

Freud, The Gothic, and Coat Symbolism in *Northanger Abbey*

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Freud declared that in a woman's dreams an overcoat is "unquestionably shown to be a symbol for a man."¹ He seemed slightly puzzled: "it is certainly not easy to guess why *hats* and *overcoats* or *cloaks* are employed the same way [as sexual symbols], but their symbolic significance is unquestionable."² Generally an overcoat is regarded as having a "genital reference."³ Drawing on these insights, Joanne Rea has discussed cloak imagery in *Jane Eyre*.⁴ *Northanger Abbey*, which satirizes the Gothic material that so influenced Charlotte Brontë, is obviously a very different work from *Jane Eyre*. But as Jane Austen makes six separate references to coats or great coats in the course of the novel, an examination of them is in order.

The first reference (Bk. 1, ch. 11) concerns Mr. Allen's unwillingness to wear a great coat, even in the rain. The speaker is his wife:

I hope that Mr. Allen will put on his great coat when he goes, but I dare say he will not, for he would rather do anything in the world than walk out in a great coat; I wonder he should dislike it, it must be so comfortable.⁵

At first sight, this may seem to be just a piece of clothes-related trivia typical of Mrs. Allen. But given Freud's comments, and other references in the novel, a greater significance emerges. The Allens are childless, and Mr. Allen's unwillingness to wear that symbol of male power and sexuality, a great coat, can be linked to this state. Mrs. Allen's wonder at his dislike may be a wistful comment on their marriage. It also represents a speculation on her part about the unknown world of the male; as Freud remarked, "the wish to be a man is found . . . frequently, consciously or unconsciously, in women."⁶ Clothes of course also represent a kind of child-substitute for Mrs. Allen, a point Jane Austen makes clear: "Mrs. Thorpe talked chiefly of her children, and Mrs. Allen of her gowns."⁷ *Northanger Abbey* is concerned with Catherine Morland's process of maturation, which includes the awakening of her sexuality. Mr. Allen, her neighbour at Fullerton, is a link with her childhood world, and his non-association with a sexual symbol marks how that world is one into which male sexuality has not intruded, in Catherine's experience—"She had reached the age of seventeen, without having seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility."⁸

The second reference (Bk. 2, ch. 1) comes in a sentence of high-spirited comedy concerning Captain Tilney's indifference towards Catherine:

He cannot be the instigator of the three villains in horsemen's great coats, by whom she will hereafter be forced into a travelling-chaise and four, which will drive off at incredible speed.⁹

Here male power over women is clearly linked with the wearing of a great coat. It also symbolizes a sexual threat—abduction followed by seduction or a forced marriage. The powerful visualization of “great coats” in this passage prepares the reader for the future symbolic use of coats.

The next two references come in the same chapter (Bk. 2, ch. 5). Catherine and the Tilneys are preparing to leave for Northanger:

[The General's] great coat, instead of being brought for him to put on directly, was spread out in a curricule in which he was to accompany his son.¹⁰

Again, this seems just a trifling domestic detail. But more can be said. General Tilney is a man of considerable authority, used to being obeyed. He is aggressive, imperious and domineering. But, believing Catherine to be an heiress, he does his best when she is around (by no means always successfully) to set aside these attributes, becoming, as it were, a smiling tiger. He tries to be open and hospitable, as a means of entrapping Catherine and her supposed wealth. This is all symbolised by the coat being spread out for him. (Later, when he expels Catherine from the Abbey, the reader may imagine him leaving his carriage clad in his coat, entering hastily, and wearing it still as with outraged authority he pronounces sentence of banishment to an appalled Eleanor.)

The other reference in this chapter concerns Henry. Catherine mentally enthuses that:

his hat sat so well, and the innumerable capes of his great coat looked so becomingly important!—To be driven by him, next to being dancing with him, was certainly the greatest happiness in the world.¹¹

Catherine is obviously sexually attracted to Henry. Her attraction is displaced into praise of those sexual symbols, a hat and a coat. The reference to dancing (and, later, to Henry being “coated”¹² before riding) is also of interest in Freudian terms, as “special representations of sexual intercourse” include “rhythmical activities such as *dancing, riding* and *climbing*.”¹³ The phrase “becomingly important” links appearance to authority.

At Bath Catherine has been reading Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and her enthusiasm for Henry's appearance echoes Annette's praise for Ludovico, in that novel:

a tall, handsome, young man—Signor Cavigni's lacquey—who always wears his cloak with such a grace, thrown round his left arm, and his hat set on so smartly, all on one side.¹⁴

Annette and Ludovico will eventually marry, as will Catherine and Henry. That Catherine's praise is modelled on Annette's is ironic, for Henry will later cause Catherine to reject Mrs. Radcliffe's works as misleading. There are a number of references to coats or cloaks in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and they are often linked with masculine power and sexual threat.¹⁵

The next reference (Bk. 2, ch. 8) also concerns Henry. Being shown round the Abbey by the General, in Henry's absence, Catherine passes through

a dark little room, owning Henry's authority, and strewed with his litter of books, guns and great coats.¹⁶

This room, Henry's den, represents a female space (Freud associates rooms with the uterus¹⁷) colonised by strongly masculine items like guns (as rifles are meant, these are obviously phallic) and coats. Books are a female symbol.¹⁸ The balance of male and female in Henry's nature will be discussed later. We may note how appropriate is the word "authority"; its use here combines two meanings — that the room is Henry's own can be determined by "authority" in terms of "weight of testimony" (*OED*, definition 6) given by the



presence of his possessions, but “power” (*OED*, definition 1) is also suggested.

