

Proto-Feminist insights into Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

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Abstract

This final degree dissertation is focused on the analysis of two different aspects present in Jane Austen's novel, *Northanger Abbey* (1817), usually deemed as a parody of the Gothic genre that emerged in Great Britain at the end of the eighteenth-century. This literary trend is based on the emphasis on terrifying aspects, the use of supernatural elements and old settings, among other things. The great development of the Gothic genre triggered a good amount of criticism, which basically decried its excessive use of dark and mysterious elements. For this reason some authors replied to the Gothic genre by means of imitating its main features but in a parodic guise. Jane Austen's novel is a case in point. Employing irony and frequent references to Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Austen managed to reveal the incoherent aspects of the Gothic genre. Thus, Austen makes a parody of her protagonist's desire of becoming a heroine and experience similar adventures to those figuring in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Many characteristic features of the Gothic writings are present in Austen's novel, as she intended to satire the excesses and irrationality of Gothic fiction. At the same time, *Northanger Abbey* could also be considered Jane Austen's proto-feminist critique of the gender relations and social structures of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century. She examines the gendered constructions of society evident in the use of customs, social conventions, codes of behavior, patterns of thinking and so forth. Austen portrays these distinctions in a society extremely concerned about wealth and adequate behavior. Thus, *Northanger Abbey* is a novel characterized by two main intentions: on the one hand it was created to question the Gothic genre, and on the other hand, Jane Austen tried to both criticize and respond to the social structure articulated around gender division.

Key words: Gender, Gothic, *Northanger Abbey*, proto-feminist.

1. Introduction

The aim of this final degree dissertation is to analyze Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*, published posthumously in 1817, focusing on several aspects that are interconnected in the novel, such as the parody of the Gothic genre and the presence of proto-feminist ideas explored through the characterization and the depiction of the English middle-upper class society of that time.

I decided to combine these two topics because of two reasons: the first one is that, as a student, I have always been interested in Gothic fiction's intent to terrify and shock readers in a somewhat exaggerated manner, thus going against the literary norms of Realism. The second one is that, while it could be said that this initial intention is the most apparent in Gothic texts, I have always thought that there is another intention, less evident, which is to call into question the conventional morality and gender roles of the late eighteenth century, and I wished to explore this two-fold dimension in Jane Austen's novel.

The methodological framework I have used revolves around a general view of the Gothic genre's features, but I have paid special attention to the reaction against the Gothic that can be observed in *Northanger Abbey*. The main intention of Jane Austen was to imitate some Gothic characteristics in order to make a critique of the misleading and phony results obtained by some Gothic authors who produced an artificial view of reality. Likewise, in *Northanger Abbey* there is a proto-feminist reaction against the social discourses prevalent in the society of that time. In other words, readers can perceive Austen's reaction against the patriarchal system but her stance is very timid, so that, strictly speaking, *Northanger Abbey* cannot be considered a feminist text, because British feminism emerged some years after the publication of the novel and also because whatever views about women's issues we can see are only tentatively explored. As a result, Jane Austen just anticipates in this novel some notions that feminist writers would later in the nineteenth century examine in a much more thorough way. For this reason, Jane Austen is considered as one of the forerunners of feminist fiction in British literature.

The second chapter offers an overview of the characteristics of Gothic fiction, with an explanation of the cultural background that triggered its appearance. Although it became very popular, Gothic fiction also received quite an amount of literary criticism.

Because society was clearly patriarchal at the time, some women writers used the Gothic genre to reflect their discontent about the social role they were forced to play. In this respect, a slightly different version of the Gothic emerged, which literary critics would much later label “Female Gothic.” This chapter engages briefly with this literary category as well.

Chapter three deals mainly with the concept of parody as it was related to Jane Austen’s proto-feminist critique of her society. I make a brief approach to this concept in order to make clear the interconnection between Austen’s use of the Gothic and her parodic intent. Likewise, Jane Austen’s novel contains features typical of the sentimental novel and I also tackle this topic in this chapter, although briefly because it is not actually the focus of my work. The novel is structured around two main features: on the one hand, it is a critique of the Gothic genre, but at the same time, it describes the main behaviors, habits and social discourses of the time. This aspect contributes to ascertain a critique of the different constructions of masculinity and femininity. The techniques employed by Jane Austen in order to create a serious criticism are explained in this chapter as well.

Chapter four contains the analysis of *Northanger Abbey*. The concepts explained in the previous chapter are applied to the textual analysis and supported by examples from the novel. All the characters of the novel are explored to illustrate the gender relations and some other theoretical issues.

Finally, I offer the conclusions extracted from the previous research, especially as they have a bearing on two main issues: Jane Austen’s use of the Gothic, firstly as a means to make a literary parody, and secondly as the instrument to make a proto-feminist critique of society.

2. The Gothic Genre: A Brief Overview.

According to Jacques Derrida, “every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text.” (230) All kinds of written works have features that categorize them within a determined literary style, and these qualities make possible to recognize the text’s identity. The Gothic genre is a form of popular literature that emerged in Great Britain at the end of the eighteenth-century. The first Gothic writings appeared between the 1760s and the 1820s. However, as Michael Gamer states, the concepts of “gothic” or “romantic” were not associated to the current meaning of this genre. (2) Both Gothic and Romantic fictions were considered to be related to each other in eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. Nevertheless, critics nowadays make a clear division between these two literary genres.

