

Title	Catherine Morland Getting into the World Gothic Fiction : Her Role as the Author, Reader, and Heroine of the Gothic Novel in Northanger Abbey
Author(s)	Katayama, Miho
Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 38 P.39-P.51
Issue Date	1999-12-24
Text Version	publisher
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/25386">https://doi.org/10.18910/25386</a>
DOI	10.18910/25386
rights	
Note	

*Osaka University Knowledge Archive : OUKA*

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

Osaka University

# Catherine Morland Getting into the World of Gothic Fiction: Her Role as Author, Reader and Heroine of the Gothic Novel in *Northanger Abbey*

Miho Katayama

## I

For a long time a large number of studies have been made on *Northanger Abbey*. Although it has provoked a great deal of controversy, critics are united in their belief that the novel is an expression of Jane Austen's support to novelists. Norman Page calls it "an essay ... in defense of novel-reading" and quotes Austen's words in a scene where Catherine Morland reads a book with Isabella Thorpe (54):

... they ... shut themselves up ... to read novels together. Yes, novels;—for I [Austen] will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding — joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine. ... Let us [novel writers] leave it to the Reviewers (sic) to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure. ... (33-34; vol. 1, ch. 5)

Jane Austen, however, does not take sides with the Gothic novel. Gothic writing, which is fiction of terror and mystery, became very popular in the late eighteenth century and attracted many readers. Numerous numbers of Gothic works were published. Some of the novelists, however, took such great pains to horrify readers that their works seemed less

valuable as literature. Austen felt that Gothic enthusiasm went too far. It is generally agreed that she is trying to make a burlesque of Gothic fiction in *Northanger Abbey*. Andrew Wright writes that “one of the purposes of Northanger Abbey is to satirize the Gothic novel” (190).

Marvin Mudrick points out an anti-Gothic element at the very opening of the first chapter. It describes the situation where Catherine is put.

...he [Catherine's father] was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters... She [her mother] had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world..., she still lived on—lived to have six children more... (13; vol. 1, ch. 1)

Catherine Morland, the heroine of this novel, is never subjected to confinement in a decayed castle as a captive nor to the loss of her mother in her babyhood.

Portrayal of Catherine, too, provides a striking contrast to that of Gothic heroines, who are likely to faint at horrible sights. Being “noisy and wild” (14; vol. 1, ch. 1), Catherine “prefer[s] ... running about the country” (15; vol. 1, ch. 1).

Anti-Gothic manner also shows itself in Catherine's state as a heroine. Jane Austen places her heroine in a situation where she does not meet a mysterious hero who turns out to be of noble birth. Mudrick quotes the following passage: “There was not one family among their [the Morlands'] acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door — not one young man whose origin was unknown” (16; vol. 1, ch. 1).

Moreover, when Catherine sets out on her journey to Bath with Mr. and Mrs. Allen, “[n]either robbers nor tempests befriended them...” (18; vol. 1, ch. 2). There is nothing gloomy about the setting which the heroine is put in.

## II

In order to satirize the Gothic novel, Jane Austen gives to the novel not only an anti-Gothic framework but also a heroine who takes the Gothic fiction which she reads as reality. Catherine likes Gothic novels and is apt to be absorbed in the pleasantly horrifying writing. In this frightful world, she is led to a ruined castle or an ancient abbey whose dark passages take her to a wretched lady kept captive by a cruel tyrant. When Catherine stays at Northanger Abbey at the invitation of General Tilney, the idea that it is an abbey in Gothic fiction possesses her. Page suggests that the "misinterpretations of Catherine" at the abbey are due to "the confusions arising when the make-believe of fiction is mistaken for reality" (17).

Catherine's enthusiasm for Gothic novels is evident in a conversation with Isabella Thorpe who also has a strong liking for them. Catherine begins to read a Gothic novel as soon as she gets up in the morning. Before meeting Isabella by appointment at the Pump-room in Bath, too, she has been steeped in the world of Gothic fiction from morning.

"Have you [Catherine] gone on with Udolpho?" . . . .

"Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil."

" . . . I [Isabella] would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are not you wild to know?"

"Oh! Yes, quite; what can it be? . . . . I am sure it is Laurentina's skeleton. . . . Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it." (36; vol. 1, ch. 6)

Enjoying Gothic novels, Catherine tastes the delight of terror. The great fear of the Gothic fantasy brings joy to her because she is not a heroine who suffers from frightening events inside the world of terrible Gothic novels but a reader outside

of it. William Patrick Day discusses Gothic works by using the word distance. The reader has “analytical distance” as an observer to horrible sights (73), but “[t]he protagonists are destroyed because they cannot maintain their safe position as observers...” (68). He also suggests that “pleasure” comes from being at a “safe distance” as the observer (66). Catherine has a good distance away from the Gothic world as an observer does. In the real world, which is not that of Gothic fiction, a role which she can play is not that of a heroine but of a reader or an author of a Gothic novel.

