

Hyperbolized feminist realism in northanger abbey



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The gothic phenomena, although short-lived, left an indisputably heavy influence on literary practices in the late 1700's, particularly that of the 'feminist' literary space. Jane Austen's questionable heroine, Catherine Morland, is both the construction and deconstruction of female figures that populated the novels of her predecessors. By presenting a parodic victim of the patriarchy the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen was attempting to rewrite the extravagant and hyperbolic claims introduced by her more popular and sentimental precursors, such as Charlotte Smith. Hers, among many, were the texts that characterized females in literature as politically 'sensible' and sentimentally gothic. Austen utilizes all the literary excesses that characterize the gothic tradition to satirize the 'sensibilities' that marked her contemporary feminist counterparts. The role of satire destabilizes femininity; the exaggerated 'romantic expectations' and delusions provide a parodic victimized female figure. Firstly, Austen cleverly constructs a parodic profile of Catherine: she is naïve, part of an uneventful family life, and disinterested in 'feminine' social conventions. She then declares her "Everywoman's" relationship to literature, through the voice of a self-conscious female narrative. And finally, Austen 'fictionalizes' the exaggerated realism that stays consistent throughout the text, by introducing Catherine to the "écriture féminine". *Northanger Abbey* reads as a critique of both the gothic and the sentimental sensibilities that were beings foisted on women at the time. Austen, simultaneously, constructs and deconstructs femininity as 'feminism' by profiling the gothic heroine, Catherine Morland; by satirizing the hyperbolic and excessive nature of 'true sensibility' and female gothic conventions, Austen presents a strong female identity within the patriarchy. By 1803, the year Austen sold the manuscript

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of Northanger abbey, the gothic heroine was a highly codified ideological figure, complete with stock physical traits, predictable parentage, and reliable class indicators. Clearly, this heroine was ripe as a subject for parody, and such, presumably, was Austen's motive when she created her gothic heroine-in-training, Catherine Morland. Austen deflates the hyperbole that personifies the gothic heroine by beginning the novel with the following: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine." (Austen 5) Austen directly undermines Catherine in a way that portrays her to be 'real'. Heroism is not perhaps an inherent characteristic in females, it is instead a label that a young girl must grow into. Diane Hoeveler, author of *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization Of Gender From Charlotte Smith To The Brontes*, dissects the role of hyperbole in feminist literature in Austen's time. She brings forth the hyperbolic nature of the 'gothic heroine': "By presenting a naïve heroine Austen suggests that the female gothic project is hopelessly out of touch with the social, cultural, and educational realities for most women." (Hoeveler 143) Catherine does not fit the mold intentionally because she represents a social 'reality' that was a rarity in late 18th century feminist literature. Her "thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without color, dark lank hair, and strong feature" designate her as plain and ordinary, but relatable. (Austen 13) Hoeveler categorizes her as an 'everywoman', term that encompasses the commonplace behaviors of literary women, such as Catherine; "Catherine is Austen's Everywoman heroine—plain, ordinary, insufficiently educated, nothing special—but she still manages to become a heroine by following her instincts, waiting passively, and learning to keep her mouth shut." (Hoeveler 131) The

everywoman is essentially a product of realism and the distorted expectations of 'true sensibility' that fiction conventionalizes. Catherine, labeled as the everywoman, makes clear the distortions when she spends her first night in Bath. Upon her arrival to the ball, the first great tragedy occurs in her mind, an inflation of her imaginative construct of gothic romance: "Not one, however, started with rapturous wonder on beholding her, no whisper of eager inquiry ran round the room, nor was she once called a divinity by anybody"(Austen 18). The gothic novel, in elevating to a contemptible level a young woman's sense of herself as the object of the obsessive male gaze, masculine scrutiny and praise, can only fail to set up a frustrating disappointment for the everywoman. Catherine is victimized similarly to her gothic sisters, such as Radcliffe's Emily and Lewis' Antonia. Her vulnerability resembles her fellow heroines, however, the social situations are ordinary and not distinctly gothic. Hoeveler, providing comment on Catherine's self-imagined victimization, claims that "a victim is always rewarded because such is the case in the melodramatic scheme of things. Her suffering is reified as value and stands as lucre to be exchanged for a husband."(Hoeveler 130) Ultimately, the comment that Austen makes is on the mutability of the 'feminine' figure; her juxtaposition of stark realism to the amplified tropes of gothic feminism butts Catherine in a position of identity crisis. Catherine, as a victim, suffers more social adversities during her time in Bath. She feels that her situation resembles that of Emily's, Radcliffe's heroine in *The Mysteries of Rudolph*, and so begin Catherine's delusions of her insertion into a gothic atmosphere. When Catherine faces ignorance again in the ballroom, she muses that her fate is similar to a tortured and deceived gothic heroine:" To be disgraced in the eye of the