It is important to take into account that the idea of “Gothic” was related to Goth civilization and its language. It was one of the Germanic tribes that fought against the Roman Empire. For this reason, this term means in many cases “uncivilized” or sometimes involves negative connotations. Besides, the word “gothic” was firstly attached to medieval and ecclesiastical architecture from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. Some of the main characteristics of Gothic architecture are the light constructions, the high spaces, the introduction of the system of flying buttresses, the use of structures to embellish the building and the great windows to admit light. These features are represented especially in castles, cathedrals, abbeys...For this reason, the settings of Gothic novels are usually such locations.

In the eighteenth century, there was a revival of the Gothic style, and one of the most important figures in this time was Horace Walpole, who built Strawberry Hill following the style of a Gothic castle. He applied the word “gothic” when he published *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, which is considered the first novel belonging to the Gothic genre. Among the characteristics of Gothic literature, we find the ones mentioned by David Punter: “An emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense.” (1) As he suggests, Gothic fiction usually follows a number of stylistic norms and authors deal with similar themes. Besides, the main aim of this genre

is to entertain and to terrify the reader. To understand this function, we need to know the cultural background in which Gothic literature emerged.

The eighteenth century was a period marked by revolutions, “a period characterized by massive instabilities in its socio-political structures” (Heiland 3). Probably these circumstances, for example the French Revolution as well as the Enlightenment, had some influence in the creation of this popular genre. Gothic literature was much admired during the 1760s to 1820s and as Punter states, one of the main features causing that was precisely that it was not a realistic genre. Many Gothic writings commonly deal with problematic issues, mysterious facts or supernatural elements that are solved at the end. In some cases, these irrational aspects are explained logically, a case in point is *Northanger Abbey*. Although it was a popular genre it has received a lot of literary critique for many years. The critics of Gothic fiction often consider it as a subgenre of Romanticism, but there is also an opposite view, which considers the Gothic as unique and different from the Romantic genre. During the 1760s to 1820s, the great rise of Gothic literature provoked a response by ideologists that followed the Romantic literature, as Michael Gamer remarks:

While gothic’s contentious reception constituted it as a conspicuously “low” form against which romantic writers could oppose themselves, its immense popularity, economic promise, and sensational subject matter made this opposition a complex and ultimately conflicted and duplicitous endeavor. (7)

When the Gothic genre was becoming a popular form of writing, many Romantics rejected the evident connection between both literary styles, although there is a coincidence in time between them. Other critics, such as Anne Williams, point out that Romantics define Gothic as “shocking and subversive.” (4) Moreover, it is a kind of writing that goes beyond the limits and surpasses the social conventions of the time, questioning conventional morality and the realistic literary norms of the eighteenth century.

There are some features that are commonly used in Gothic fiction. In addition to the concept of fear, the setting is a very important aspect too and it has to produce an ominous atmosphere. As Ann B. Tracy explains, the Gothic novels represent “the fallen world” so the location of this fiction is generally characterized by threatening and gloomy elements which surround the characters. (3) Furthermore, the main character, a

Gothic hero or heroine, is usually subjected to fear and horrible experiences. This protagonist is considered to be a stereotype who does not evolve throughout the story; he or she is just involved in circumstances from which he/she cannot escape. At the same time, there is the presence of the antagonist or the villain, usually a man. He typically persecutes and is perceived as a threat to the Gothic heroine, who plays the role of a fragile and innocent woman. In addition to these common features of Gothic writings, there are other elements that help to define a work as “gothic.” Donna Heiland defines Gothic stories as “stories of transgression” that deal with destruction of moral or social restrictions. (5) For this reason, most Gothic writings are often violent and terrifying.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, English society was clearly ruled by patriarchy. In this context, the Gothic genre is visibly associated to the social structures of that time and it reflects gender relations. It drew my attention that critics who have underrated this kind of writing do it on the grounds that it is particularly suited to the feminine world: “At other times these same writers circumvent gothic’s stigma as the genre of adolescent and women by adapting it to explore ‘adolescent’ and ‘feminine’ ways of seeing the world.” (Gamer 11) Actually, Gothic literature seemed to be addressed to women and at the same time, many female writers were interested in this genre. Ellen Moers coined the term “Female Gothic” in her work *Literary Women* (1976) to refer to the way in which female authors described their role in a society that oppressed them. Furthermore, “Female Gothic” involves that women writers depicted female experiences “within a domestic and within the female body”. (Smith & Wallace, 1) In this kind of writing the story exhibits all the elements of Gothic aesthetics and the main features of male characters, but seen from the point of view of women. In addition, these works portray women’s discontent with male authority over them. As suggested above, in eighteenth-century England, women were ruled by patriarchal society in which their position was clearly secondary and their activities limited to the domestic sphere. Hence, women found in the Gothic genre an opportunity to address their social and personal restrictions.

