

Review Article

Satire and Humour in Jane Austen's 'Northanger Abbey'

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A B S T R A C T

'Northanger Abbey' is a commentary on as well as satire of the popular Gothic novels of Austen's era. She was exploiting public interest in the creaky house, creaky older man and frightened virginal young heroine tropes of the era's popular Gothic novel. As it is in one of the hardest novels of Austen, people miss its satire. Here, we get a brilliant satire on the ridiculousness of the events, settings, and emotions of gothic novels in general.

Keywords: Commentary, Exploiting, Virginal, Brilliant Satire, Ridiculousness, Settings

Introduction

Jane Austen is often referred to as a satirist, although the genres of her novels are diverse. Her great achievement is that contrary to previous satirists like Pope or Swift, her goals are perfectly reachable and achievable. She does not describe society according to a moral standard as they used to do. On the contrary, she claims that virtue is at hand, ideals are achievable. Consequently, her novels are rather didactic. They show the reader what is superficial in people's attitude and how they can chase away this superficiality. Parody is the device Jane Austen used in the accomplishment of her satire. And such is our definition of the satire according to the 'Oxford Companion to the English Language':

*"A literary attack through ridicule, irony and parody, in verse or prose, and intended to arouse amuse contempt for its target."*¹

Sutherland defines the satire in his 'English Satire':

*"It is the depiction of the follies and imperfections and faults of men and women."*²

In our case, 'Northanger Abbey' is a satire in which Jane

Austen depicts her society and questions its conventions and values. She mocks 18th century literature and more specifically Radcliffean Gothic literature. That is why, it is replete with parodic elements. According to the 'Oxford Companion to the English Language':

*"Parody often emphasizes and exaggerates typical features of the original text or performance in order to make and, whether friendly or hostile, exploits any possible weakness."*³

Finally, the aspect of the genre that interested most people when they read and studied 'Northanger Abbey' was the satire. It was meant to satirize behaviours, conventions and literature. We can call it a satire because it is a distorted portrait of society, whose aim is to enlighten the reader by showing its defects. Jane Austen denounces superficiality, through the portrait of Mrs Allen, greed and avidity through the portraits of the Thorpes and naivete through the portrait of Catherine. In her novels, Jane Austen often deals with specific behavioural features like pride in 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'Emma' or cupidity, hypocrisy and jealousy in 'Northanger Abbey' and 'Sense and Sensibility'.

Jane Austen is inevitably unveiled through her writing. She is a witty woman who can illustrate the shortcomings and the defects of society faithfully enough to amuse her

reader. She represents the intellectual woman who cannot be misled by the superficiality of people and their hypocrisy. What she is trying to say is that women and men have secrets and act out of their own interests. The novel was not really written with such a moralizing aim but more of a didactic one. She mocks human defects to show that they are intellectually empty. She denounces the open sexuality of her contemporaries and criticizes the Prince of Wales' behaviour. But another facet of Jane Austen's is unveiled by the reading of her novel. She feels the need to intervene in the story-telling more than she is expected to. But her interventions are not only meant to tell her story; they are also aimed at telling her opinion. The story suddenly becomes an essay in which Austen expresses her views on literature. To quote— J. Howard in this regard.

*"Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey includes a satire on literature and mocks the conventions of the sentimental novel."*⁴

Austen also deals with the other gender and offers several facets for the same gender. For example, Henry Tilney is a gentleman. he is humble, educated, cultivated and has very good manners. As we saw in the first part, he is like a mentor for Catherine. He frequently guides her in her learning of life and teaches her how to use language more appropriately. For instance, in chapter fourteen, Henry mocks Catherine's excessive use of the word "nice":

*"'I am sure,' cried Catherine, 'I did not mean to say anything wrong; but it is a nice book, and why should not I call it so?' 'very true', said Henry, 'and this is a very nice day, and we are taking a very nice walk, and you are two very nice ladies. Oh! It is a very nice word indeed!— it does for everything.'"*⁵

