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Significant Authors: Jane Austen

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*Northanger Abbey*: Jane Austen’s Satire on the Incongruence between Gothic Literature and Common Life

Published posthumously in 1817, Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* is perhaps best known as her first written novel as well as its satiric interpretation of the Gothic literature that was popular at the time. In *Northanger Abbey,* Austen’s portrayal of the Morland family as common rather than romantic, her humorous characterization of Catherine Morland and her self-expectations, and her allusions to elements of Gothic works popularized by authors such as Ann Radcliffe and Regina Maria Roche cement the novel as a commentary on the over-dramatized elements of romantic literature, especially as Catherine attempts to implement them into her own life. In her writing, Austen emphasizes the overall message that more often than not, the events in Gothic literature are largely incompatible – and not necessarily more desirable – with the occurrences in everyday life.

At the beginning of the novel, readers are introduced to the irony of Catherine Morland’s circumstances, as she is a young girl – determined to be a heroine in her own imagined adventure – whose upbringing and family life could not seem to be more ordinary. Austen writes at the novel’s opening, “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her” (Austen 5). Austen, who takes on the role of a writer determined to tell the story of Catherine in a spellbinding narrative is often disappointed by the lack of adventure by which Catherine is plagued. Stuart M. Tave, author of *Some Words of Jane Austen* comments on this part Austen plays: “The art of the author who must tell the story is continually defeated...it is inadequate to define this very plain family which insists on acting with the common feelings of common life” (Tave 36). In this sense, Austen essentially writes a story within a story, meaning that *Northanger Abbey* is not explicitly a literary burlesque, but is what writer Frank J. Kearful says is claimed to be both a Gothic satire novel and a straightforward fiction, like Austen’s previously published works. He argues, “The novel as a literary type is, in fact, significantly different from satire as a literary type, both in intrinsic structure and in the illusion its fiction creates. Whereas a novel typically creates an imaginatively self-contained world, the imagined world of satire exists only through its implied or indirect reference to a world outside its own” (Kearful 513). In simpler terms, *Northanger Abbey* should not be observed strictly as a satire, but also as a lighthearted fiction emphasizing the underlying message that the romance of popular, sensational novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is unrealistic, overrated, and wholly incongruent with the occurrences of everyday life. By using Bath and Northanger Abbey as the primary settings, Austen is able to both write satirically and tell Catherine’s story in a similar manner as her previously published novels.

Despite Catherine’s “common” upbringing, her time spent reading a plethora of Gothic novels serve to convince her that like her beloved heroines, she too is capable of being the heroine of her story. However in the first chapter of *Northanger Abbey,* the description of Catherine’s character for the most part contrasts the common characteristics of a novel heroine. Described as “plain” with “a thin awkward figure,” tomboyish with little apt for gardening, music, and drawing during the adolescent portion of her years (Austen 6), Catherine is not the heroine that she often reads of. Instead, Avrom Fleishman alludes to Austen’s comedic reference to Catherine as a heroine in training as well as the obvious differences between Catherine and her favorite heroines in his essay “The Socialization of Catherine Morland.” In it he writes, “Every schoolboy knows Catherine Morland as an innocent who goes out to discover the world as romance and finds instead the harsh realities of the social nexus in which she lives...Gothic romance proving no appropriate model in a country neither medieval nor romantic,” adding that throughout the narrative, Catherine is forced to reconcile with the irony of the realities of her situations versus her perceived, fantasized notions of how her story “should” play out (Fleishman 649).

Arguably, one of Catherine’s redeeming qualities may be the fact that she is generally well-read, particularly within the realm of Gothic literature, although this characteristic also serves as the bane of her misadventures in the form of an overactive imagination. While Catherine’s preference of novel genre lies most with the Gothic, it is evident in the beginning of *Northanger Abbey* that Catherine is also familiar with the works of Pope, Gray, Thompson, and Shakespeare (Austen 7). However, the Gothic genre tends to have the greater influence on her thinking. One pivotal moment of the novel in which Catherine’s imagination leads to her downfall is when she is utterly convinced that the cabinet in her room at Northanger Abbey *must* contain an object of mystery (Austen 115-117). In this scene, she knowingly – try as she might to convince readers otherwise – compares her situation to the heroines in her beloved novels.

Within the first chapter, Catherine expects that her adventure should begin upon her arrival into Bath with the Allens. The concept of imagined expectations on Catherine’s part is crucial in understanding *Northanger Abbey* as a Gothic burlesque or humorous interpretation of the Gothic genre. Again, the influence of popular Gothic literature rests heavily on Catherine’s ego, as she is determined to run into dangerous scenarios, mystery, love, and other mishaps. Catherine views her less than exciting life in Fullerton as a limitation to her perceived role as a heroine, and her journey to Bath as a means of adventure, a point emphasized by Tave: “So many kinds of false freedom from limitation are offered [Austen’s] characters...In the eager expectations of Catherine Morland, romance is an art of exciting surprise, its events more eventful, its emotions more moving, altogether a higher adventure than the life she observes” (Tave 31-32). Keeping this in mind, it is evident that Austen uses Catherine’s unmet expectations to relay the idea that the scenarios found in Gothic-type literature are not to be expected in reality.