Incidentally, Gothic texts are clearly differentiated on the basis of the author’s gender. The narrative techniques used, the plot, the supernatural elements or the use of horror, vary depending on the author’s gender and point of view. For instance, female Gothic writings depict romantic love and offer a rational explanation to supernatural

episodes, whereas in male Gothic writings, the supernatural elements, for example, are not explained, they are just taken for granted. On the other hand, Gothic texts by male writers do not exhibit as much sensibility as those of women, and they prefer to use irony much more than women. Two of the novels that best represent these two kinds of Gothic are *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis, respectively. The Female Gothic might be considered a revolutionary genre in which women rebelled against male domination over them. However, not all critics agree on this point. Diane Hoeveler, for example, argues that the main feature of Female Gothic is the creation of a weak and passive heroine that fights against the patriarchal system by means of victimhood. ("Preface" n.p.)

Among the elements usually treated by critics of Gothic fiction, we find the notion of parody. In the next chapter I will deal with the relationship between the Gothic and parody and its connection with the proto-feminist critique made by Jane Austen.

3. Parody and the Gothic: Jane Austen's Proto-Feminist Critique

A parody is a literary device that throughout history has assumed different features, intentions and functions. For this reason it is a term that can be unclear and hard to define in a definite way. First of all, it is characterized by the imitation of a particular author or style of writing, a literary genre or a convention of a specific society. At the same time, the concept of parody can be exemplified by means of many literary devices. The use of exaggeration, irony and comedy are very frequent. Thus, the main aim of this literary figure is to imitate and ridicule a single work, genre, discourse or person.

The word "parody" was first used in England in Ben Jonson's comedy *Every Man in his Humour* (1598): "A parodie! A parodie! With a king of miraculous gift, to make it absurder than it was." (129) In this fragment, the author used the word "parodie" to classify something as ridiculous and illogical. Its etymology derives from the Greek term "*paroidia*", where The prefix *-para* means "beside", or "parallel to", and *-oide* means "song" or "ode".

Nil Korkut states that there are three major kinds of parody that have been used in English literature: "The first kind is parody directed at texts and personal styles; the second is parody directed at genres, and the third is parody directed at discourse." (1) All these categories of the term "parody" have been represented throughout history according to the ideological characteristics of each literary period. My intention is to focus on the use of this element by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*. This novel has long been considered one of the most remarkable parodies of the Gothic genre. However, some critics argue that Austen goes beyond the mere parodic stance and "equally praises and ridicules the Gothic." (Davison 159) For example, the choice of an innocent female character that resembles the heroines of Ann Radcliffe's novels. Gothic heroines tend to be pretty, gentle, innocent and pure. The main character of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine, is depicted by Austen as a plain girl who later turns into a "quite good-looking girl" (17). Austen does not mock her personality, as she is an innocent and simple girl, but she ridicules her beliefs about Gothic novels. In fact, the author questions the intelligence of other female characters, but she does not question Catherine's intelligence, as her mind "uniformed as the female mind at seventeenth usually is" (19) so, she has the characteristics of a common girl of her age. Rather, she

parodies the way in which Catherine perceives life, as realistic events are not as sentimental as in Gothic fiction. However, the Gothic heroine is usually a sentimental woman, as Catherine is, but at the end of the novel, as she has evolved, she learns to respond to irrational elements by means of reason, which is a very common feature of Ann Radcliffe's heroines, too. So, Austen does not reject the main characteristics of a Gothic heroine, but she refuses and parodies the Gothic elements that surround her. At the same time, Catherine evolves and changes throughout the novel, whereas Gothic heroines do not develop and remain passive. So, there are elements that resemble Ann Radcliffe's heroines, whereas other elements are used in order to question the stereotyped female characters of Gothic fiction.

There are several novels by Austen that have in common the fact of being satires. She explored in her early writings a literary form named "burlesque", defined by Meyer Abrams as "an imitation in the manner (the form and the style) or else the subject matter of a serious literary work or a literary genre in verse or in prose, but makes the imitation amusing by a ridiculous disparity between the manner and the matter". (26) He goes on to explain that despite being used as a literary figure associated with humor, it can be usually a form of satire, which means "derogating a subject by making it ridiculous." (275) So, the term "burlesque" is considered a term to refer to different kinds of imitations. As suggested above, the concept can be an imitation of the main features of an specific author or it can be applied to a general literary genre, as the case of *Northanger Abbey*. Jane Austen uses her novel to imitate the main characteristics of the Gothic genre in order to mock and question its features.

There are several varieties of burlesque, and parody is one of them. Jane Austen employs a good sense of humor in her parody of the Gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey*. In addition, she uses literary parodies in some of her premature writings as in the tales "Love and Freindship" and "The History of England". In the former, written when she was fourteen, she ridicules the romantic components of the sentimental novels, whereas in the latter, she mocks the style of the historical works of her time by imitating them. Thus, in the beginning of her career she was involved in specific techniques of social comedy. Margaret Kirkham argues that the main aim of Jane Austen when using humor in her novels was "to enlarge the scope of comedy in prose fiction, by making it capable of embodying a serious criticism of contemporary manners and morals and of contemporary literature." (82) Therefore, she employed techniques of comic writings as

