

NORTHANGER ABBEY

Austen was a precocious talent and irony was the lethal weapon which she could make ample use of with flawless dexterity in her literary creation. Austen became awfully discontented with the unwholesome disproportionate show of romantic Gothicism of Mrs. Radcliffe and her followers. Her approach here resembles that of Fielding and burlesque and irony become the most appropriate tool in her hand to cudgel the objects of her dislikes. In order to understand the stimulus behind the creation of *Northanger Abbey* we are to take into account a historical perspective of the second half of the 18th century. Michael ^Sadleir (a Critic)¹ presents statistics which demonstrate that Gothic novels were fairly popular before *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was published but still far outnumbered by novels of sentiments and sensibility which flooded the market in the later half of the 1790's. Already in an earlier chapter we have referred to Austen's exceptional faculty of parodying ^{and} are one hardly disagrees with Marvin Muddrick when he remarks in relation to *'Love and Friendship'*:

1. Michael Sadleir: *Jane Austen* (Published, 1930).

"In 'Love and Friendship' Jane Austen parodied the lachrymose novel by reproducing its characters and situation and then allowing them both to overreach themselves into absurdity: the action of the parody was single and internal, with no reference but an implicit and general one to the actual world."²

In *Northanger Abbey*, the projected world picture obviously written with a positive parodying intention does not reflect anything lachrymose obviously outer manifestations of sentiments and sensibility. To make dig at this issue Austen arranges a different scenario in her another novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. Burlesquing happens to be the main spirit in *Northanger Abbey* as it is with her other novels but the target of her attack here is exclusively the Radcliffian world of Gothicism much fan-fared by Mrs. Radcliffe in 'The Mysteries of Udolpho'. In a sense *Northanger Abbey* is replete with irony. The structural pattern of the novel holds throughout an ironical frame.

Austen begins her anti-romantic mode with a moderate projection of her heroine in the opening line of the novel:

2. Marvin Mudrick: *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense & Discovery*; P-39

*"No one who had ever seen Catherine Moorland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine."*³

Throughout the first chapter of the novel, Austen persistently highlights the mediocrities and commonalities of her heroine. Not only that she is more intent to enlighten us about Catherine's incapacibilities and negative faculties:

*"Her greatest deficiency was in the pencil. There she fell miserably sort of the true heroic height."*⁴

If we look at the plot of *Northanger Abbey*, the ironical tone of Austen becomes apparent and we must appreciate that she is not abashed to exhibit it, rather she feels some elation's in her ironical gesticulations. If we make a thorough survey of the novel, the grab of irony over the whole novel becomes explicit to us. Irony is there and it is all irony-ridden. With a precise artistic finesse Austen places her plot on two different geographical stations — Bath and Northanger. In *Northanger Abbey*, irony overtly juxtaposes the Gothic and the

3. *Northanger Abbey*; Ch-1; P-1063

4. *Ibid*; Ch-1 P-1065

Bourgeois worlds and allows them to comment on each other. In the moulding of the plot Austen purposively transports her heroine, Catherine at first from Fullerton to Bath under the managerial supervision of the chaperon, Mrs. Allen, a good neighbour of the Moreland family. With curiosity we notice that after the ironic function which as per Austen's plan the Bath scenario is scheduled to perform, with a not unnatural manipulation the novelist whisks our heroine from Bath to Northanger to perform her function in the same ironical rôle in a different perspective.

Had *Northanger Abbey* been a faint-copy of the Radcliffen novel? We would expect to come across in the heroine a replica of the heroine found in a Gothic novel. But we must appreciate that Austen never makes the heroine's sensibility the centre of action. In *Northanger Abbey*, the heroine's function is doubled with the doubling of the action. There is irony even in its internal point of view: in fact, that its two worlds must originate, converge and be finally discriminated in the limited consciousness of that most ingenuous and domestic heroine, Catherine Moreland. And Marvin Mudrick to highlight the point ironically remarks:

*"the double-burden seems almost too much for so lightweight a mind."*⁵

The ironical tone of the author is discernable even in the opening part of the novel. At the out-set, nobody but the novelist knows that Catherine is deigned to be a potential Gothic heroine:

*"No one who had ever seen Catherine Moreland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of a father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her."*⁶

Again Austen states that Catherine 'had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark, lank hair and strong features'. Nor are her abilities those of a heroine:

*"She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid."*⁷

The ironical tone of Austen vis-à-vis Catherine's not getting a partner for love romance inspite of attaining the age of seventeen is highlighted in the following lines:

5. *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense & Discovery*; Ch-II; P-40. Title: The Literary Pretext
Continued: Irony Versus Gothicism.

6. *Northanger Abbey*; Ch-1; P-1063.

