

So after talking with Jane today, I've realized that my introduction and thesis are probably going to change substantially. In essence, I think I'm going to argue that Austen satirizes the rhetoric of awe (gothic, surprise, epiphany) and finds genuine awe? wonder? in realism. I haven't worked on my paper at all to fit that new organization.

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BEGIN WITH PREFACE TO AWE

Given Jane Austen's Romantic contemporaries (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley), it is surprising that their most central theme, awe, is little associated with Austen herself. While it's true that some scholars have ventured to discuss this topic, the general public—and the average fan—sees no connection between Austen and awe. In fact, the most common description of Austen I've heard is domestically mundane, which to most is as far away from awe you can get. I believe, however, that William Wordsworth, a principle player in the history of Romanticism, would disagree. In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," Wordsworth spends a great deal of time discussing his preference for the mundane:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way . . . Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity . . . (264)

He is essentially defining the Romantic movement as a call to finding wonder in the mundane. This definition brings Austen's domestic fiction a step closer to the literature of awe but it does not close the gap entirely; her realism and social satire are still the more obvious take-aways. This paper, however, will discuss additional attributes of (the rhetoric of?) awe that can be found in Austen, namely the Gothic sublime, surprise, and epiphany. These three concepts are linked to the theme of awe in many ways and by many theorists; however, with Austen it is necessary to decipher where her use of awe is genuine and where it is satirical. This paper will explore Austen's use of these characteristics and whether her works merit acknowledgement as literature of awe.

The Gothic Sublime

Gothic literature, born from the Romantic period, is grounded in awe and specifically designed to invoke the sublime. In reference to the sublime, Hugh Blair wrote, "What are the scenes of nature that elevate the mind in the highest degree, and produce the sublime sensation? Not the gay landscape, the flowery field, or the flourishing city; but the hoary mountain, and the solitary lake; the aged forest, and the torrent falling over the rock" (31). In contrast to beauty, the sublime and the Gothic feature dark, vast grandeurs and terror-inducing haunts. These scenes set the mood for the traditional Gothic novel and play an important role in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

LIT ANALYSIS OF NORTHANGER

"*Northanger Abbey* is the novel most often regarded as Austen's explicit 'riposte to magic and mystery,' a counterthrust that does not so much wholly reject the charms of romance as transform and contain them into a mechanism of normativity (Litvak 1997)." (Illusion 104)

“Catherine’s passion—for ancient edifices as well as for Henry Tilney—is enacted (and ultimately realized) as consciousness through the experience of wonder.” (Illusion 105)

Surprise and Illusion

Surprise was a typical theme for eighteenth-century theorists and authors. Beginning with Joseph Addison, who ascribed the emotion to novelty—a middle ground between complacent beauty and astonishing greatness—surprise as an idea was soon adopted “as a key term in the emotional lexicon of artistic experience” (Miller 238). As lower form of awe, Edmund Burke, in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, abandoned surprise for the more powerful astonishment. Christopher Miller notes that “the word [astonishment] thus names an experience of terror in the face of forces beyond our control. Surprise, on the other hand, is milder than this— . . . whereas astonishment involves a solitary and utterly terrifying experience, surprise belongs to the realm of social existence” (238). Hugh Blair states the difference as such: “I am surprised, with what is new or unexpected; I am astonished, at what is vast or great; I am amazed, with what is incomprehensible; I am confounded, by what is shocking or terrible” (124).

As theory suggests, surprise is too mild and trivial to be a true representation of awe; it is a lesser form of awe, simply brought by novelties and newness. Miller, however, asserts, “Austen, who adeptly deploys the vocabulary of the gothic sublime in the abbey chapters, surely appreciated such distinctions, and in her novels she often pokes fun at abuses of the language of astonishment” (241). Austen purposefully creates characters that associate simple surprise with a ridiculous level of wonder, astonishment, and awe. The overt sensibility of these characters is often exaggerated and caricature-like, supporting the notion that Austen is parodying an incorrect use of the language of awe. ADD EXAMPLES FROM TEXT

