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Gothic Sense and Sensibility

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Gothic Sense and Sensibility

Although Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* was published in 1818 after her death, it is the first novel that she wrote (around 1798). During this time, the Gothic Novel (or Gothic Romance) saturated the literary scene. This genre characteristically focused on the sensational, the horrible, and the over-romanticized and necessarily included elements such as medieval settings, ghosts, murder, and graphic sexual encounters. *Northanger Abbey*, like many works, either reflects or responds to the climate of its time period, but instead of embracing such gothic characteristics, the novel satirizes them. Austen frames her novel in the gothic tradition to parody the genre's shortcomings and to depict the dichotomy of two schools of thought, sense and sensibility. The gothic provides the reader with a picture of sensibility, and therefore illuminates the dangers of being ruled by one's passions and imaginations, as well as advocates the need for sense and sound judgment.

From the very first lines of the text, the reader is introduced to the heroine of the novel, Catherine Morland, one who seems to be the imperfect candidate for the damsel in distress motif that often appears in gothic novels. In her article on realism in Austen's novels, Cynthia Griffin outlines Austen's purpose of the introduction this way: "The reader is secure no longer and finds that he, too, may find himself an object of jest. If 'bad' novels continue to flourish, there must be 'bad' readers who provide the demand for such fiction, readers who have developed unsound expectations about the qualities of novels in general" (39). The reader of such novels expects the

heroine to be wealthy, beautiful, and talented; therefore, Austen purposefully rejects the assumptions of sensational novel readers by creating a kind of anti-heroine. Catherine Moreland's "situation in life, the character of her father and mother, [and] her own person and disposition [are] equally against her" (1). She suffers not from poverty or parental restrictions nor enjoys wealth—she is average and unremarkable in status. Her father is not a drunk or a thief or a tyrant, and her mother is not overbearing or overindulgent; thus they fail to present Catherine with such social issues that she must rise above and hence become strong and sensible. Her nine brothers and sisters have rescued her from the burden of determining the fate of the family, for they can carry on in her stead. Catherine also lacks the ravishing beauty that oft defines a heroine: "She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features" (1). These horrors improve with age, but still fail to reach anything remarkable. Possessing beauty alone is insufficient in a heroine—she must also be intelligent and master other skills, which distinguish her. However, Catherine again falls short of the mark: "She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught, and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid" (2). Her intelligence is certainly not above average, and accomplishments are few having only taken one year of music and having generally poor taste in drawing. In spite of, or more likely because of, all that she lacks, Austen chooses Catherine to be the heroine of her gothic novel.

The novel also employs one of the standard plot lines that is frequently employed by gothic romances. Marilyn Gaulle writes in the contexts following the Longman edition of the novel:

Like the gothic romances Austen parodies, *Northanger Abbey* embodies a tale derived from ancient courtship rituals describing the adventures of a favorite

daughter abandoned or sent off by her father to confront danger, find a mate, and rescue the family. She trespasses, enters a forbidden room, eats a forbidden fruit, opens a forbidden chest, and must therefore be redeemed by some kind of task or ordeal that often includes a trip to the underworld. (201)

Catherine's story follows this outline just enough to make it clear that it is indeed romantic, but Austen twists the treatment of these elements. For instance, Catherine does leave her home to go to Bath and eventually Northanger Abbey, but she is not kidnapped, forced by her father to leave, or abandoned by a parent's untimely death (in the *Mysteries of Udolpho* the heroine's parents die leaving her to fend for herself). She is merely invited to accompany her friends, the Allens on vacation to the city. One of the reasons she and her family endorse this plan is perhaps the potential of finding a suitable husband through the increase of society; however, Catherine is by no means sent to find courage in the face of danger—her mother issues no “cautions against the violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farmhouse” and instead pleads that Catherine take caution against catching cold by wrapping up (6). She does find a not-so-hidden chest and what she believes to be a forbidden room, but finding nothing of value, she is in little danger of confrontations with the underworld. Again Austen emphasizes the reality of the situation to contrast the sensational assumptions of and necessities sought by the “bad” reader, one who perpetuates sensibility.