7. *Ibid*; Ch-1; P-1063

*"She had reached the age of seventeen without having seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility; without having inspired one real passion, and without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and very transient."*⁸

Though the main light unflinching is projected on Catherine, Austen takes every opportunity to shift her focus now and then on the minor characters as well, so that her ironical perspective may take a ubiquitous dimension. To strengthen the point that Catherine does not have any attribute of the heroine of a Gothic romance, the incongruity of her family situation and her social milieu has been ventilated. In the portraiture of Mrs. Moorland, we failed to notice the projection of a heroine's mother:

*"Mrs. Moreland knew so little of lords and baronets, that she entertained no notion of their general mischievousness, and was wholly unsuspecting of danger to her daughter from their machinations."*⁹

In the portrait of Mrs. Allen the same ironical tone is noticeable. Mrs. Allen is 'one of that numerous class of females, whose society

8. Ibid; Ch-1; P-1065.

9. Ibid; Ch-2; P-1066.

can raise no other emotion than surprise at their being any man in the world who could live them well enough to marry them. She had neither beauty, genius, accomplishment, nor manner. The year of a gentle woman, in active good temper and trifling turn of mind were all that put account for her being the choice of a sensible intelligent man like Mr. Allen'.

We must notice that as the plot of *Northanger Abbey* advances, Austen retreats to the rear shoving Henry Tilney to the front to enact as her representative. Since the first appearance of Henry, he is presented as an anti-hero. But there the matter does not end. Among the male characters he is the single one who plays the vital function in both the two world of Bath and *Northanger* to present the Gothic ideology upside-down and make an effective ironical review of the unsustainable Gothic Illusions. We fully endorse the view of Mudrick when he says:

*"Not only is Henry within the two actions of the story, but he becomes our chief observer and interpreter of both."*¹⁰

10. Marvin Mudrick: *Irony as Defense & Discovery*; Ch-II; P-43

To focus the ironical temperament of Henry, Austen is as solicitous as anything. Perhaps the detonation of a bomb would cause less damage to a populous place than what Henry does vis-a-vis *'The Mysteries of Udolpho'* in his following observation:

*"My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your brain. The confusion there is scandalous. Miss Moreland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duo-decimo volumes, two hundred and seventy six pages in each, with a frontispiece to be first, of two tombstones and a lantern — do you understand? And you Miss Moreland — my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expression. You talked of expected horrors in London; and instead of instantly conceiving as any rational preacher could have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood..."*¹¹

Perhaps no greater scathing on the Gothic romances could be made. We must notice that while all other characters of the novel excluding the Tilney family happened to be the functional characters bound in some kind of bondage and preserved in the volt of a Gothic

11. *Northanger Abbey*, Ch-14; P-1125

romance, Henry appreciates the whole situation with an ironist's enjoyment.

In the Bath scenario, it is Isabella Thorpe who first explicitly introduces the Gothic theme. Isabella parades herself as a heroine and Catherine dazzled by the show is quite willing to play the confidante to this paragon of beauty and sensibility. After the introductory phase intimacy grows between the two girls and Catherine gets infatuated with the spa of Isabella's personality. Plunged into all this self-conscious heroism, Catherine has no difficulty in accepting Isabella's protestations of affection, altruism and constancy. Catherine is moving stably toward the Gothic world. Her ingenuousness and ignorance have prevented her from suspecting Isabella's indefatigable coquetry, her malice toward women, her large foolish generalisations about men. Strange enough, Catherine yet does not detect that it is not Isabella but she who has been destined for the role of heroine. To make the Gothic atmosphere complete, we are expected to find in the Bath world insinuation of a villain or two, and a recognisable Gothic setting to consolidate herself delusion. Burlesquing of the Gothic world Austen wants to achieve through her usual ironical overtone. A Gothic romance invariably would import

in its fold a dreadful villain. Austen also imports the same in her book in the shape of John Thorpe. But how different he is from the Gothic type! Against the malice, hypocrisy, treachery and wickedness at Udolpho, Jane Austen invents in her novel an ironical counterpart. She provides a villain but her irony prompts her to project the same in a diminished scale with puncturing of the grandiose pretensions of the Gothic Villain.⁵ Austen, the ironist in the character of John Thorpe places an anti-type of the Gothic villain and a proto-type of the real one, contemptible in all earnest. The ironical note prevalent in the novel is rightly appreciated by Marvin Muddrick when he remarks:

"The most interesting novelistic fact about all these characters is that – whatever else they may be – they are consistently, even rigidly functional. They perform the special task of parody within a domestic setting of action beside action: they behave as the author knows that bourgeois types behave, and in their behaviour they suggest the corresponding Gothic types by being so different, by displaying the Gothic qualities reserved and contracted."¹²

It has already been observed that the characters in *Northanger Abbey* are consistently functional characters, and their functions are

12. M. Muddrick: *Irony as Defense & Discovery*, P-47

to illustrate the double irony of Jane Austen. Firstly, she shows that the Gothic world does not correspond to human nature as it may be seen at Bath and secondly, that the ^{hy}human nature as it may be seen at Bath is not necessarily more agreeable or more trustworthy than the Udolpho variety.

