

Afraid of the dark: a gothic binary in jane austen's northanger abbey



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The segment on pages 133-135* of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* relates the binary of light and darkness which symbolizes the interaction between Gothicism and reality in the novel, helping the reader to realize role of Catherine in the novel as a staple between the two extremes. A popular form of entertainment in Austen's time, Gothic novels were considered to be full of cheap thrills. *Northanger Abbey*'s heroine, Catherine Morland is a true lady of her time and enjoys the sensation and intrigue of Gothic novels, often to the point of excess. *Northanger Abbey*, however, is not a Gothic novel, but rather a story based in realism. Catherine is a realist character caught up in Gothic notions and ideals; she is in a sort of limbo, making her an ideal candidate to serve as mediator between light and dark, Gothic and Realist literature. The binary established between light and dark help to assure the reader of Catherine's candidacy. As Catherine is about to read the letters she finds tucked away in the cabinet in her room, her candle begins to flicker. This fluctuation in light makes Catherine "turn to it with alarm," for she is afraid her candle is in "danger of sudden extinction" (135). The words "alarm," "danger," and "sudden"—even "extinction," to some degree—cause the reader to feel a sense of urgency, of impending doom. However, upon further inspection, the reader realizes that Catherine's fears are silly and unfounded and her intense emotional response seems unnecessary and almost forced; the very nature of a candle is that it flickers, and that slight dimness is not cause for alarm. Moreover, just before Catherine sights the cabinet, she convinces herself that fear of the dark is a foolish phobia; in fact, she spends nearly an hour readying herself for bed, purposefully avoiding stroking the fire to prove herself brave enough to face the dark.

According to Catherine, to fix the fire "would seem cowardly, as if she
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wished for the protection of light after she were in bed" (133). Catherine's extreme reaction to the flickering candle, though, only moments later tells the reader differently. While Catherine's reaction to light and darkness could appear to be sporadic to the reader, something else shifts during the scene as well—Catherine's subjectivity. In the earlier scene, where Catherine allows the fire to die to prove her bravery, she is unaware of the papers in the cabinet and, therefore, is unbothered by the lack of light, by the impending darkness. However, later in the scene, after Catherine has found the papers in the cabinet, she grows jumpy, her anxiety not fueled by actual threats but by her own imagination and anticipation. The light becomes her ally and the darkness, her foe because of its inherent obscurity. The discovery of the papers changes Catherine's view of herself—she envisions herself newly involved with her surroundings, with the papers, the cabinet they were stored in, and the darkness that envelops them. Catherine's fear of the dark is not actually fear at all—her reactions are derived from her subjectivity. Catherine, therefore, creates her own fear and intensifies the scene for her own pleasure—she wishes to be in a Gothic novel and, since she is not, she fabricates and elaborates on certain aspects of her situation until they are exaggerated enough to appear Gothic in nature. Catherine, excited by her recent discovery of the papers in the cabinet, exaggerates the intensity of her situation. The candle flickers and, her emotions magnified, she grows alarmed. Yet when she checks the candle, she sees there is "no danger of its sudden extinction, it had yet some hours to burn" (135). In a Gothic novel, however, inconvenience and suspense are paramount, so hours of light, while the reality, does not fit in with Catherine's vision of what should happen. She therefore snuffs the candle and the resulting darkness is so "

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awful...impenetrable and immovable” that she becomes “ motionless with horror” (135). When reality does not align with Catherine’s yearning for suspense and mystery, she fabricates intrigue to fuel her preoccupation with Gothicism. While darkness is referred to explicitly, the properties of light are merely implicated. Before Catherine explores the cabinet in her room, she muses on the light radiating from her fireplace, suggesting that stoking the fire would make it look “ as if she wished for the protection of light after she were in bed” (133). After Catherine finds the papers in the cabinet and extinguishes her candle, it is stated that there was “ not a remnant of light [left] in the wick” (135). Light is therefore discussed only hypothetically. In the former excerpt, the prospect of light is pure conjecture and suggestion; it is discussed in passing and only in the theoretical sense. In the latter excerpt, light is only referred to in terms of its absence. References to light are subtle and understated, just as novels based in Realism are. The differences between allusions to darkness and light here are stark; darkness is described in detail and has a great—albeit, fabricated, even false—impact on Catherine. Light, on the other hand, is simply alluded to as the absence of darkness; it is the default, what the reader assumes unless he or she is informed otherwise. This binary, therefore, serves to inform the reader about Gothic and Realist texts. Gothic texts are showy and full of exaggeration and childish thrills. Realist texts are more subtly intriguing; they are what is left after the curtains are drawn and the stage is clean. The reader is then left with the difficult job of deciphering Catherine’s roll in the novel. Though she is the unlikely heroine of a Realist novel, she is obsessed with Gothicism, to the point of appearing juvenile. She snuffs her candle—she incurs darkness—just to intensify the scene, to fabricate Gothicism. The reader interprets

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Catherine's behavior as silly and childish, yet can still relate to her because she is written realistically. Her preoccupation with Gothicism, with playing pretend and make-believe endears her to the reader and, though at times, her actions and attitude are slightly exaggerated her reactions based on her age and interests are realistic. Catherine serves as a compass, a mediator between light and dark where the two extremes touch. She is the shadow the reader follows, living in the light but yearning for the dark. The binary of light and dark, of Gothicism and Realism, help the reader to interpret Catherine as a sort of unsung mediator, as a staple, as the link that bridges the two extremes with a flickering candle and a complex fear of and yearning for the dark.