However, in one aspect, Austen uses surprise and wonder purposefully to strengthen the reader's experience with her texts. Sonia Hofkosh's essay "The Illusionist: Northanger Abbey and Austen's Uses of Enchantment," published in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, discusses the illusion and magic inherent in Austen. She writes, "I want to approach these issues by highlighting the unfamiliar—the experience of wonder, unexpected appearances and disappearances, the flights of fairies—evoked at the scene of Austen's writing" (101). She frames the "unfamiliar" in Austen as a form of enchantment because it lies within the expected and the ordinary. Hofkosh takes two of Austen's contradictory themes, wonder and irony, and finds enchantment in their relationship: Austen continually turns her satirical beginnings into surprising endings, leaving the reader with a sense of ironic wonder. In making this point, Hofkosh uses an example from Austen's *Persuasion* to depict the journey from satire to wonder. She says, "It is the illusionist's forte . . . to make the most unlikely event look as much like 'a common-place business' as the evening card-party that culminates 'all the surprise and suspense' (*Persuasion* 245) that Anne experiences on the morning of Wentworth's declaration . . ." (102).

Regarding this enchantment of surprising endings, Hofkosh also states:

"Such enchanted effects are built into the courtship plot, a dynamic at stake for the reader as well. If we do not experience the wonder of the Bennets, that is partly because we have already suspended our disbelief in that plot as a truth universally acknowledged since the novel's opening sentence, an especially potent instance of Austenian irony which parodies the very expectations the novel will ultimately realize" (107).

The phrase "suspension of disbelief," coined by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*, essentially implies a reader overlook problems of possibility and enjoy the show. While normally a

suspension of disbelief is what enables one to experience wonder, Hofkosh is arguing the opposite: one must question Austen's statements, recognizing her irony. Only then will a reader experience the surprise and wonder of an ending that parallels such an ironic beginning[SJ8] . In essence, Austen creates wonder by creating an illusion of predictable endings that are nonetheless unexpected as a result of her satire. She purposefully blinds the reader to the very obvious ending by meeting every expectation of that which she originally satirized.

In relation to this discussion of ironic endings[SJ9] , Hofkosh says, “‘Austen and her readers allow the rabbit, or the husband, to be pulled out of the hat.’ But this is no mere ‘gimmickry’ (Levine 1981: 69-71): the realization of the girl’s desire occurs with a wave of the authorial wand that embeds magic as a fundamental element of narrative design, including the reader in the ‘general satisfaction’ its enchanted effects provide.” (107) Austen’s ironically predictable endings are only possible through the magic of the author. Just as the heroine’s journey seems unsalvageable, with the only realistic ending an unhappy one, Austen throws any sense of reality out the door and magically leaves us with a neatly wrapped story. While this is the natural arc of many stories, Austen’s use of this maneuver is ironic because it is unexpected; she creates a satire that regularly overturns the generic sentimental text, yet never completely disregards its conventions. Her satire surprises because it flips from obvious mockery to genuine romance so often; the reader is left not knowing how to separate the real from the ridiculous. Most readers, naturally enchanted by the Romantic elements, also feel a baffled enchantment at the magic show just performed.[SJ10]

Hofkosh also addresses the idea that Austen is first and foremost a realist. While some argue that realism, like the mundane, runs in an entirely different sphere than awe, Hofkosh states that realism, “however commonplace or precisely mimetic,” is representational and thus an illusion, calling realists magicians (101). In relation to Austen, Hofkosh discusses how

enchantment is directly dependent on the everyday. She says, “‘to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday’; enchantment can be understood as ‘a mood of lively and intense engagement with the world,’ and opportunity for affective attachment, disturbing and deep but also potentially generative (Bennett 2001: 11, 4)” (104).

QUOTES

“‘Witchery by daytime’ ‘to describe the kind of quotidian sorcery Austen performs in realizing the illusions of girls in her novels’” (Illusionist 102).

“Austen’s fantasmatic edge (Wilt 1980, Levine 1981)—the line, as Nancy Armstrong has recently put it, that Austen insistently draws between mystery and reference, between, we could say, a girl’s illusions and ‘what is actually before her eyes’ (Armstrong 2005: 19).”

“So if Austen seems to have vanished, into her language or as language, as voice, such a disappearance can be seen as part of the apparatus of illusion that contributes to or even constitutes our sense of what feels real—what strikes and shakes us—in her writing. In this way, she may after all share some tricks with the great dissembler, the Wizard of Oz, both when he hides behind a screen, appearing in various forms and projecting his voice so that it seems as if someone else is speaking, and also when he is revealed in the end to be ‘just a common man,’ a ventriloquist, whose magic consists of ‘making believe’ with paper and paint, needle and thread and bits of silk but who still performs it quite to satisfact