In contrast to the rest, Henry stands in the novel as a distinctive luminary who is no doubt a functional character, but at the same time more than that. He may be viewed as the Gothic hero reversed. With him, irony is here and there and everywhere. At the first instance, he accepts Catherine as heroine, but does not fall in love with her at the first sight. He is not seen to be engaged in act of chivalry to redress the heroine from the villain's clutch. He is full with worldly pragmatism and it is he who ultimately delivers our heroine from the colourful meshes of her romantic delusions. We must appreciate that in no other novel after *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen has been so conspicuously absent from the inner and outer functional scenario of the plot. Till the end of the novel, Henry Tilney is posted as an overseeing mentor ever engaged in rectifying the ingrained delusions of Catherine.

For the ironical observation of the author vis-à-vis the world of Gothic romances spatial shift of the plot becomes a necessity and on that account the plot is moved from Bath to Northanger:

"Mr. and Mrs. Allen were sorry to lose their young friend, whose good humour and cheerfulness had made her a valuable companion, and in the promotion of whose enjoyment their own had been greatly increased. Her happiness in going with Miss. Tilney, however prevented their wishing it otherwise; and as they were to remain only one more week in Bath themselves, her quitting them now would not long be felt." ¹³

The Journey that takes Catherine to Northanger Abbey, the ancestral house of the Tilney family creates a congenial prefatorial atmosphere for our coming across ironical lambasting made to the heroine by the novelist's representative. The gap between what Catherine expects to view at Northanger and what really the picture is, has been repeatedly highlighted during the conversation between Catherine and Henry during their onward journey to Northanger. With pseudo seriousness and urchin like trickery he aggravates the suspension and fear in the mind of Catherine as to her expectation of

13. *Northanger Abbey*; Ch-20; P-1148

fulfilment of a Gothic romance narrative. The following statement of Henry is resplendent with unmitigable irony:

"And, are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that building such as what one reads about may produce? Have you stout heart? Nerves fit for sliding panels and tapestry?"¹⁴

Jane Austen did not intend to make Catherine a female Sherlock Holmes but on her arrival at Northanger heart is shaken both with an elation on the thought that here she will view a real handiwork of Gothic romance and simultaneously the thought encumbers her with a fearful shakiness at heart. And we notice more than once ignoring civility and crossing the barrier of decorum, she makes surreptitious lone adventures to different nooks and corners of the Abbey to explore if anything marrow shivering can be discovered, either in the closed chest or behind the closed doors of a not long-used-room. Everytime her romantic expectations are miserably tentatised and everytime Henry with a mentor's psychology comes to her rescue. And the Austenian irony gains the sharpest edge in the closing part of the

14. Ibid; Ch-20; P- 1150

novel where after Catherine's sneaky entrance to the deserted room supposed to be inhabited by dead Mrs. Tilney fills Catherine with the impression that the dead woman was a victim of Captain Tilney's cruelty and she succumbed to her death because of her husband's prolonged prosecution. But her line of thought well nourished by her study of the Gothic romances experiences a traumatic shock when Henry explains to her the cause of Mrs. Tilney's death, which was certainly a natural one with no incriminatory role played by Captain Tilney in this behalf.

We must admit that the second part of *Northanger Abbey* which we term the Northanger Abbey episode, is built by Jane Austen with the positive purpose of disillusioning Catherine of her romantic notions about an Abbey and its mysteries:

"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. Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry."¹⁵

15. Ibid; Ch-25; P- 1175

When our approach is to investigate the ironical twists dispensed by Austen to show her temperamental penchant, we cannot fail to note Austen's perspicuous toying with the prevalent social mannerisms especially in the feminine world. Though the marital issue between a man and a woman of two different social status has been the main focus in *Pride and Prejudice*, the marital issue never has been absent from the world of fiction of Jane Austen. Austen was no feminist and no where did she cry Jihad against the unjust social persecution meted out to the female class, nor did she enact the role of a social reformer. As in other novels in *Northanger Abbey* as well, she portrays two different social milieus — one conspicuously petit middle class and the other, the aristocrat. Here unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, the clash between the two classes never sits on the steering. Rather in the Bath-world scenario, we come across a happy social intercourse between the two. But the tone in this behalf adopts an ironical air when Mrs. Allen and the like-go-on making perpetually the meaningless efforts to pose as women of the higher class than they really were. Particularly in the conduct and manners, gestures and gesticulations of Isabella, we experience a timid rehearsal of the Manners drama. The whole first part till Catherine is transported to Northanger Abbey the cohortive role of Isabella in the life drama of