a manner of criticizing Gothic literature, which was a contemporary genre, and at the same time, to examine and assess the moral and social discourses prevalent in her time. It was not a method used in order to minimize the importance of the moral issues of the novel, as might be expected, but as the means to emphasize them and draw the reader's attention. Hence, Austen explores and uses comic features in her works in order to call into question both Gothic fiction and her own society. One of the key tools employed to carry out this type of critique is irony. As Marvin Mudrick explains, *Northanger Abbey* is considered both a domestic novel and a parody of the Gothic genre. The domestic fiction is a subgenre of the sentimental novel; characterized by the emphasis on emotions and sentimentalism. Furthermore, Mudrick suggests that "irony overtly juxtaposes the Gothic and the bourgeois worlds, and allows them to comment on each other." (38) Thus, Jane Austen manages to integrate the two dimensions in her use of irony, which has a twofold objective: the critique of her society, especially the middle-class – excessively concerned about wealth and respectable behavior – and the Gothic novel. As a matter of fact, Jane Austen is considered a major comic writer of the Romantic period, with a subtle use of irony that turns her novels into elegant masterpieces of satire. At the same time, however, the use of irony serves to go beyond the merely parodic intention in order to carry out a "feminist attack on patriarchal refusal to understand woman as a rational creature" (David 846). Jane Austen's works are therefore a response to the supremacy of men in nineteenth-century society and the social consequences of this male hegemony for women.

In this respect, Jane Austen might be placed in the group of forerunners of feminist fiction in British literature. The date of publication of *Northanger Abbey* -- 1817- allows to see it as a pioneer work of those novels which later would openly call into question the patriarchal system. It is very likely that Austen could have access to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published some years before (1792), which is a rational argumentation against women's social and private subordination. Of course, British feminism would emerge more explicitly some years after the publication of *Northanger Abbey*, with the foundation of the Langham Place Circle in the 1850s by Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes, or in a much more organized way in 1903 with Emmeline Pankhurst's foundation of the Women's Social and Political Union. However, Jane Austen was already concerned about gender issues in her own lifetime and "many critics have noticed that feminist feeling and feminist

ideas are easily apparent in her novels” (Kirkham 53). Women writers made use of fiction as a way to combat patriarchal authority, if certainly enough in a rather timid way in this early stage.

Margaret Kirkham suggests that Austen is skeptical about Romanticism and gives her interest in feminist ideas as the reason that explains that: “Austen’s anti-Romanticism, as specific to the form of feminism current in her youth” (10) Moreover, she makes clear that Austen’s anti-Romanticism is associated to the debate about the nature and status of women that took place at that time. This debate related men to reason, whereas women were associated to emotions. Therefore, Jane Austen defended “Reason as the supreme guide of conduct, from which follow her criticism of Romanticism.” (Kirkham 22) Other critics argue that her writings are a response to male authored-texts, for instance to Samuel Richardson’s ideas about women’s correct manners portrayed in his writings (Lambdin 116). One example of that is *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, written by Samuel Richardson and published in 1740. In this novel the main character, Pamela, is a servant woman who suffers the rape attempts by her wealthy employer. At the end, he proposes to her and she accepts. This female character has been interpreted by some critics as a falsely innocent girl, who pretends to be a modest woman just to achieve her purpose, which is to improve her social status by marrying a rich man. As a result of this kind of novels, Austen “employs dialogic parody to reject Richardson’s promotion of conscious innocence and to inspire readers to think differently about women and gender relations.”(Lambdin 117) In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, Catherine is depicted as a truly innocent and naïve young girl totally opposed to the main character of Richardson’s Pamela. She shows that the manners of the female characters are not the same ones depicted by Richardson. Thus, the comic character present in some of Austen’s novels does not respond to the simple wish of making readers laugh but to a sort of proto-feminist stance that can be perceived in one reads between the lines. Actually, her wit has been compared by some critics to that of Shakespeare or Shelley during Romanticism. (Kirkham 82), in the way these male authors deployed a critique of serious issues through the use of humor.

One of the key elements of *Northanger Abbey* in its parody of the Gothic genre is intertextuality, a term “used to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text is made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal substantive features of earlier texts...”

(Abrams 317) In other words, it is the presence of other literary texts within a text. In Jane Austen's novel, the presence of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* plays an important role as it is connected with Austen's parody of the Gothic fiction. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is considered one of the most popular Gothic novels, published in 1794. Catherine, the main character of *Northanger Abbey*, is very much concerned about Gothic literature and she is reading Ann Radcliffe's story. The character loves reading novels and she is very obsessed with *Udolpho*, as she already calls the novel in the story. In fact, Catherine imagines herself as the heroine of a Gothic novel who is involved in strange events. The parody that Austen makes is reflected when Catherine discovers that her life is not similar to the novels that she loves to read, all the horrid facts that she had imagined have rational explanations, and her mind has led her to misunderstanding.

The elements of parody and the Gothic literary genre are really present in *Northanger Abbey*. These two aspects are combined in Austen's novel to create serious criticism about the social structures prevalent during the author's life. She also imitates some aspect of the Gothic genre as a way to create the parody of this literary trend. In the next chapter I will analyze the novel and all the aspects that make possible to consider *Northanger Abbey* as a parody of the Gothic genre, but at the same time, a proto-feminist critique.

