



## NORTHANGER ABBEY: A PARODY OF GOTHIC NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT

Jane Austen is one of the literary giants of the eighteenth century. She condemns the wrong customs of society and tries to reform it by her works. Published posthumously in 1818 Austen's shortest major work, *Northanger Abbey* makes fun of the prevailing fashion for the Gothic novel. Most of the novelists of her time were practicing the genre; Austen does something different to them: she uses the novel to satirize the popular literature of her time, especially Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Catherine Morland, the protagonist of the novel, mingles her Gothic imagination in real life and sees everything in the same view, but later Austen makes realize her that evil lies not in buildings and their surroundings, but in the hearts of men.

Key Words: Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Gothic Novel, Catherine Morland, Parody

Jane Austen is the first great woman writer in English and, arguably, England's first great novelist. She is one of those literary artists, who not only laid the foundation of novel, but also give it to a new direction. A supremely comic writer and moralist, Austen redefines novel as a delicate instrument to reveal human nature. She is one of the few novelists in the world literature who is regarded as a "classic" and yet is widely read. She wrote six major novels, however, only four novels were published during her life time that established her reputation in literary circle anonymously. Her earliest novel *Northanger Abbey* and last completed novel *Persuasion* were the novels which were not published during her life-time. The two novels were originally published together as a four-volume set in December 1817(1818 on the title page) by her brother Henry Austen. He also provided a 'Biographical Notice' at the beginning of the set that revealed the identity of the anonymous 'Lady' whose previous four novels had won for a keen and

devoted following, which even included the Prince Regent.

*Northanger Abbey*, though published posthumously, was probably the first to be completed, in the nearest to its original form. It belongs with *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* to an early period of writing, though all three were revised in later life, after the author had moved in 1809, with her widowed mother and her sister, to Chawton, the Hampshire home of her father's brother, who had come into riches. The novel was written by Austen in 1798, revised for the press in 1803, and sold in the same year for £10 to a London bookseller, Crosby & Co., who after allowing it to remain for many years on his shelves, was content to sell it back to the novelist's brother, Henry Austen, for the exact sum that he had paid for it at the beginning, not knowing that the writer was already the author of four popular novels. In March 1817 (Letter 141) Jane told Fanny Knight: "Miss Catherine is put upon the Shelve for the present, and I do not know that she will ever come out" (Faye

1997,182). The novel was further revised before being brought out posthumously in late December 1817 (1818 given on the title-page), as the first two volumes of a four-volume set with *Persuasion*.

In many respects *Northanger Abbey* is the most light-hearted of Austen's novels, yet at its core is a serious, unsentimental commentary on love and marriage of nineteenth century British style. Written by Austen at a tender age (though not published until the year following her death), *Northanger Abbey* features incredibly human complex characters full of wit and charm. Most literary critics refer the novel as Austen's Gothic parody because it satirizes the form and conventions of the Gothic novels especially Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* that were popular during the time when Austen wrote it. Decrepit castles, locked rooms, mysterious chests, cryptic notes, and tyrannical fathers all figure into *Northanger Abbey*, but with a decidedly satirical twist.

Begun as a satire on the improbable plots and characters of the typical Gothic novel, *Northanger Abbey* developed into a treatment of Austen's favourite theme, the initiation of a young woman into the complexities of adult social life. Catherine Morland, the young protagonist of the novel has been heavily influenced by these gruesome ideas, yet is entranced by them. She mingles her Gothic imagination in real life and sees everything in the same view, but later Austen makes her realize that evil lies not in buildings and their surroundings, but in the hearts of men. She was trying to reveal that everyday domestic situations have their own horrors; that oppression often takes place within the home, and that real life can be all too 'Gothic' for some people. She forces Catherine to realize the difference between illusion and reality, and forces upon her the real evil of the seventeenth century; the overbearing, selfish, and materialistic patriarchal figure. Walter Anderson, a critic remarks that *Northanger Abbey* presents a struggle between "fatuous imaginings" and "common, sensible pleasures in reading," in which Austen "intends her work . . . to compete with and ultimately outstrip Gothic romances" (Anderson 1984, 498).

The novel is an effective parody of the Gothic genre as it depicts not only the contents of

the typical novel, but how they may have affected their readers. As Catherine; a young woman's mind can be easily influenced by such things. Her near-obsession reflects that of the society of her time. Through using Gothic themes and motifs, Austen creates an effective atmosphere but rather than creating a horrific and mysterious story from them, she clearly depicts the effects the genre had on young women during their time of writing. She shows the societal opinion of the Gothic, her own opinion of Gothic novelists, and how the genre can influence one's imagination. For Catherine, *Northanger Abbey* symbolizes an imagined ideal. As soon as she enters the abbey, she begins to think of herself as the heroine of a Gothic novel. Unlike Bath, which is simply a pleasant tourist town, the Abbey is a place of mystery and perhaps even adventure, at least in Catherine's mind. She makes the mistake of applying Gothic novels to real life situations; for example, later in the novel she begins to suspect General Tilney of having murdered his deceased wife. When the Abbey turns out to be disappointingly normal, Catherine uses her memory of the abbeys from her novel-reading to make it more frightening. She soon learns that the world is not all melodrama and eventually matures and marries a very sensible man.

