to do disgusting menial work for the mere purpose of showing that they are slaves at her command. (Abbott, *Revelations*, p. 157)

Because of their particularly sensitive natures, girls were believed to be greatly affected, both physically and mentally, by the rigours of convent life. So much so that their fate would involve loss of health and looks even to the point of death, or else entail corruption so that they become...
part of the great conspiracy perpetrated by the Catholic Church in its quest for power. Abbott’s ideas reflect those of the Rev. Hobart Seymour who was writing in 1852.3

the nuns seem to me to be confined like birds within a cage, that might flutter their wings and hurt their feathers, but could not escape, being prisoners, victims, and recluses of life. (Seymour, Convents or Nunneries, p. 10)

He asks his readers what purpose of religion could it serve to immure young girls of 16 years of age in these ecclesiastical prisons.

This type of anti-Catholic writing was generally produced by the Evangelical wing of the Protestant Church, by both men and women. It was frequently published by Seeleys, a private, anti-Catholic publisher. As Catherine Hall has pointed out, Evangelicals expected women to sustain and even improve the moral qualities of the male sex.4 It was in this area of life that women could find a sense of importance. By immersing herself in religion, the Protestant female could experience some kind of empowerment that could not be disputed on account of her gender. In Practical Christianity (1797) William Wilberforce had argued that women were especially disposed to religion, and therefore had the responsibility of encouraging their husbands in religious observance.5

When the husband should return to his family, worn and harassed by worldly cares or professional labours, the wife, habitually preserving a warmer and more unimpaired spirit of devotion, than is perhaps consistent with being immersed in the bustle of life, might revive his languid piety. (Wilberforce, A Practical View, p. 86)

This concept of the female as the more naturally religious gender runs through mid-nineteenth-century literature. The ideal Evangelical woman needed to possess certain characteristics. She was supposed to be modest, natural and not too sentimental nor subject to violent feeling. It was the role of the Evangelical male to educate the women in theology and to guide them in their spiritual lives, but it was for the females to demonstrate their piety by example and to exercise a proper moral influence on those around them. The type of girl who was seen to be particularly in danger from the corrupting influences of the Catholic Church is the ultra-sensitive, irrational female stereotype, who was religiose and fascinated by the external and aesthetic trappings of religion such as music, iconography and ritualistic services. This type of female was frequently