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# Buildings’ Role in Gothic Fiction: a Review of *The Castle of Otranto* and *Northanger Abbey*

**Introduction**

*Northanger Abbey! These were thrilling words, and wound up Catherine's feelings to the highest point of ecstasy* (Austen, Jane. N.p). Fiction has changed and developed dramatically in the present era with arrival of 3D technology, but it was perhaps in its simplest form during the romantic age where writers used to imagine and portray a world and the reader was also supposed to see that world with the imaginative eye. This medium was helped by the physical description of the objects, places, and characters which were supposed to be visualized in the mind of the reader. Gothic fiction was famous in that era to help the reader’s imagination by giving physical description of the objects. An English critic Patrick Kennedy defines Gothic literature as: “writing that employs dark and picturesque scenery, startling and melodramatic narrative devices, and an overall atmosphere of exoticism, mystery, fear, and dread. Often, a Gothic novel or story will revolve around a large, ancient house that conceals a terrible secret or that serves as the refuge of an especially frightening and threatening character” (Hopkins, Robert. P.p. 213). Kennedy’s definition reveals that the description of setting and buildings in an extraordinary way is norm in while producing Gothic fiction. First significant Gothic fiction example is *The Castle of Otranto (1764)* by Horace Walpole. Jane Austen is a credible Romantic era English novelist. She also is famous for fascinating the imagination of her readers. She portrays Gothic setting in her novel *Northanger Abbey* (1817). It is also an argument that she wrote Gothic comedy. Nevertheless, both writers successfully captivate the imagination of their readers. This essay discusses how the Gothic description becomes imaginative catalyst for contemplating power.

**Body**

Horace Walpole’s novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) portrays a castle of medieval age that makes this novel a typical gothic novel with unrealistic description of the building, living pictures of the deceased characters, and the arrival of the giants within the plot. The novel revolves around the story of Isabella who is expected to marry Conrad, the prince of Otranto. Manfred is the ruler of Otranto who is eager to make this marriage happen as soon as possible. His eagerness reveals first Gothic feature that this marriage is going to happen as the result of a prophecy that the castle should get its heir as soon as possible (Bruhm, Steven. P.p. 259). Horace writes: “The Castle and Lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it” (Walpole, Horace. N.p.). Manfred wants this castle to remain within his family, but his son dies suddenly before marriage. The description of his death itself makes the novel a typical Gothic novel; Conrad dies as the result of a “Giant Helmet’s attack”. Angela Wright is a known Postmodern English critic who argues that the description of a castle is the first and a bold attempt by the author of fiction to boost the imagination of his/her readers. Wright turns to be right when we discover that Walpole gives special room to the description of the castle of Otranto. The castle is not less than a mystery where supernatural creatures appear and even act. The only prince dies as the result of a giant helmet’s attack and no one looks as much shocked as one might look if such an incident happens in real life. The ruler of the castle accepts it as a fate and then plans to continue his lineage from Isabella, his son’s fiancée after his death. He plans to kill or divorce his wife Hippolita, but Isabella contradicts with his plans. He attempts to rape her and then again we notice the arrival of supernatural forces. He is distracted by the swaying feathers of the giant helmet and then appears the hero of the story: Theodore, a peasant. Walpole describes the incident in a way that the reader delves into the haunted walls of the castle: “Manfred rose to pursue her; when the moon, which was now up, and gleamed in at the opposite casement, presented to his sight the plumes of the fatal helmet, which rose to the height of the windows, waving backwards and forwards in a tempestuous manner, and accompanied with a hollow and rustling sound…. “Heaven nor hell shall impede my designed!” said Manfred, advancing again to seize the princess. At that instant, the portrait of his grandfather, which hung over the bench where they had been sitting, uttered a deep sigh, and heaved its breast” (Walpole, Horace. N.p.). It is revealed in the novel that Theodore was a noble born and he turns to be the husband of Princess Isabella. The novel is rich with such description and quotes that support the argument of Wright that the presence of a castle in a fiction story is enough to catalyze the imagination of the reader.

Jane Austen’s novel *Northanger Abbey* (1817) is not considered a Gothic fiction rather a mockery of the Gothic fiction, but the author artistically fulfills the purpose of fascinating the imagination of her readers by Gothic and mysterious description of Northanger Abbey that was a church before it became the house of General Tilney. Catherine is the heroine of the novel, she is an ordinary girl like one other famous heroine of Jane Austen Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Austen is famous for writing on contemporary social issues of women in particular. Catherine is grown up and she is ready to pursue her match that is the reason that she is allowed to travel to Bath. Catherine is fond of Gothic fiction and she always remains in imagination of supernatural incidents and mysterious discoveries. The first part of the book discusses her experiences in Bath and the second part occurs when she travels to Northanger Abbey with her lover Henry Tilney. Her experiences at Northanger Abbey reveal that Austen was not writing Gothic fiction rather a mockery of that. Catherine stays at Northanger Abbey and learns that Mrs. Tilney has died a few years ago. She is under the influence of the readings of Gothic fiction and the description of white building of the abbey boosts her supernatural imagination. She doubts that General Tileny might have killed his wife mysteriously and her spirit still haunts the building. She enters into the secret room of General Tilney when he is away. She is captured by the eyes of Henry, a clergyman and her lover. He enquires what she was doing there and being a naïve girl she tells everything straight. Henry insults her and makes her realize how poor thinking she has. Eventually, Catherine realizes her mental abnormality after excessive reading of Gothic fiction and after realization she almost abandons(Austen, Jane. N.p.). Finally, they marry after some hindrances and Catherine realizes that the life is much different than how it appears in the novels. Interestingly, Austen has criticizes exaggeration of mysterious descriptions in novels through a novel and in a mild tone. Nevertheless, Angela Wright’s argument that mere existence of castles (or alike buildings) in the novels is enough to boost the imagination of a reader.

**Conclusion**

Gothic fiction is a famous genre in English literature that has developed much in this era of technology where people are sent to the world of awe by portraying supernatural kind of pictures with the use of 3D technology. In the past, it was detailed description of the objects that was used to capture the imagination of the reader. Angela Wright argues rightly that a castle was enough in a story to haunt the reader’s mind and to catalyze his/her imagination. Horace Walpole’s novel The Castle of Otranto (1764) and Jane Austen’s novel Northanger Abbey are analyzed to evaluate the argument of Angela Wright and much shreds of the literary pieces appear to be supportive to her argument.

**Works Cited**

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