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world, to wear the appearance to infamy while her heart is all purity, her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of her debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine's life, and her fortitude under it what particularly dignifies her character."(Austen 43) Catherine's heart is 'pure' and her actions 'innocent'; she is the epitome of gothic vulnerability, even though her situation does not call for such weakness. Sensibility—or codified subjection—is a quality she, and many other women in the novel, strive to maintain. Conveniently, Henry Tilney is introduced into the novel at this particular time, and tests her 'feminism' through hyperbolic politeness and courting standards. Henry begins immediately by pressing her on the contents of her journal, however, she is flustered because she does not keep a journal. A journal may perhaps suggest a level of self-awareness that Catherine at this stage in her life simply does not possess. But it is significant that for the first time in the novel the act of writing appears as a metaphor for defining and inscribing one's femininity. Henry, ironically, offers the most insight on what is feminine or not: "...it is this delightful habit of journalizing which largely contributes to form the easy style of writing for which ladies are so generally celebrated. Every body allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is particularly female. Nature may have done something, but I am sure it must be essentially assisted by the practice of keeping a journal."(Austen 16) Northanger Abbey can be construed as Austen's own journal, in which she is recording the politics of female 'sensibility'. The bulk of her utilization of satire lies in this, in the self-conscious 'sister author', the narrator herself. Joanne Cordon examines the theoretical aspects that lie in Austen's text through her close reading of the 'Écriture feminine'. In her article, Speaking <https://assignbuster.com/hyperbolized-feminist-realism-in-northanger-abbey/>

Up for Catherine Morland: Cixous and the Feminist Heroine, states the following regarding Catherine's language and the role of an artistic recording outlet, the journal: "The idea of a woman's right to her own language adds significance to Catherine's more modest assertion because the narrative examines two literary traditions associated with women—the journal and the female-authored novel—within the narrative." (Cordon 50) *Écriture féminine*, translates to "women's writing", but the concept extends to the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text. It is a strain of feminist literary theory that originated in France in the early 1970s and included foundational theorists such as Hélène Cixous. Cordon writes that "what makes the writing *féminine* is not the gender of the writer, but the aim of the writing, for *écriture féminine* invents new systems and dismantles old structures." (Cordon 43) Austen is performing this in her relationship between Catherine and the 'mighty pen'. The *écriture féminine* is a useful tool in juxtaposing Catherine as the 'sentimental' and the 'gothic'; Catherine's sentiment exists in her humble approach to novels and reading, and her taste for gothic and the delusions they inflict in her create a 'self-conscious' gothic heroine. Despite her taste for novels, Catherine does not appreciate 'masculine' reading: languages and history. Though her parents taught her writing and French, "her proficiency in either was not remarkable, and she shirked her lessons in both whenever she could" (Austen 14). Cordon decodes this as: "Catherine's aversion to the prescribed literature of her childhood gives her a kind of immunity to the "masculine" ideals inscribed by her culture." (Cordon 44) This follows a reluctance that gothic females usually possess towards male authoritative forces. The parodic tone of Austen's narrator is not just employed for the sole purpose of humor, but rather, goes

