The Gothic in Parody

Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest*, one of the first gothic novels, offers a basic framework for other novels of its kind; whereas Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* was written to parody the Gothic template and to poke fun at the drama: the obscurity and the absurdness that some gothic novels possess. To contrast, Radcliffe’s sweet and innocent Adeline is the perfect formula for what a gothic heroine should be, while Austen’s “heroine” Catherineis the epitome of the anti-heroine. Despite Catherine wanting to live her life as though she were in a gothic novel, due to her excessive reading of them, real life has a way of thwarting her plans; unfortunately, for Adeline she is actually living in one. Jane Austen’s humor in *Northanger Abbey* is derived from the extremely opposite characteristics that her main character, Catherine, possess when compared to gothic heroines such as Adeline. For examples, Austen’s work mirrors scenes and situations for her characters that could easily be found in gothic novels, and yet offer unexpected resolutions to them (along with her ability to poke fun at the small details) seems to make the entire gothic novel plausible and linked.

In order to understand what Austen was trying to create, one must understand what Austen was also trying to break. Adeline in *The Romance of the Forest* is without a doubt the ideal gothic heroine for more reasons than just her angelic looks. Adeline is a heroine that embodies what all women of the romantic period should emulate. She is soft in her looks, unselfish, and has a huge amount of sensibility that follows her in her day-to-day activities. She is both emotionally strong, and morally sound despite being sheltered from the outside world in a convent for most of her life. Adeline does what women of the period are expected to do; but also does not cave to the temptations of men to ensure she maintains her clean reputation. Despite the majority believing that she was not of noble birth, her breeding is so pure she displays all the attributes which are expected and revered in noble women. Her childhood is very different from Catherine’s in that Adeline was brought up in a convent in France, and falsely led to believe that her mother and abnormally cruel father are her real family. Adeline is the victim of unfortunate events, as well as her own fears and her overactive imagination, all of which she eventually overcomes and rises above due to the help of others.

Catherine is a very different kind of heroine should such a consideration ever be made. Despite her self-described non-heroic character, she is the protagonist of the novel therefore if the reader desires a heroine the designation must be given to her. Right away, the reader discovers “no one… would have supposed her to be born a heroine” (Austen 3). Catherine is average and there is nothing inadvertently special about her, her family, or character that makes her the ideal heroine. She does not meet any of the heroine stereotypes. Catherine when younger is very plain, and when she matures her biggest compliment is that she was “almost pretty” (Austen 4).

Later in the novel, Catherine even allows the flattery of others to get the best of her in spite of her true feelings. Beyond her looks, it appears as though she is not the girl everyone strives to emulate. Quickly, the reader learns that she quit music, has “no notion of drawing,” and that she likes to read gothic novels. In her youth she preferred outdoor activities to learning, and in her late teens she enjoyed books that featured heroines. Nothing provokes her sensibility until she meets Mr. Henry Tilney. It is not until much later that her true feelings and real life situations prompt her to make decisions and learn to act according. Catherine is offered situations to deal with and though she is sometimes led astray she does respond with sense over sensibility. Austen does provide a character in her novel that meets some of the outward characteristics of the gothic heroine. Although this character has the beauty, “forced” sensibility, and real-life-drama, Catherine slowly discovers that this character lacks all the morals and internal aspects of a dignified gothic heroine.

Austen intentionally creates similar scenes and situations for Catherine that might be found in gothic novels; the setting is in an abbey, the weather is dark and stormy, and it appears as though the area is just waiting for a heroine to come along and discover its secrets. Therefore, it is no surprise that Catherine acts as though she is a gothic heroine. When Catherine visits Northanger Abbey, she believes she is embarking on a journey that could lead her into situations similar to the heroines in the gothic novels she has read. From her first impression she is disappointed with Northanger because it is not menacing, run-down, or decaying like the settings in her stories – which should not actually be surprising considering a family has been inhabiting Northanger for years. In her room, Catherine twice allows her imagination to get the best of her: once on her arrival and then again that same night. Due to the intense story that Henry Tilney bring to her attention while they travel to the abbey, Catherine fancies there must be hidden mysteries at Northanger and she attempts to seek them out; first in the trunk in her room, then in the cabinet, and finally among the members of the household.

Like Adeline, Catherine’s imagination at times is much worse than reality, and it is because of this she becomes emotionally distraught and physically responsive to the events unfolding around her. Upon her arrival in her room at Northanger, Catherine is overcome by curiosity over a trunk and allows herself to play the gothic heroine by searching further and finding just “a white cotton counterpane properly folded reposing at the end of the chest in undisputed possession” (Austen 119). Later that night while preparing for bed, she once again seeks out a mystery via the cabinet in her room, because she would be unable to sleep until it was discovered what mysteries lied within. This time Catherine finds a manuscript, but because her light is extinguished, she is unable to read it until the morning where it is revealed that she has found an ordinary inventory of linen and washing bills and not “memoirs of the wretched Matilda” (Austen 115). which could have “impressed her with curiosity and terror” (Radcliffe 116). Like Adeline, she does adventure into the unknown; she overcomes her fears— in doing so, she finds something that is considered important in the novel though at this time it means next to nothing to the main character. During her stay at Northanger, in order to live out the full role of a heroine, Catherine even goes as far as trying to place General Tilney in the role of a gothic villain due to his common and understandable reactions to situations and locations that link him with sad or nostalgic memories of his late wife.

Austen’s pokes fun at the plausibility of gothic novels by playing with her plot, and by sometimes offering small details to shatter the image of the gothic novel adding to overall humor of *Northanger Abbey*. At the end, Catherine and Henry are only allowed to marry because Henry’s sister, Eleanor, recently married a man with title and wealth, which made General Tilney proud of his daughter’s choice. This plot point is very convenient, a similar twist ending that is found within gothic novels. A huge device just happens to be absent the entire time and then when all is lost it just appears as if connected, but subtly and conveniently revealed. Similar to the almost random discovery of Adeline’s lineage due to her finding the manuscript and keeping the crest of her mother, it is understood that the man whom marries Eleanor did make an appearance in the novel earlier, as it was his servant who left the washing bills in the cabinet Catherine found on one of her adventures in Northanger Abbey. Austen ensures that there is a link with him and the heroine because she, like her ambiguous narrator, is “aware that the rules of composition forbid the introduction of a character not connected with [the] fable” (Austen 184).

Austen’s understanding of the gothic allows her to parody the themes and gimmicks found within the genre. Catherine finds herself in strange situations that only distress her due to her overactive imagination. The narrator ensures there are no loose ends to any plot point no matter how random or obscure they appear to be. Most importantly, Austen has her heroine overcome due to characteristics that most gothic heroines lack. After Catherine admits she was trying to discover evidence of General Tilney’s horrid actions toward his late wife, Henry kindly reminds her to “remember that we are English, that we are Christians” (Austen 144). What he meant was they did not live in a gothic novel, so she should not act as though she were in one. Catherine overcomes her want to portray a gothic heroine, and in doing so she becomes confident in her own abilities. At the end of Northanger Abbey, it is not Catherine’s sensibility that finds her a husband and a good life, but her sense and learning that the world in which she lives will never be a gothic novel.

Bibliography

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