5. Analysis of the text

Northanger Abbey is considered the first novel that Jane Austen ever completed for publication. It was first called 'Susan,' as the main character's name, and was written between 1798 and 1799. In 1803 the novel was finished and it was sold to the London firm of Benjamin Crosby and Co., but it was not published at that time for unknown reasons. Then, Jane Austen decided to change the protagonist's name to Catherine. Furthermore, in 1816 the author became seriously ill and after that the novel's title was changed from *Susan* to *Northanger Abbey*. It was finally published posthumously in late December 1817.

The novel is divided into two volumes: the first one with fifteen chapters, and the second one with sixteen chapters. The events depicted in the novel are narrated from an omniscient point of view in which the narrator knows all the thoughts and feelings of the main characters. However, Austen addresses the reader in several times, especially to comment the heroine's situation or even to give her own opinion about specific issues. The facts narrated in the novel are based on concrete and real aspects of the 1790s, the years in which the novel was written. The first volume of the novel is settled in Bath which Jane Austen visited in 1797 (Butler i). For this reason, *Northanger Abbey* could be said to contain elements related to Austen's own experiences. She makes in the novel many references to concrete places, such as streets and walks, which she probably visited when she was in Bath.

The characters of the novel could be divided according to their characteristics. First of all, there is a clear difference between the male and female ones. Especially in the first volume of the novel, the female characters talk about the differences between the attitudes of men against the manners of women, these distinctions represent the conventions and customs of that time, for instance in Mrs. Allen's comment: "Men commonly take so little notice of those things," said she: "I can never get Mr. Allen to know one of my gowns from another. You must be a great comfort to your sister, sir." (28). In this case, Mrs. Allen is talking with Henry Tilney about the preferences of men, which are really different from women's. The social conventions of that time are represented through the characters of Isabella Thorpe, Mrs. Allen and John Thorpe. The first two, Isabella Thorpe and Mrs. Allen, are depicted in stereotypical terms: both of them are superficial, just concerned about fashion and gossiping. The third one, John

Thorpe, is constructed as the typical male-chauvinist of that time: he is an arrogant man, selfish and conceited, who only cares about his horses and wealth. These three characters play a prominent role in the story that surrounds Catherine Morland, and they will be analyzed in detail. However, in general terms it might be said that they represent the negative side of a society marked by gender differences.

In the society described in the novel, men and women occupy different places. For example, in Bath women usually enjoyed watching people and gossiping, whereas men had their own space for having fun, the card-room. When Catherine and her friends first arrived to the ball-room, Mr. Allen abandoned them and went immediately to the place where men gathered: “The season was full, the room crowded; and the two ladies squeezed in as well as they could. As for Mr. Allen, he repaired directly to the card-room, and left them to enjoy a mob by themselves.” (21) Similarly, John Thorpe decides to meet his friends in the card-room leaving Catherine waiting for him to dance. This is considered one of the important moments of the novel in which John clearly shows that, as a prototypical male of the time, he does not care about women’s interests. Thus, Jane Austen tries to critique the gendered-division dominant in that society. For this reason she gives clear evidence in the novel in which women’s concerns are portrayed as insignificant, opposed to the important interests of men: “Mr. Allen, after drinking his glass of water, joined some gentlemen to talk over the politics of the day and compare the accounts of their news-papers; and the ladies walked about together, noticing every new face, and almost every new bonnet in the room.” (69); Also in: “...a day never passes in which parties of ladies, however important their business, whether in quest of pastry, millinery, or even (as in the present case) of young men, are not detained on one side or other by carriages, horsemen, or carts.” (43) Here, Austen is clearly using an ironical tone which also contains a noticeable degree of parody.

Although gender differences are really important in the novel there are other significant aspects. As Butler suggests in the introduction of the novel, “In *Northanger Abbey*, living in the world involves the reading of people, behaviour, dress and conversation as well as of books.” (xx) Hence, characters are classified according to several principles and features, but at the same time, some of them share similar aspects. When I made the division of the main characters, I considered that there are prototypes that resemble the characters of Gothic novels. Austen uses them to create a parody of this kind of fiction. Catherine, the protagonist, is described as an innocent, young

woman, who at the age of seventeen is going to experience her first adventure away from her family. From the very beginning she is described as a plain girl who does not have the necessary features to play the role of a heroine. In fact, Austen states that nobody would consider her fit to play the role of heroine. “Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother; her own person and disposition, were equally against her.” (15) The author uses a comical tone in her description of Catherine as well as irony to emphasize the fact that Catherine could never aspire to become a typical Gothic heroine: Her mother “had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as any body might expect, she still lived on...” (15) The Morlands were a very humble and plain family, as normal as any other family. This feature is not common in Gothic novels, in which the father is usually a tyrant or in which the protagonist’s mother dies. In this case, Catherine’s father “was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters.” (15) For this reason, the protagonist is allowed to experience her first journey accompanied by some family’s friends, Mr. and Mrs. Allen.