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beyond and parodies an entire political gendering system. The parody also extends to that of the gothic heroine, but of course by now, Austen has made her construct of the female in the gothic space clear. It is significant to consider Catherine's conscious relationship to the gothic and her self-characterization. Hoeveler offers a comment on the role of parody in the text: "The parody or lack of parody in Austen's work stems from the ambiguity or confusion about this notion of gendered place: either the entire external network that we know as society for women is a gothic monstrosity or there is no gothic realm at all—only faulty education and the overactive imaginations of female gothic novelists feeding false fantasies to young women." (Hoeveler 129) The entire gothic genre was an exercise of female positioning physically and socially in the literary discipline. Hoeveler proposes the point of 'ambiguity', which not only pervades Austen's novel, but feminist literature in general. Austen is parodying this ambiguity, for there is no concrete solution at the conclusion of Catherine's journey; it is instead a social experiment of a gothic heroine attempting to function in a reality that cannot cater to her imaginative freedom. Cordon concurs that "The Mysteries of Udolpho gives Catherine a template she can apply to her own experience, and so the female-authored gothic serves as *écriture féminine* for Catherine." (Cordon 51) Catherine treated it so much so that she felt a sense of great disappointment when her gothic mental construct is found to be as ordinary as she is described in the beginning: "The Abbey in itself was no more to her now than any other house. The painful remembrance of the folly it had helped to nourish and perfect, was the only emotion which could spring from a consideration of the building." (Austen 182) Catherine's disillusionment with Northanger Abbey marks the end of <https://assignbuster.com/hyperbolized-feminist-realism-in-northanger-abbey/>

her Gothic fantasy about the house's secret history. If her folly was to imagine Northanger Abbey as a fictional place of suppressed horror, then her redemption lies in seeing it for what it is—an ordinary family home. Her infatuation with the gothic is also discussed by Waldo S. Glock, in his article, Catherine Morland's Gothic Delusions: A Defense of "Northanger Abbey": "Her primary fault, the Gothic infatuation that seems to disrupt the harmonious balance of the novel, becomes the symbolic mark of Catherine's charmingly enthusiastic enthrallment to the power of the imagination, and to the persuasive power of literature to reconcile or transcend the commonplace logic of events." (Glock 35) The 'commonplace logic' that Glock is referring to may be the concept of 'true sensibility', again, the ideal that women are trained to strive for. The romantic expectations are tested most vigorously. Catherine's wildly impulsive gothic reasoning exceeds normative social interaction when she becomes convinced that General Tilney killed his wife: "...and what had been terror and dislike before, was now absolute aversion. Yes, aversion! His cruelty to such a charming woman made him odious to her. She had often read of such characters." (Austen 161) Catherine, after admitting her contempt for the General's actions, immediately makes reference to the fiction that influences her choices. Austen, by hyperbolizing a situation such as this to this extent, brings to light the 'ridiculousness' of female positions in literary spaces up to Austen's point in time. Hoeveler also acknowledges the 'bringing to light' that Austen performs: "By revealing to the light of common day the implausibilities of gothic conventions, Austen thought she would free herself and her fellow female novelists from the artificialities and limitations that the genre inflicted on them." (Hoeveler 144) Austen's work is not just a profile or a social

experiment, it is most importantly a gendering struggle. Her self-conscious narrator and Catherine's inconsistencies are coded struggles to break the mold of gothic ritual and sensible demeanor. Catherine's escape from reality is reminiscent of the quixotic, of Lennox's Arabella, but the metaphor for the escape is different; Catherine is utilizing her fictitious guidelines as a means to transform the feminine to 'feminism'. Glock, on a final note, illustrates the limitations that caged Catherine throughout the text: "The point of the Gothic scenes at Northanger, in fact, is to emphasize by contrast that Catherine cannot find happiness in fantasy and romantic retreat from reality; it can only be found in the acceptance of the general ordinariness of life, as epitomized by the witty and original, yet totally unromantic Henry Tilney." (Glock 38) Northanger abbey reads as a critique of both the gothic and the sentimental sensibilities that were beings foisted on women at the time. Austen, simultaneously, constructs and deconstructs femininity as 'feminism' by profiling the gothic heroine, Catherine Morland; by satirizing the hyperbolic and excessive nature of 'true sensibility' and female gothic conventions, Austen presents a strong female identity within the patriarchy.

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