The previous examples have focused mainly on the parody of the genre as a whole, but Austen also employs the names of specific Gothic Novels. Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* and *Camilla* are referenced several times both by Austen (25) and by her characters (36), Gregory Lewis' *Monk* is mentioned by Thorpe, and a list of other books by various authors is included (*Castle of Wolfenbach*, *Clermont*, *Mysterious Warnings*, *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *Midnight Bell*,

Orphan of the Rhine, and *Horrid Mysteries* [27]), which are not famous but nonetheless actual publications (Haney 224). However, Austen focuses most of her attention on Anne Radcliffe and her *Mysteries of Udolpho*. This is interesting to note because Radcliffe is the foremost author of her genre, which has even earned her a separated subgenre, Radcliffean Gothic. Cannon Schmitt summarizes the appeal of her works in his “Techniques of Terror,” saying that the readers “apparently possessed of all they need to know to interpret the events cannot make out the truth and are driven to turning over the ‘eventful page’—each succeeding page of the novel, we might say—all the while ‘enveloped in mystery’” (870). By directing the reader’s attention to Radcliffe, Austen is aiming her criticism at the heart of the genre leaving no room for argument about her position—if she would have employed a lesser author, readers could have appealed to their sense of reading only the best of the gothic the way John Thorpe justifies himself when he says, “If I read any, it shall be Mrs. Radcliffe’s; her novels are amusing enough; they are worth reading; some fun and nature in *them*” (36).

The sensibility which Austen seeks to criticize is also fueled by the novel reading that her characters’ engage in. Griffin explains this double role of readership this way:

However, the issue is made much more complex here by the presentation of the views and responses of several *different* novel-readers. The principle “reader” is, of course, the individual who is reading *Northanger Abbey*. However, all of the main characters in the book are, themselves, readers of novels, and their conduct throughout is directly related to the way in which they respond to fiction. Thus they bear a curious double relationship to the reader. They are both imaginary characters whom he may judge and representations of himself. (39)

In the first few chapters, the author herself is speaking to the readership in a more direct way, pointing out some of the discrepancies between her novel and the gothic (reality and imagination). The method shifts in chapter VI when she introduces Catherine to this literary genre and lets her characters' actions speak to the follies of sensibility.

Only two pages before the beginning of this chapter, Catherine and Isabella have started reading together, and already this activity is affecting Catherine. She arrives late for a meeting with her friend because she “ha[d] been reading [*The Mysteries of Udolpho*] ever since [she] woke” and is so “delighted with the book” that she “should like to spend [her] whole life reading it” (26). The plot of the novel begins to interrupt her discussion with Isabella about Henry Tilney, the man who she fancied herself in love with and as such a subject that previously dominated her thoughts: “Catherine, in some amazement, complied; and, after remaining a few moments silent, was on the point of reverting to what interested her at the time rather more than anything else in the world, Laurentina’s skeleton” (29). The reading of *Udolpho*, as well as the plots of various like novels, also becomes the focal point of other conversations. Catherine brings up this discussion quite out of context upon her first meeting of John Thorpe: “This brought on a dialog of civilities between the other two [...] and Catherine, after listening and agreeing as long as she could [...] ventured at length to vary the subject by a question which had been long uppermost in her thoughts: it was, ‘Have you ever read *Udolpho*, Mr. Thorpe?’” (35). She again broaches the subject, though not with such calculation, on her walk with the Tilneys by equating the scene that lay before her with one she had read about (94). Catherine’s reading of the novel causes her to lose touch with the reality, a reality that upon which sense places such importance.