Catherine is safe from danger which inevitably accompanies terror in the realm of Gothic writing. She, therefore, is eager to be frightened. When she visits Northanger Abbey, she is full of curiosity. Laurence Lerner says that Catherine in the abbey “looks forward with delighted terror to ... concealed crimes, skeletons...” (4). Catherine, therefore, notices that she “had been craving to be frightened” after she gives up the idea that Northanger Abbey is the ruined abbey of a merciless tyrant (173; vol. 2, ch. 10). Naturally, when Isabella reads aloud a list of Gothic novels, too, Catherine asks if they are terrifying:

“... Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries...”

“... are they all horrid, are you [Isabella] sure they are all horrid?” (37; vol. 1, ch. 6)

Catherine, who does not separate reality from Gothic fiction, is on the border between them. Although this is done rather undecisively, Alan D. McKillop makes an interesting suggestion that “[t]here is ... a possible connection between her growing affection for Henry and her Gothic fixation...” (60). When Henry Tilney leaves Bath, Catherine cannot find him neither at the upper room nor at the Pomp-room. She feels as if she

were a heroine of a Gothic novel who met a mysterious man.

He [Henry] must be gone from Bath. Yet he had not mentioned that his stay would be so short! This sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero, threw a fresh grace in Catherine's imagination around his person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him. (32; vol. 1, ch. 5)

Catherine misconceives that Northanger Abbey conceals a dark secret on her visit there. She is plunging into the world of the Gothic fantasy. On the way to the abbey, she is listening to supposed Gothic mysteries which Henry foretells may occur to her. Henry's story ends when it comes to "a large, old-fashioned cabinet of ebony and gold" (140; vol. 2, ch. 5), and it is left unfinished, as is seen in the following quotation. Before reaching the abbey, she is already in the middle of Gothic fiction.

"... by touching a secret spring, an inner compartment [of the cabinet] will open—a roll of paper appears: ... it contains many sheets of manuscript ..., but scarcely have you [Catherine] been able to decipher 'Oh! Thou...' — when your lamp suddenly expires in the socket..."

"Oh! No, oh... Well, go on."

But Henry was too much amused by the interest he had raised, to be able to carry it farther... (140; vol. 2, ch. 5)

### III

At the abbey, Catherine notices "a high, old-fashioned black cabinet" (147; vol. 2, ch. 6). Its resemblance to the cabinet which Henry describes astonishes her, and she falls into the temptation to examine the drawers: "She seized the key ... and tried to turn it; but it resisted her utmost strength" (147; vol. 2, ch. 6). She manages to unlock the doors with great efforts. Her

search of the drawers is the following story of the fiction which Catherine is told on the way to Northanger Abbey by Henry. She is trying to turn from a reader in reality into a heroine in a Gothic novel, but the attempt results in failure:

Well read in the art of concealing a treasure, the possibility of false linings to the drawers did not escape her, and she felt round each with anxious acuteness in vain. (148; vol. 2, ch. 6)

There, however, seems to be some validity to the idea that Catherine is on the point of crossing the border between real life and the Gothic fantasy. In the search of the cabinet, too, Catherine finds "a roll of paper" concealed inside it (148; vol. 2, ch. 6), as is fortold in Henry's story. When she cuts off the wick of the candle not to have difficulty in reading the manuscript, the light is put out, as the lamp is extinguished in the Gothic story told by Henry. Catherine completely forgets her "exultation" which she has when she finally unlocks the doors of the cabinet which will not open (148; vol. 2, ch. 6). She cannot keep enough distance to remain as a reader who enjoys the terror of Gothic fiction now. She is falling into the Gothic world where great fear sweeps over a heroine left in the darkness in a stormy night:

Catherine ... was motionless with horror... Darkness impenetrable and immovable filled the room. A violent gust of wind, rising with sudden fury, added fresh horror to the moment. Catherine trembled from head to foot. (149; vol. 2, ch. 6)

A howling wind sounds like a voice foretelling a dangerous event in store for her: "[T]he storm too abroad so dreadful! — She had not been used to feel alarm from wind, but now every blast seemed fraught with awful intelligence" (149; vol. 2, ch. 6).

Everything around her is characteristic of an atmosphere of the Gothic horror: “[T]he very curtains of her bed seemed at one moment in motion, and at another the lock of her door was agitated, as if by the attempt of somebody to enter” (149; vol. 2, ch. 6). Catherine, who is seized with terror, feels herself to be a heroine of a Gothic novel.