Catherine’s description allows the reader to imagine her as an ordinary girl, with unattractive physical features and manners: “She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features;--so much for her person;--and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind.” (15) Furthermore, she is not considered a clever girl, whereas Gothic heroines are commonly very intelligent women:

So far her improvement was sufficient—and in many other points she came on exceedingly well; for though she could not write sonnets, she brought herself to read them; and though there seemed no chance of her throwing a whole party into raptures by a prelude on the pianoforte, or her own composition, she could listen to other people’s performance with very little fatigue. (18)

Perhaps this comical and amusing description of Catherine is what appeals to the reader, maybe producing sympathy. However, as she grows up, she begins to read Gothic stories and her main intention was to become a heroine, to experience strange and risky events as real heroines did. On several occasions Jane Austen parodies these events, and because Catherine is a hesitant heroine, she is involved in questionable dangerous episodes: “But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of

forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way” (18). Also in: “...when about to be launched into all difficulties and dangers of a six weeks’ residence in Bath...” (19) The author uses, once again, irony to highlight the fact that the events and experiences undergone by Catherine did not constitute a real risk, after all.

Despite being opposed to Gothic heroines, Catherine has nevertheless some features in common with these brave female characters. For example, she is equally depicted as innocent, shy, fragile and unaware woman who does not perceive the dangers. However, she shows an evolution that the others do not, as heroines usually do not develop throughout a Gothic story. Instead, she is presented as an ignorant young girl, “as the female mind at seventeen usually is” (19), who realizes throughout the novel about the real nature of life and people, thus showing herself to be not as gullible as might be expected.

Catherine is really immersed in literature. As said above, she loves reading novels, especially Gothic novels. Probably what draws her attention about this kind of novels are the mysterious and sentimental aspects. Austen employs the main protagonist’s obsession to critique this type of literature, in which sentimentalism is normally attached to female characters. For this reason, Catherine does not feel free to express her preferences openly. In fact she feels ashamed for reading novels, as the followings excerpt shows: “Have you ever read Udolpho, Mr. Thorpe? Udolpho! Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do.” Catherine, humbled and ashamed, was going to apologize for her question”. (46) The author suggests that novels are especially addressed to women, because men consider them insignificant and trivial. The narrator of this novel might be taken, on some occasions, as Austen’s *alter ego*. This is clearly seen, for example, when she drops some remarks regarding female literary productions and how women writers should protect each other and claim the value of women’s writings, despite the numerous attacks against them. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to a talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any

other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. (36)

At the same time, in this brief parenthesis in the narration of the story, she is defending the position of women, as both author and reader, that in some cases feel the pressure of social conventions and feel ashamed for defending novels. However, novels are works “in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.” (37) Jane Austen is not only defending her own literature, which is obviously characterized by this effusion of wit and humour, but she defends novels in general.

Catherine is presented as the heroine of the novel, so the reader can see her world from her own perspective. The reader can perceive her feelings and emotions, but her judgments are often unreliable. However, we can understand the heroine’s life through the other main characters. During her stay in Bath she gets to know two families thanks to whom Catherine’s experiences become the most important events of the novel. These two families are the Thorpes and the Tilneys. On the one hand, Isabella Thorpe is considered the anti-heroine of the novel. Nevertheless, Catherine admires her when they first meet; she is impressed by Isabella’s knowledge about fashion, balls and relationships.

These powers received due admiration from Catherine, to whom they were entirely new. (...) Catherine then ran directly up stairs, and watched Miss Thorpe’s progress down the street from the drawing-room window; admired the graceful spirit of her walk, the fashionable air of her figure and dress, and felt grateful, as well she might, for the chance which had procured her such a friend. (32-33)

So, Isabella Thorpe is going to have a prominent function in the story’s development, as both Catherine’s most faithful friend and role model for her, at least until Catherine discovers that she was not such a loyal friend. Both Isabella and Catherine enjoy reading novels, but the former does not seem to read as much as Catherine. In fact, Isabella feigns having made out a list of ten or twelve novels, but later acknowledges that she hasn’t read all of them and that she neither made the list, but a friend of hers,

Miss Andrews. Austen makes reference to these novels, some of them are *Castle of Wolfenbach*, *Clermont*, *Mysterious Warnings*, *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *Midnight Bell*, *Orphan of the Rhine*, and *Horrid Mysteries*. Thus, Isabella is constructed as a false mentor of Catherine, the first person that apparently instructs the inexperienced and innocent heroine in many topics, although this is not true. As a matter of fact, she seems to feel an unconditional, authentic and sincere love for Catherine, but eventually these feelings turned to be false and dishonest. When describing Isabella's feelings, Jane Austen uses many ironies and antiphrasis to suggest that the anti-heroine is not as Catherine sees her: "her faithful Isabella" (55); "Of her other, her older, her more established friend, Isabella, of whose fidelity and worth she had enjoyed a fortnight's experience..." (78) Similarly, Austen uses antiphrasis and ironies to give voice to Isabella, who in many cases acts exaggeratedly and falsely, as in the following examples:

I think her as beautiful as an angel, and I am so vexed with the men for not admiring her! [...] There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. (39)

I never mind going through anything, where a friend is concerned; that is my disposition... (86)

So pure and uncoquettish were her feelings, that though they overtook and passed the two offending young men in Milsom-street, she was so far from seeking to attract their notice, that she looked back at them only three times. (46)

Austen parodies Isabella's attitude through comical ironies and antiphrasis, in which she wants to express just the contrary of what she is saying. However, as the novel progresses, Catherine finally opens her eyes to the real attitude of Isabella.

