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The Imagined Space of *Northanger Abbey*

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen uses the story of Catherine and the spaces she inhabits to build an argument against the perception of the English novel during the early Nineteenth Century. Ultimately, the imagined space of Northanger Abbey influenced by Catherine's reading of Gothic novels becomes its own character in the novel. Through the comparison of the real and the imagined space of Northanger Abbey, Austen was able to satirize the Gothic novel and Catherine's obsession; it is clear this contrasting identity of the space becomes the driving force of Austen's argument for the novel. This is important to consider because through analyzing Austen's characterization of the Abbey, and consequently Catherine, we as readers can learn not only about the stigma towards novels during the period, but we can also learn how we can craft spaces in our work to enhance overall meaning.

In the chapters leading up to Catherine's arrival at Northanger Abbey, Austen uses Catherine and her supporting characters to begin her critique of the English novel, specifically, the Gothic novel. In relation to the space of Northanger Abbey, Austen uses Catherine's obsession with Radcliff's Gothic novel *Udolpho* to build her expectations for the space as a place of mystery. We can see these expectations developed in the simple joy Catherine shows at her realization that Northanger is an abbey of all places, when she anticipates Northanger's, "long damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, [which] were to be within her daily reach" (Austen 134). She continues this romanticized view of the Abbey admitting, "she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials an injured and ill-

fated nun” (134). These expectations of the Abbey, resulting from her reading of the Gothic novel, are how Austen begins to build the imagined Northanger Abbey as its own character in the text.

When Catherine arrives at the Abbey, it does not match these expectations formed through her reading; she begins to create her own mystery that she craves. Catherine fantasizes the mystery of the Tilney mother’s death and supports these horrors through her investigation and assumptions of the real space of Northanger Abbey. Eventually, we see how the imagined “horrors” of Northanger Abbey end in her dismay, and she is left embarrassed after telling Henry of her horrific findings, which he called her “surmise of horror” (186). She even admits this “infatuation had been created, the mischief settled long before her quitting Bath, and it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had indulged,” clearly owing her skewed view of the Abbey to her reading of the Gothic novel (188). Through Catherine’s interaction with the real and the imagined space, Northanger Abbey is brought to life, becoming its own character, while simultaneously characterizing Catherine with her childish nature through her obsession with the Gothic novel.

This contrasting characterization between the real and imagined Northanger Abbey, not only is a literary tool used by Austen to characterize Catherine, but it is also used as the driving force of Austen’s argument about the novel and the Gothic novel. Earlier in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen actively defends the novel through her conscious narration and critique of novels and novelists during her time (36). Yet, her satirized approach to writing Catherine’s romanticized view of Northanger Abbey and the Gothic novel paired with the embarrassment in the unfolding of her investigation proves Austen has something to say about the Gothic novel. And while she goes lengths to defend the novel as a respectable reading choice, it is clear through her use of the

imagined space of Northanger Abbey that Austen does not support blurring the line between novel and reality.

Honor Statement:

This essay constitutes my own thinking and writing. Where I have used any other materials, I have clearly identified and properly attributed them.

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Work Cited

Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. 1818. Penguin Classics, 1995.