The final reference (Bk. 2, ch. 11 — with a neat symmetry, the final reference occurs in the eleventh chapter of the second volume, while the first reference came in the eleventh chapter of the first volume) shows Henry about to leave for Woodston, “booted and great coated.”¹⁹ Now this makes clear that Henry normally wears a coat when riding. We may recall how, two chapters earlier, Henry encounters Catherine unexpectedly, near his late mother’s room, after climbing the stairs from the stable-entrance, on his way to his own room. We can therefore assume that at this moment he is still wearing his coat. Dressed like this, he deduces Catherine’s fantasies about his father, and exposes their errors. This is the climactic moment of the Gothic section of the novel, and a crucial point in Catherine’s maturation: and it is brought about by a man dressed in a powerful symbol of male sexuality and authority. Henry, a hero in a horseman’s great coat, by force (of argument) strips Catherine of her delusions.

These delusions are specifically described as being drawn from reading the works of Mrs. Radcliffe and her imitators. Catherine read them in the company of Isabella, her ultimately false friend. Henry shows Catherine that women writers of the Radcliffe school are also false friends, deceiving and misleading their unwary readers.

The references to Henry’s coat are important in our assessment of his character. When we first meet him at Bath, at the same time as does Catherine, he seems a rather androgynous figure. He discusses muslins, and the keeping of journals by young ladies. As Erickson noted, “his views and knowledge of circulating library fiction seem to have been unusual for a man.”²⁰ He assumes an androgynous *persona*—“forming his features into a set smile, and affectedly softening his voice, he added, with a simpering air.”²¹ He seems to be as much at home in the female sphere as in the male world, and Catherine thinks him, and almost calls him, “strange.”²² This is not perhaps what most girls think at first of the man they are to marry, nor is it the reaction that the man is most likely to desire. But Henry is a good enough dancer to attract Catherine, and, it is hinted, cause her to dream about him. The identification of Henry, in later chapters, with heavily masculine sexual symbols, removes our sense of his androgyny. His familiarity with the female sphere reveals itself to be that of a cheerfully chauvinist colonist. The man whose simpering and knowledge of the contents of the private journals of young ladies might seem to make a voyeur is rather a kind of colonizer of minds, and highly investigative—one, in fact, of the “voluntary spies”²³ of whom he considers society to be constituted. His final masculinity is

proved by his refusal to think no more of Catherine, and her defiance of his father.

We might expect Gothic and Romantic works like the novels of Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Brontë to be especially susceptible to Freudian analysis, but Jane Austen in her very different way also deploys symbols with associations that Freud would later codify. Had she been able to read his work, it probably would not have shocked or surprised her; and, as a satirist herself, especially in *Northanger Abbey*, she would hopefully have appreciated the use of that novel to make some satirical points about the over-solemn application by literary critics of the decrees of the dark gods of Vienna, which this article has lightheartedly attempted to accomplish.

NOTES

- ¹ Sigmund Freud, "Observations and Examples from Analytic Practice," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1953-1967), 13:196. Subsequent citations refer to this edition.
- ² Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," 15:155.
- ³ Freud, 15:157.
- ⁴ Joanne E. Rea, "Cloak Imagery in Jane Eyre," *English Language Notes*, 25 (1987), 53-60.
- ⁵ *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols., 3rd ed. (London, 1932-1934), 5:83.
- ⁶ Freud, 15:155.
- ⁷ Austen, 36.
- ⁸ Austen, 16.
- ⁹ Austen, 131.
- ¹⁰ Austen, 155.
- ¹¹ Austen, 157.
- ¹² Austen, 210.
- ¹³ Freud, 15:157.
- ¹⁴ Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London, 1966), 246.
- ¹⁵ For example, the banditti have "a cloak of plain black, which, covering the person entirely, hung down from the stirrups" (Radcliffe, 301-02); when Montoni leaves the room "he burst from Emily, leaving his cloak, in her hand" (305); "Barnardine was wrapped in a long dark cloak" (346).
- ¹⁶ Austen, 183.
- ¹⁷ Freud, 15:156.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Austen, 210.
- ²⁰ Lee Erickson, "The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 30 (1990), 578.
- ²¹ Austen, 26.
- ²² Austen, 28.
- ²³ Austen, 197.