In a parody, the writer will imitate "the words, style, attitude, tone and ideas" of another writer. Jane Austen is a great imitator who managed to mimic the various elements which characterize Ann Radcliffe's style while creating a fiction which can exist without the original. Ann Radcliffe's style is characterized by three main elements: the creation of suspense, the ghostly elements to convey a strange atmosphere and the Romantic elements suggested by a sublime scenery. Jane Austen reproduces Radcliffe's style, first by fooling both her heroine and her reader. This is displayed for instance, in chapter twenty-one of 'The Northanger Abbey'.

*"The night was stormy; the wind had been rising at intervals the whole afternoon; and by the time the party broke up, it blew and rained violently. Catherine, as she crossed the hall, listened to the tempest with sensations of awe; and, when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time that she was really in an abbey."*⁶

In Catherine's case, everybody wants the money, which she has not. What is quite ironic is that the other characters believe that she is the wealthy daughter of the Allens, the truly wealthy aristocrats with whom she came to Bath. As soon as they find out that she has actually no money, they are no longer interested in her. Catherine's initial departure from Fullerton to Bath is also characteristic of this parody. It looks like a heroine leaving her family to accomplish her quest. Therefore Jane Austen uses irony and a tone usually found in adventure stories. Her departure for Bath is put forward by the narrator once again to make the heroine look ridiculous reinforcing thereof the lack of mystery and adventure. To quote from this very novel.

*"Under these unpromising auspices, the parting took place, and the journey began. 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. Nothing more alarming occurred than a fear on Mrs Allen's side, of having one left her clogs behind her at an inn, and that fortunately proved to be groundless."*⁷

Catherine cannot distinguish fiction from reality. She is constantly confused and compares her friends and the people surrounding her with the characters of the novels, which she reads. Once again to quote from the text of the same novel.

*"This charming sentiment, recommended as much by sense as novelty, gave Catherine a most pleasing remembrance of all the heroines of her acquaintance; and she thought her friend never looked more lovely than in uttering the grand idea."*⁸

For her, what she reads in novels is a representation of real life; she seems to be living in a novel where she would be the heroine and her friends would be the different protagonists following her.

The famous episode in chapter twenty-two of this novel ['Northanger Abbey'] is also a good illustration of Catherine's misunderstandings. When she discovers the manuscript, she instantly compares it to the other manuscripts, she read about in Radcliffe's novels: "She [Catherine] now plainly saw that she must not expect a manuscript of equal length with the generality of what she had shuddered over in books" (Ref. 9)- thus, comparing herself to the heroine. The reading of Gothic novels created in her mind the absolute necessity to find an object leading her to adventure, such as a manuscript like in 'The Romance of the Forest' or in 'The Mysteries of Udolpho'.

What is so comical about this novel ['Northanger Abbey'] is that after many failures, Catherine never gives in. She feels a necessity to discover something about the abbey. After she has been fooled by the abbey and the manuscript, she

will be fooled by the story of Henry's mother. When she reads 'The Mysteries of Udolpho,' she [Catherine] surely did not fail to ignore the passage about the veiled picture:

*"She [Catherine] paused again, and, then, with a timid hand, lifted the veil; but instantly let it fall — perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture, and, before she could leave the chamber, she dropped senseless on the floor."*¹⁰

During her stay at Northanger Abbey, Catherine hears from Eleanor that there is a portrait of their mother in her father's bedroom. The coincidence is too obvious; she needs to see it. Yet, when Catherine sees the portrait of Eleanor's mother, there is nothing "uncanny" about the portrait which is rather normal. She has been fooled once again by her readings.

Thus, it is clear that the novel ['Northanger Abbey'] is a satire about Gothic novels. Austen makes fun of the typical stereotypes of the genre like the isolated manor [i.e, Northanger Abbey] and in many passages, which are mentioned above Austen ridicules Catherine and her vivid imagination.

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