This misplaced focus also threatens to ruin Catherine’s future. Blinded by love of gothic novels, she forms a close friendship with the coquettish Isabella, who thinks little of others

except how to use them for her own purposes—she pursues Colonel Tilney while professing engagement to Catherine’s brother. Catherine’s association with Isabella could have damaged her reputation, but the imitation of such a creature surely would have been irreparable. Her desire (sensibility) to see and explore a real castle nearly overrides her sense of decency and propriety. John Thorpe wishes to drive her about the country with no one else in the carriage, and the possibility of seeing Blaize Castle causes her to momentarily forget that such things are not proper: “I cannot go with you today because I am engaged; I expect some friends at any moment [...] Blaize Castle! [...] But is it like what one reads of? [...] But now, really, are there towers and long galleries?” (72). She objects to the trip only because of a prior commitment not because of the scandalous appearance given by “young ladies [being] frequently driven about in [open carriages] with young men, to whom they are not even related” (92). The Thorpes pose real dangers to Catherine, but perhaps the most telling effect of her mixing fantasy with reality manifests itself during her visit to Northanger Abbey.

Before Catherine even reaches the abbey, she lets her imagination have free reign, her spirit of sensibility ruling her. She is almost as excited about the place that she has been invited to as the people who have invited her: “Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney’ and castles and abbeys made usually the charm of her reveries which his image did not fill” (126). Henry picks up on her infatuation with her idea of his home and exploits it by creating a gothic tale of his own:

Unable of course to repress your curiosity in so favorable a moment for indulging it, you will instantly arise, and, throwing your dressing-gown around you, proceed to examine this mystery. After a very short search, you will discover a division in the tapestry so artfully constructed as to defy the minutest inspection, and on

opening it a door will immediately appear, which door being only secured by mass bars and a padlock, you will, after a few efforts, succeed in opening, and, with your lamp in your hand, will pass through it into a small vaulted room. (144)

His tale not only points out to the reader the ridiculousness of the action in gothic novels but also the language used to describe them. George E. Haggerty explains that

because of the nature of their endeavor[...] Gothic writers seemed caught between proving the reality of their fancy and making that fantast powerful and real. That is, they use language either referentially as an attempt to encompass the reader's experience within the boundaries of the fictional work, or poetically as an attempt to find a vocabulary for inexpressible private reality. (381)

This kind of language and action occurs several more times during Catherine's stay at the abbey because she fancies herself the heroine of her own gothic tale. She explores the mysteries of the chest and cabinet and concocts a villain:

Catherine's blood ran cold with horrid suggestions which naturally sprang from these words. Could it be possible? Could Henry's father—? [...] The probability that Mrs. Tilney yet lived, shut up for causes unknown, and receiving from the pitiless hands of her husband a nightly supply of course food, was the conclusion which necessarily followed. (171-3)

The absurdity of her thoughts and actions and the way in which they are portrayed combine to give the reader a picture of the follies of sensibility—the incidents are laughable and as such make the reader acutely aware of their ridiculousness.

Austen brings her heroine to the same conclusion that she wants her readers to reach—sense triumphs over sensibility—through the words of Henry Tilney. During the last of the

ridiculous episodes, Henry returns and catches Catherine in the act of exploring his mother's room (or the secret chamber) and chastises her for her irrationality: "Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? [...] Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. [...] What ideas have you been admitting?" (182). Austen asks her readers these same questions, challenging them to consider how the books they are reading influence their perception of reality. Her hope and purpose is that they will respond as Catherine does admitting their errors—"Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature [...] was to be looked for" (184)—and seeking to change—"and her resolution formed, of always judging and acting in future with the greatest good sense" (185). Austen's voice comes through the narrative in the form of Henry Tilney as she admonishes her readers to employ good judgment in all things.

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* employs mockery of the Gothic Novel to illustrate the need for sense of sensibility. To do so she includes elements, plot lines, and language of the genre such as a heroine, a castle, a villain, and long descriptive passages which she has manipulated to expose their ridiculousness. Austen also directly references gothic authors and works of her day, the most notable being Anne Radcliffe. However, the most effective measure that she draws upon is the thoughts and actions of Catherine, the novel's heroine, whose imagination is permitted to gain the best of her. After the adventures of Catherine are over, Austen speaks directly to her readership through the voice of Henry Tilney advising them to change their thinking.

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