Catherine, however, is entering Gothic fiction, only to confirm its barrier to reality. Lerner remarks that “she looks at real situations as if they were part of a Gothic romance. The comedy comes from the contrast between her expectations and reality” (6). Dangers, for example, a threat to the life of a heroine left in the darkness, never befall the frightened Catherine in the real world. When she gets up the next morning of the frightful experience, Catherine notices that she is the author who, being at a safe distance from frightening events, creates the Gothic story whose events she experiences. At night she tries to open the doors of the cabinet, but it will not open. In the morning, though, it is unlocked very easily. This case provides an example of her being an author:

Why the locks should have been so difficult to open however, was ... something remarkable, for she could now [in the morning] manage them with perfect ease. In this there was surely something mysterious, and she indulged in the flattering suggestion..., till the possibility of the door's having been at first unlocked, and of being herself its fastener, darted into her head.... (151; vol. 2, ch. 7)

Moreover, the roll of paper which she seizes in alarm at night turns out to be “washing-bill”s (150; vol. 2, ch. 7) and “a farrier’s bill” (150; vol. 2, ch. 7).

Although these events teach her a lesson to some extent, the feeling that Northanger Abbey is a gloomy abbey in Gothic writing still gets possession of her. Catherine applies *The*

*Mysteries of Udolpho* by Anne Radcliffe, which she reads, to the abbey where she stays. She imagines that General Tilney shuts Mrs. Tilney up in a cell and gives food to her at night. A more dreadful idea even strikes her. Catherine thinks of people around her from the point of view of a Gothic heroine. General Tilney becomes a pitiless tyrant just as Montoni is a cruel one in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Seeing General Tilney pacing the drawing room deep in thought with the knitted brows, Catherine cries to herself, "It was the air and attitude of a Montoni!" (163; vol. 2, ch. 8).

Catherine's curiosity rises all the more, because General Tilney does not allow Eleanor Tilney to open the door of the cell when they show Catherine around the abbey. Soon after that, Catherine asks Eleanor to take her to the room supposed to be the place of Mrs. Tilney's confinement again, and they set out going there. Passing the gallery, they reach the forbidden cell and try to unlock the door. A sudden appearance of General Tilney, however, makes Catherine frightened from top to toe. This time, what causes Catherine's horror is not danger of Gothic fiction but the terrifying figure of General Tilney in the real world.

... the figure, the dreaded figure of the General himself at the further end of the gallery, stood before her [Catherine] ! The name of "Eleanor" at the same moment ... resounded through the building, giving to his daughter the first intimation of his presence, and to Catherine terror upon terror. (167; vol. 2, ch. 9)

Catherine's attempt to look for a frightening event in the abbey does not succeed. Catherine "crave"s to be terrified at a Gothic event, but she is in the realm of reality. What she experiences is a dangerous event in real life. Catherine, however, makes up her mind to go to the room again. With stealthy

steps she approaches the door of the cell. She opens it with a trembling hand and sees a neatly arranged room through whose windows the sun shines brightly. At this sight she cannot but be convinced that she is an author who creates the terrifying story in which General Tilney plays a role of an evil tyrant who imprisons his wife in a Gothic novel. Catherine is not a heroine who is horrified to find a wretched lady in captivity at a ruined abbey. The barrier which keeps reality and Gothic writing apart is preventing her from going any farther.

Catherine's Gothic delusion arises out of her enthusiasm for writing of terror and mystery. She is fascinated by the Gothic novel. The words which Eleanor says when General Tilney forbids her to open the door of Mrs. Tilney's room have Gothic traits, because she conjures up visions of horrible sights. Catherine imagines that the words tell his cruel treatment of Mrs. Tilney, because she is enthralled with Gothic literature.

"I was going to take you [Catherine] into what was my mother's room — the room in which she died —" were all her [Eleanor's] words; but few as they were, they conveyed pages of intelligence to Catherine. (162; vol. 2, ch. 8)

Now Catherine, however, feels that Gothic deeds are unlikely to happen in everyday life.

#### IV

On the point of going back from Mrs. Tilney's cell to her own room, Catherine comes across Henry Tilney. He notices her exploration of the cell and tries to talk Catherine out of her Gothic fantasy. However, it seems that Catherine does not get a complete awakening yet. She notices that Northanger Abbey is not part of the world of horror and mystery. Catherine, however, still imagines that Gothic fiction could

possibly give an exact description of certain places. She still labors under the illusion that there are some places which "might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there [in Gothic novels] represented" (174; vol. 2, ch. 10).