Catherine is an enchanting character, whose innocence, and naiveté make her charming from beginning to end; while her overactive imagination leaves the reader chuckling in delight at the many crazy notions she creates within that bright head of hers. What keeps the heroine likable is her capacity to learn from her mistakes. She is certainly the least mature of Austen's heroines but she is never boring. Catherine, enjoying the frisson of fear produced by her own literary imagination, scares herself and displeases the man who loves her. Nevertheless, she has a well-developed sense of social duty, and is capable of learning from experience.

Catherine's character grows throughout the novel, as she gradually becomes a real heroine, learning from her mistakes when she is exposed to the outside world in Bath. Catherine soon learns that Gothic novels are really just fiction and do not always correspond with reality. In addition,

Catherine Morland realises she is not to rely upon others, such as Isabella, who are negatively influential on her, but to be single minded and independent. It is only through bad experiences that Catherine really begins to properly mature individually and grow up.

Austen turns the conventions of eighteenth-century novels on their head, by making her heroine a plain and undistinguished girl from a middle-class family, allowing the heroine to fall in love with the hero before he has a serious thought of her, and exposing the heroine's romantic fears and curiosities as groundless. In fact, the story of the novel deals with the familiar Austen themes of social mores and the pursuit of a suitable husband. It is a light and commonplace tale of young love told with the wit and wisdom of one of England's greatest authors.

*Northanger Abbey* is simply comic and lacks most of the moral concerns and discriminations of the other Austen's novels. This difference extends to the character of the hero, Henry Tilney. No other Austen hero is so superior in wit to the heroine, and yet it is difficult to claim that he educates Catherine in anything but a greater consciousness of convention. He does not supply a moral standard which the heroine must learn to accept or move toward, as Emma moves toward Mr. Knightley's. Nor is he in need of any enlightenment or reformation parallel to the heroine's, as Mr. Darcy is. His function instead is to make jokes about literary and social convention. He is alive to all clichés of feeling and language, and his insistence on using words discriminatingly is relentlessly but hardly 'moral'.

The domineering father of Henry and Eleanor, Captain Tilney like several characters in the novel, is very concerned with material things. Tilney is not a storybook villain, or even a villain from a Gothic novel. He is realistic man, a wealth-obsessed real estate developer who gets in the way of his children's happiness. Like John Thorpe, he is given to boasting and preoccupied with himself when he is not meddling in his children's lives. General Tilney is obsessed with money and is only interested in Catherine as a prospective daughter-in-law, for he is under the impression that she is from a wealthy family. He takes great pride in his home,

Northanger Abbey, which he has refurbished himself. He is preoccupied with both earning money and spending it. He has a gruff nature which makes some, such as Catherine Morland, think poorly of him. General Tilney breaks proper convention and the rules of hospitality by suddenly and severely cutting Catherine out of the lives of the Tilney's. The humiliation she suffered by the action of General Tilney is worse than any physically evil or horrifying deed he could commit. As Maria Edgeworth wrote to her Aunt:

The behaviour of General in "Northanger Abbey," packing off the young lady without a servant or the common civilities which any bear of a man, not say gentleman, would have shown, is quite outrageously out of drawing and out of nature (Augustus 1985,63).

In this way, the novel has examined ways of understanding the world, and the links between these ways as they exist in fiction and in reality, but it will not resolve itself into a too-easy aphorism about moral or psychological or social development that Catherine's progress could be said to demonstrate, and the reader who needs such a thing must devise his own. So, too, this novel about an ordinary unheroinely heroine ends, fully in the spirit of the opening pages with the narrator deliberately reminding us that this is, itself, a novel shaped by art; it is not 'life'. The resolution of the difficulties of heroine and hero is so contrived as to be a joke about the clumsy unreality and the necessity of endings in fiction. Likewise there is a claim, for the 'perfect' future happiness of the hero and heroine that can only belong to the fictional world. As a final joke at the expense of the reader, in the closing words of the novel's last sentence a spurious debate is initiated about what this novel can be said to 'recommend'. Austen warns young women in *Northanger Abbey* of the folly of mixing fact and fantasy, and reveals there is nothing scary at all about old buildings, and then continues to warn of the destruction that certain men can bring into their lives. She advises her female readers to be on the lookout for these men, and to protect themselves against them by being strong and

independent. For in Gothic horrors, and in real life, that is the only way they can defeat evil.

The story of *Northanger Abbey* is really the story of the literary influence of fiction in Austen's day. At a time when fiction was still spoken about in whispers and the subject of much debate, Ms. Austen was writing this epithet to the genre. Many believe that *Northanger* was the means of Austen's scorn for Gothic novels. However, a closer look reveals a bold defense of the fiction writers of her day. This, alone, makes the book a treasure chest - because not only does Austen give you a picture of society's views of all things poetic, but actually lists novels that were popular in her time. Specifically, she lists novels and authors she personally enjoyed. As a critic remarks: 'Thus, like all Jane Austen's novels this one is, with all its lightness and humour, firmly based on questions of moral right and wrong.' While Jan Fergus say:

From any approach, *Northanger Abbey* remains the least satisfying of Austen's novels, and the slightest in emotional and moral content. It is so, however, with a purpose. *Northanger Abbey* intentionally differs from the five other novels in almost every possible way. (Fergus 1983,18).

In this way we can say *Northanger Abbey* is a social satire, romance, social criticism, and comedy of manners. It is a portrait of a certain society in a certain time; it is a universal commentary on human foibles, gender relations, class and money. It exposes the difference between reality and fantasy and questions who can be trusted as a true companion and who might actually be a shallow, false friend. The novel's central theme, common to *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*, is the peril of confusing life and art.

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