Catherine is purposively projected in a parodial tone with a view to facilitating Austen's ironical weaponry. Isabella with her urban cleverness and undesirable insolence in the Baths social world surrogates herself in the position of the lead female role and though not at the centre of any young barron's attention. To Catherine she airs such an impression and the sharp irony of Austen unmasked to us the romantic hallucinatory world Catherine is prone to live in. Though no young man pays any attention to her she fabricates a concocted story of being the object of worship of a dozen of young men. The very sight at her near vicinity of James Moorley, a victim of John Thorpe's friendship induces Isabella to entrap him in her love meshes. We would be really happy if this love of Isabella would be her first love and the last one. Meanwhile, we would find her with an engagement of James an ideal parodying of the grammar of love. But contrary to her declaration that constancy is the other name of woman she dallies with her pre-fixed love relation with Moorley at the very first opportunity of making love hob-nobbing with Frederick Tilney. Here the ironical jibe of Jane Austen mercilessly falls upon the women like Isabella and the like in the following comment of Henry at the back of Catherine's observations:

*"Though she has behaved so ill by our family, she may behave better by yours. Now she has really got the man she likes, she may be constant."*¹⁶

Henry Tilney in reply utters:

*"Indeed, I am afraid she will: I am afraid she will be very constant, unless a Baronet should come in her way; that is Frederick's only chance".*¹⁷

In all the novels of Austen irony plays constantly in a larger scale over every person and situation in the novel. It is not the less cleverly managed because it seldom leaves the level of literary joke. The novel, *Northanger Abbey* is a minor masterpiece, particularly fine in its presentation of Catherine Morland. It is she who satisfies the requirements of anti-romance, but goes beyond it to become an embodiment of honesty, spontaneity and moral fastidiousness that is convincing and attractive.

As a whole, it is unified and the novel contains a mixture of immature and of extremely skilled elements. The satiric interests

16. Ibid; Ch-25; P- 1180

17. Ibid; Ch-25; P- 1180

behind its brisk take off of popular novel genres. It quite evidently belongs to Jane Austen's juvenile satires on various kinds of contemporary literature. It provides a structural framework and a basis for characterisation in a novel whose chief interest is psychological rather than satiric. It centres upon Catherine Moreland's metamorphosis from immature child to responsible adult:

"Soon were all her thinking powers swallowed up in the reflection of her own change of feelings and spirits since last she had trodden that well-known road. It was not three months ago since, wild with joyful expectations, she had there run backward and forwards some ten times a day, with a heart light, gay, and independent; looking forward to pleasures untasted and unalloyed, and free from the apprehension of evil as from the knowledge of it. Three months ago had seen her all this, and now, how altered a being did she return!"¹⁸

It is this 'alteration' in Catherine. This alteration is a part of the natural process of growing up, that the novel is about. The use of satiric elements in *Northanger Abbey* seems to suggest that the process of rewriting and revision built up the development of Catherine's

18. Ibid; Ch-29; P- 1198

character. Her method of using satire in this novel has a sureness and poise that seems to belong to her most mature work:

*"The anxiety which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity."*¹⁹

The novel, *Northanger Abbey* as a whole may be expected to be a little more than a burlesque, but in reality it is found to be a tender and perceptive exploration of the limits of good sense. Catherine is essentially a girl. She is illusioned only in some areas that the novel of terror has distorted. She becomes a good friend of Isabella Thorpe, only because it is a Gothic convention that a confidante is indispensable, but John Thorpe is so ridiculously rustic that he cannot even be a Gothic hero and Catherine dislikes him as soon as she sees him. And soon she sees through the shallowness of Isabella even. She also does not hesitate to like Eleanor Tilney for 'her ^dgod sense good breeding'. But the novel surpasses the boundaries of common

19. Ibid; Ch-31; P- 1206

sense and takes on a dimension beyond it, because the attribute of commonsense does not allow Catherine to manage adequately her summary dismissal from Northanger Abbey. That attribute of common sense does not allow her to console herself completely, when she can not expect to marry Henry Tilney any longer. On her returning home, she finds that there are some situations of the human mind in which good sense has very little power. So, *Northanger Abbey*, starting as a burlesque, ends as a critique not only of the sentimental Gothic novel, but also of common sense which Austen so highly regards, but whose limitations she is not afraid to set forth.