Catherine is still on the dividing line between reality and Gothic writing. Although she stops looking toward the Gothic world, she does not turn her eyes on reality yet. Catherine is not concerned about danger in everyday life, though it is impossible to keep enough distance to be free from reality. Although General Tilney asks her to make a long visit at Northanger Abbey at first, he turns her out of his house because he finds that she is not as wealthy as he thinks. It is generally agreed that General Tilney is not a merciless villain in Gothic literature but an evil tyrant in the real world. McKillop comments that "he [General Tilney] gives a pretty good imitation of Montoni in real life..." (61). The appearance of General Tilney which horrifies Catherine in her exploration of his hidden crime is a prediction that he frightens Catherine again as a danger in real life.

Receiving a message that she has to get out of Northanger Abbey, Catherine spends a sleepless night. She is not a reader of a Gothic novel now. In fear and trembling, she feels insecure from danger in real life. A pleasant morning which she has had before comes to her mind.

With what cheerful ease, what happy, though false security, had she then [in the morning] looked around her, enjoying every thing present, and fearing little in future, beyond Henry's going to Woodston for a day! (199; vol. 2, ch. 13)

In the abbey Catherine is enthralled by a gloomy story of a lady imprisoned in a ruined abbey. Catherine, however, has to get out of Northanger Abbey now. Terrified and faced with

danger, Catherine goes home.

Catherine is a reader or an author of Gothic novels in the real world, so that she is free from dark deeds which frighten Gothic heroines. Catherine, however, becomes aware that she is not a heroine in Gothic writing, because she knows that she is looking toward the Gothic fantasy. At such a time, she is on the border between reality and Gothic fiction and is getting into the world of horror, but she can never enter it completely.

## V

A comment which Cynthia Griffin makes on characters in *Northanger Abbey* may be recalled here. She writes thus:

... 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. (152)

If this burlesque novel of Gothic writing deals with the question how its main characters react to fiction, the figure of Henry, who tries to rescue Catherine from illusion, deserves more than a passing notice. It is true that although "Catherine," to quote Rachel M. Brownstein, "is too naïve and unselfconscious to keep anything like Henry's amused distance from novels," Henry detaches himself from the Gothic world to some extent (40). When confusion happens in a conversation which Catherine and Eleanor hold, it is Henry who points out misinterpretations in it. Catherine speaks to Eleanor about a Gothic novel, but Eleanor thinks that Catherine talks about "a riot" which may break out (100; vol. 1, ch. 14). Henry immediately understands that what Catherine tells of is not likely to happen in everyday life. He makes it clear to puzzled Eleanor that Catherine tells not of the real world but of Gothic writing. He says what she talks about is "nothing more dreadful than a

new publication" (100; vol. 1, ch. 14).

Henry, however, does not notice that danger which General Tilney's expectations cause is in store for him, just as Catherine does not. His eyes are not on the real world. Griffin remarks that "he functions primarily to correct Catherine's distortions and offers very little himself toward a comprehensive picture of 'reality'" (163).

Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey defends the novel, but, at the same time, it satirizes excessive Gothic enthusiasm. *Northanger Abbey*, therefore, makes its burlesque. Catherine Morland is on the point of turning from a reader or an author in real life into a heroine in Gothic fiction. There is also some validity to the idea that, although Henry Tilney is not looking toward the realm of the Gothic novel and tries to keep her in distance from the Gothic novel, he is very close to the border between the world of the Gothic novel and that of reality.

### Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. Ed. Marilyn Butler. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995.
- Brownstein, Rachel M. "Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice." *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*. Ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 32-57.
- Day, William Patrick. *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.
- Griffin, Cynthia. "The Development of Realism in Jane Austen's Early Novels." *ELH* 30 (1963): 35-52. Rpt. in *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*. Vol. 3. Ed. Ian Littlewood. Mountfield: Helm Information, 1998. 4 vols. 150-63.
- Lerner, Laurence. "Northanger Abbey." The British Council. *Notes on Literature*. N. p. : n. p., 1977. Rpt. in *Jane Austen*. Trans. Hirugawa Hisayasu. Ed. Kondo Kouo. *Kouza: Igrisu Bungaku Sakuhin Ron* 3. [Criticism on Works

- of English Literature 3]. Tokyo: Eicyo, 1977. 2-10.
- McKillop, Alan D. "Critical Realism in *Northanger Abbey*." *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinman, Jr. Minnesota: U of Minnesota, 1958. 35-45. Rpt. in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Ian Watt. New Jersey: Prentice, 1963. 52-61.
- Mudrick, Marvin. *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1952.
- Page, Norman. *The Language of Jane Austen*. Language and Style Ser. 13. Oxford: Blackwell, 1972.
- Wright, Andrew. *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1953.