Upon her arrival into Bath, Catherine is disappointed by the want of any incidents to interrupt the journey: “It was performed with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero” (Austen 10). Throughout both volumes, Catherine’s expectations are continually unmet, a subject of humor for readers but a point of frustration for the female protagonist. For example, during Catherine’s stay at Northanger Abbey with the Tilneys, Catherine imagines that both the chest and the cabinet in her bedroom must contain some sort of heirloom or another object worth discovering, but ultimately comes to the quick conclusion that this is not the case. Likewise, Catherine’s expectations of Northanger Abbey are inspired at best, but fall short when she becomes more familiar with the premises. Of her Gothic-inspired delusions Waldo S. Glock argues in his “Catherine Morland’s Gothic Delusions: A Defense of *Northanger Abbey*”: “Her primary fault, the Gothic infatuation that seems to disrupt the harmonious balance of the novel, becomes the symbolic mark of Catherine’s charmingly enthusiastic enthrallment to the power of the imagination” (Glock 35).

The climax of *Northanger Abbey* and the end to Catherine’s fantastical delusions occurs when she encounters Henry Tilney after seeing the deceased Mrs. Tilney’s bedchamber. Initially convinced that General Tilney was *not* a devoted husband to his wife, and likely the cause of her premature death, Catherine is mortified to learn quite the opposite through an annoyed Henry: “If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to – Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained” (Austen 136). Immediately in the next chapter, Catherine admits to herself that all “visions of romance were over,” her mind “completely awakened” (Austen 136) upon the realization that all her fantasies would remain just those – fantasies.

A hopeless romantic, Catherine’s fondness for Gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho* prompts her to expect the same or similar events that Radcliffe’s characters encounter to cross her own path. In this way, Catherine is accustomed to exaggerating even the smallest of scenarios, which Tave describes as imposing her expectations in order to create oddity (Tave 45), and her habit of setting high expectations which are almost always dashed as a “dependable trait” (38). Common characteristics of Gothic literature include drama, suspense, horror, elements of mystery, secrets and usually demonstrate the tension within the novel through vivid imagery pathetic fallacy. Although Catherine did experience a violent thunderstorm during her stay at the abbey, the remaining “mysteries” of the abbey are purely imposed by Catherine. In Jan Fergus’s *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, Fergus asserts that Austen’s intent in writing *Northanger Abbey* was to entertain her audience by satirizing elements of popular Gothic literature rather than maintaining the writing style typical of her previous novels (Fergus 7). Though Catherine’s Gothic-inspired, imaginative whims lessen by the close of the novel, even Catherine’s unceremonious homecoming is a subject of satire, as Catherine does not perceive the end of her adventures to reflect that of a Gothic heroine’s: “I bring back my heroine to her home in solitude and disgrace,” Austen writes, “and no sweet elation of spirits can lead me into minuteness...Swiftly therefore shall her post-boy drive through the village, amid the gaze of Sunday groups, and speedy shall be her descent from it” (Austen 160).

Yet despite Catherine’s seeming lack of adventure, Austen successfully implements the idea that any notion that real life might be comparable to the romances of Gothic literature is mistaken. Rather than serve merely as a condemnation of all contemporary Gothic fiction, Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* with the purpose of revealing the both the delight and folly with which many readers take in reading such sensational novels (Fergus 37). Fergus writes, “Written in response to contemporary fiction, [*Northanger Abbey*] exhibits the most visibly comic relation to that fiction of all Austen’s full-length novels. It insists on pointing up, and treating comically, the incongruities between literature and life, and the tendencies of novels to imitate each other rather than life” (Fergus 11). Tave’s argument supports this idea, claiming that Austen was “probably” disconcerted by the false but often believed concept that fiction is more glamorous than actuality (Tave 64).

Rather than focusing her writing solely on satirizing the Gothic genre, Austen also provides the underlying message for her readers, which reveals the inconsistencies of such romantic works with common, everyday life. This is a prominent theme in *Northanger Abbey,* as asserted by Glock, who comments upon Austen’s implementation of the idea of “the persuasive power of the imagination” and “the persuasive power of literature to reconcile or transcend the commonplace logic of events” (Glock 35). By portraying Catherine as common rather than reflective of a Gothic heroine, incorporating numerous scenarios in which Catherine’s fictitious expectations are largely unmet, and alluding to characteristics of contemporary Gothic literature to demonstrate the incongruences between Catherine’s real life and her imagined one, Austen not only humorously responds to popularized Gothic fiction, but reveals an avid reader’s tendency to romanticize common life in order to fit a seemingly more desirable but imagined one.

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