The characters of Mrs. Allen and Isabella resemble each other, as they are both depicted as superficial and vain. The narrator suggests that their conversation is plain and sometimes stupid, although Mrs. Allen does not represent dishonesty or falsehood towards Catherine, as opposed to Isabella. Mrs. Allen embodies the type of person who has an ordinary and simple intervention in society, she "can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough, to marry them." (21). She is very much concerned about fashion and the author parodies this frivolous attitude: "How is my head, my dear?—Somebody gave me a push that has hurt it I am afraid." (23); "Catherine [...] was lost from all worldly concerns of dressing

and dinner, incapable of soothing Mrs. Allen's fears of the delay of an expected dress-maker..." (50) She seems to worry just about gowns, dresses and headdresses. As Isabella, her conversations are insubstantial and they sometimes criticize men's manners or attitudes, as when Isabella says: "You men have such restless curiosity! Talk of the curiosity of women, indeed!" (55), or when Mrs. Allen comments that men are not interested at all in fashion, as women are. This type of characters are constructed as foolish and mindless, as becomes clear in the following lines: "Mrs. Allen, whose vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking were such, that as she never talked a great deal, so she could never be entirely silent..." (59) Nonetheless, Mrs. Allen is a great friend of the Morlands, and as she is childless she sees Catherine almost as a daughter or niece.

Leaving aside this comparison between the two female characters, the Thorpes are really important in the development of the novel. On the one hand, the role of Isabella as anti-heroine, and on the other hand, the character of John Thorpe, who acts as one of the main villains. Thorpe's characterization is quite typical of Gothic fiction: the man who often persecutes the heroine and endangers her safety, for example when he forces Catherine to stay in the carriage though she was asking him to stop and let her go. Here, Austen parodies the figure of the Gothic villain. From the very beginning John Thorpe is depicted as egocentric, conceited, arrogant and ill-mannered. He just talks about his horses and his main interests are carriages and money. In fact, greed is considered one of the main elements of the novel. Ambition contributes to the most important events of the novel, in which characters are moved by avarice. As a result, Catherine is affected by other characters' greed. John Thorpe's manners are not displayed properly with Catherine, neither with his mother and sister. The narrator again uses irony to describe this attitude: "fraternal tenderness" which instead of greeting his family he "asked each of them how they did, and observed that they both looked very ugly." (48) These manners provoke Catherine's revulsion being Thorpe the clear antithesis of the gentlemanly Henry Tilney. Furthermore, John Thorpe's conversation bores her, but his persistence makes Catherine withstand his presence. On the occasion when, persuaded by Isabella, James Morland, John Thorpe and Catherine, take a trip, James Morland and Isabella Thorpe are left on their own while Catherine has to bear the impertinence of John Thorpe. He exhibits his arrogance and his obsession with wealth

at all time but mostly when he asks Catherine about Mr. Allen's wealth:

Thorpe's saying very abruptly, "Old Allen is as rich as a Jew—is not he?" Catherine did not understand him—and he repeated his question, adding in explanation, "Old Allen, the man you are with."

"Oh! Mr. Allen, you mean. Yes, I believe, he is very rich."

"And no children at all?"

"No—not any."

"A famous thing for his next heirs. He is your godfather, is not he?" (62)

It was probably from this moment onwards that John Thorpe imagines that Catherine Morland is Mr. Allen's heir, so she would be well positioned in the future. However, Thorpe's suspicions are false. Catherine was raised by humble parents who did not have great possessions. In addition, Mr. Allen was not as rich as John has imagined and Catherine was neither his heir. Thus, Thorpe has imagined facts that were not true and he was really interested in Catherine just for pretending to have privileged and elegant acquaintances. In this moment of the story the Tilney family appears. The members of this family are: General Tilney, his daughter, Eleanor Tilney, and his two sons, the Captain Tilney and the clergyman Henry Tilney, the man opposed to John Thorpe that was mentioned above. The latter is presented as the hero of the novel and he will be analyzed in the following pages. The role of General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* is related to John Thorpe for different reasons. First of all, John Thorpe is the character that tells General Tilney that Catherine Morland is a rich and well positioned woman, although it is not true. So, the General believes this false statement and he begins to be interested in Catherine. He is the owner of Northanger Abbey, a rich man with many possessions. Thus, both John Thorpe and General Tilney pretend to be interested in Catherine, but they are just concerned about her wealth. Believing John Thorpe, General Tilney plans to arrange one of his sons' marriages, Henry's one. He wants Catherine and Henry to be married, motivated primarily by economic interests. Furthermore, John Thorpe and General Tilney share the characteristic features of the villain, commonly represented in Gothic fiction. Instead of using just one villain, the author uses in *Northanger Abbey* the figures of two characters that fit in the role of bad characters. John Thorpe and General Tilney are interested in Catherine Morland because both believe that she is a rich woman. But their interest disappears when they discover that it is not true. John boasts about Catherine's wealth with Mr. Tilney in order to show that his acquaintances are usually very distinguished. In addition, probably for this reason,

