

Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey : A Parody of Gothic Novels



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June, 2011

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Jane Austen's earliest novel *Northanger Abbey* was published in 1818 after her death. It is both a witty and sympathetic burlesque of the popular late eighteenth century Gothic genre. Interest in Gothic elements of the novel has however often obscured the other important targets of Austen's satire - 'The Sentimental novel'. When Miss Austen was very young she amused herself with writing burlesque, "ridiculing the improbable events and exaggerated sentiments which had met with sundry silly romances." 1

By 1874, when *The Mysteries of Udolpho* captured the reading public, Jane Austen had at least four years of authorship behind her. "Having cleared away the lachrymose debris, and in the process grown aware and confident of her literary powers," 2 she may have felt that simple parody, even of so promising and fresh a target as Gothic novel, was too restrictive for her now; that striking out in the novels of her own, which would treat the familiar verifiable, renewable world, was a more stimulating prospect for the time being at least. Meanwhile, however the Gothic enthusiasm had mounted to a fury. The temptation to dismantle became too strong for the ironist and *Northanger Abbey* was the result.

Northanger Abbey is by far the most 'bookish' of all of Jane Austen's novels. It insists on pointing up, and treating comically the incongruities between literature and life; and the tendencies of the novelist to imitate each other rather than imitating the realities of life. In this sense, *Northanger Abbey* is a novel about writing novels; it can be termed as an 'anti-novel'.

It has no doubt been said that Austen began this story of an antiheroic hero and heroine in pure-spirit of parody. As a minor work of art, it is a criticism of both art and life. Both the elements are integrated so that life criticizes literature.

Here the burlesque is of the obvious kind what was practised by Fielding and Dickens; all the world of fiction is its victim; novel of the 'sentimental' and of the 'horror-school'. There are two themes, which determine the novel's structure and Catherine Morland, the heroine, is central to both. Catherine has first to learn how to face the difficulties of life. The two themes are clearly denounced. Chapter I begins "No one who had ever

seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine" 3. And when Catherine become free from her romantic fancies the second theme is announced : "The anxieties of common life began soon to succeed to the alarms of romance" 4

Northanger Abbey is a good point of departure because of boldness with which it flaunts its burlesque intention. The pattern of its burlesque element however is by no means simple. Though it is not subtly interwoven with the rest of the fabric, it is elaborately and ingeniously contrived.

In *Northanger Abbey*, for the mature and most conscious artist the problem of parody has become more complex. The problem is to write simultaneously a Gothic novel and a realistic novel, and to gain and keep the reader's acceptance of the latter while proving that former is false and absurd. Instead of reproducing the Gothic types of character and situation, she presents their anti-types in the actual world, and organizes these into a domestic narrative that parallels or intersects, and at all points is intended to invalidate the Gothic narrative to which it diligently corresponds.

There is not much to tell about the story of Catherine; the anti-heroine of the novel is notoriously led astray by addiction to fiction, by her indulgence in Gothic romances. Under their influence she becomes temporarily blind to the real world of fact. The novel describes how under a proper guidance of Henry Tilney, the hero or can be said an anti-hero, she ultimately sheds her romantic blinders and comes to see things as they are.

Austen starts by debunking the gothic conventions. Her ridicule of Gothic conventions is more immediately followed by her attempt to produce with them the very curiosity, tension, suspense and apprehension they aim at, which Henry Tilney has just mocked and Catherine has just repudiated.

Henry's mockery of gothic conventions takes the form of a very memorable, sustained parody in which he imagines several Gothic adventures for Catherine at the Abbey. Parody has many functions, the first of which is sheer comedy. Austen takes the opportunity to revel in cliches of Gothic fiction, not simply it stock situations and stock props, but also its stock descrip-

tive phrases. Though Henry conflates these brilliantly and assembles the hackneyed adjectives of Gothic description. The 'dimly lighted' hall, the 'expiring embers' of a fire, the 'ancient house-keeper', 'gloomy passages' and 'gloomy chamber' too lofty and extensive. These cliches are relentlessly pursued throughout his narration.

John Thorpe, Isabella's oafish brother, does not recommend the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe to us, because he finds some 'fun and nature' in them (Which is exactly what they lack). However it is Isabella Thorpe herself who first explicitly introduces the Gothic theme. The *Mysteries of Udolpho* is the first novel Isabella Thorpe brings Catherine to read and she promises her also. The Italian and seven other Gothic Romances that she names. Catherine is moving steadily toward Gothic world. Marvin Mudrick has made the point that it "demands too abrupt a transition from Catherine the matter affect ingenue to Catherine the self-appointed gothic heroine."⁵

Catherine's first brief adventure; the 'mysterious chest', reinforces and extends for her and for the reader the effects of Henry's parody. Catherine takes the posture of a Gothic heroine and examines the object. The comic anti-climax follows : she discovers just the counterpane. The reader is lulled once more with fairly simple parody.

The second adventure, of the 'mysterious manuscript' follows hard upon the first but is treated more seriously. This section is highly complex, for within it Austen modulates between close imitation of Gothic conventions and several methods of distancing the reader from them. Ultimately, the 'precious manuscript' is turned out to be just 'washing bills'. After her foolish discovery Catherine feels 'humbled to the dust'⁶, but she doesn't easily aside her folly. She doesn't learn any proper lesson from her folly. She still continues her foolish adventure.

The final Gothic adventure in *Northanger Abbey* is more lengthy and most discussed. It is Catherine's reading of *General Tilney* as a Radcliffean villain. Catherine's most serious mistake is to imagine that *General Tilney* has been responsible for the death of his wife. Henry gently rebukes her. It is the climax of the novel: "Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicious you have entertained. What you have been judging from? Remember the country and age in which we live. Remember that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of probable, your own observations of what is passing around you"⁷. Henry's words prompt 'Tears of Shame'⁸ to Catherine. Now Catherine comes to realize that it has been all a voluntary, self-created delusion'.⁹

Indeed, what Catherine comes to realize gives authority to the particular provenance of Jane Austen's Characteristic insights. "Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland countries of England, was to be looked for".¹⁰

So Catherine's education or self-actualisation is a process which highlights the need to deck the violence of gothic imagination. Catherine is learning to see clearly: The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done.

Thus it may be seen that Catherine's perception of the excess of fictional representations of life leads to process of the recovery of true self in which she is aided by Henry Tilney - a process which highlights the need to check the violence of the Gothic imagination in order to do away with the forces inhibiting the exploratory self which alone can ensure self-actualization.

REFERENCE

- 1B.C. Southam ed., *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), pp. 53-54. 2Marvin Mudrick, "Irony Versus Gothicism," in B.C. Southam, p.73. 3Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818; rpt. London : Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1962), p.13 4Ibid., p.201. 5John Hardy, "Catherine Morland," in *Austen's Heroines*, ed. Robert Liddell (1950; rpt. London : Lowe and Brydone Ltd. 1969), p.24. 6Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* , P. 173. 7Ibid, p.197. 8Ibid, p.198. 9Ibid, p.199. 10Ibid, p.200.