he pretends to want to marry Catherine Morland. At the same time, in a talk between John Thorpe and General Tilney, the latter designs his plans involving his son, Henry Tilney, and Catherine. He pretends to arrange his son's marriage with a wealthy woman. There are clear examples of his intention, which are shown when the General flatters Catherine and pleases her as much as he can. Some of these cases in point include: "Modesty such as your's—but not for the world would I pain it by open praise. If you can be induced to honour us with a visit, you will make us happy beyond expression." (132) In this fragment General Tilney flatters Catherine in order to invite her to Northanger Abbey. Another example is the following one: "His anxiety for her comfort—his continual solicitations that she would eat, and his often-expressed fears of her seeing nothing to her taste—though never in her life before had she beheld such variety on a breakfast-table..."(146). Once he made Catherine visit them in Northanger Abbey, his plan was to praise her in order to purpose, in order to facilitate Henry and Catherine's marriage. The General wanted to join both the Morlands and the Tilneys by means of their wedding. Of course, Henry's father was moved just for economic reasons. The naïve Catherine becomes involved then in the most important events of the novel, which are the ones happening during her stay at Northanger Abbey.

Conversely, Henry and Eleanor Tilney, foster Catherine's development and are conceived as her real mentors, the ones that enable Catherine to see the truth. Henry Tilney plays the role of the typical hero of Gothic novels. Incidentally, they were introduced by the master of the ceremony in Bath. He is described as quite handsome and the narrator also states that there was "an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by her."(25) As the opposite of John Thorpe, who did not arouse her curiosity, Henry did from the very beginning, almost as soon as she saw him. She fell in love with him at first sight. As Butler suggests, "Catherine does just what she should not by falling in love with her man without waiting for him to make the first move..." (xviii), but her love is emphasized by means of some sentimental novels' features, in which the emotions and feelings are the main elements. Henry Tilney is a clergyman who loves reading, both novels and history texts and affirms that he has read all of Ann Radcliffe's novels. In short, he is depicted as a chivalrous figure. He also understands about fabrics such as muslins, which is very unusual in a man, since textiles are normally considered to be part of the feminine world. Catherine has dreamed about him even before actually meeting him because, as

the narrator says, “it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her.” (29) The author emphasizes this fact in order to create a parody of sentimentalism in novels.

After that, Catherine designs a plan – a very common element in heroines – which consists of becoming Eleanor Tilney’s friend. Like her brother, she is good-natured. Furthermore, she is also depicted as a shy young girl who loves reading, and this allows for a comparison with Catherine, since both seem to be innocent girls that do not know much about life in general, they are inexperienced. Nevertheless, both Eleanor and Henry are considered the true mentors of Catherine. Butler suggests that one of the most important episodes of the novel is when the three of them were walking around Beechen Cliff and the narrator expresses the good effects that this new friendship with the Tilneys has on Catherine:

On Beechen Cliff, in natural-seeming conversation, the leading characters exchange important principles, priorities which reveal their value-systems and philosophies of life. Largely thanks to the Tilneys (and not thanks to her first mentor Isabella) Catherine finds not one world but many worlds opening to her through books.” (xxi)

Both Eleanor and Henry teach Catherine about topics she was completely unknowledgeable about. Catherine does not want to admit her ignorance but the easy-going tone of her conversations with Eleanor and Henry makes her relax and forget about her lack of culture. Henry also contributed in Catherine’s development (“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.” (187) in the way of making her realize about what is going on. On the one hand, Henry helps the protagonist to be aware of Isabella’s intentions. James Morland, Catherine’s brother, engages Isabella but when James travelled, in order to seek approval from his parents, Isabella failed him and flirted with Henry’s brother. Isabella demonstrated that her main interests were wealth and possessions, and the Morlands could not offer her what she wanted. Therefore, their marriage was cancelled and as Isabella was guilty of all these facts, her relation with Catherine was broken. On the other hand, when Catherine arrived to Northanger Abbey, the protagonist started to imagine ominous and mysterious elements that are so frequent of Gothic novels, some examples are the following ones:

“...when her eye suddenly fell on a large high chest, standing back in a deep recess on one side of the fire-place [...] This is strange indeed! I did not expect such a sight as this!—An immense heavy chest!—What can it hold?—Why should it be placed here?—Pushed back too, as if meant to be out of sight!” (155)

“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.—Yes, these were characteristic sounds;—they brought to her recollection a countless variety of dreadful situation and horrid scenes, which such buildings had witnessed...” (158)

“The wind roared down the chimney, the rain beat in torrents against the windows, and every thing seemed to speak awfulness of her situation.” (160)

These examples represent the moment in which Catherine arrived to the Abbey and during the first night she found a simple box that was closed. Therefore, she started to imagine that this chest hid some secret inside. However, this idea was imagined by her, and it did not contain anything relevant.

The second volume of *Northanger Abbey* contains the most parodic part of the novel. Until this moment there were elements related to the Gothic genre, especially in relation to the role of the heroine, the doubtful dangerous events that surround her and the reference to the Gothic novels that Catherine had read, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. However, the second volume is more explicit in its satire of Ann Radcliffe’s novel. Everything starts before arriving to Northanger Abbey: Catherine was excited about visiting an old castle and during the trip Henry tells her story full of Gothic elements in order to entertain her, as she loved these kinds of narrations. She had imagined a place “just like what one reads about” (149), and began to think that something similar to Henry’s story could happen to her in the abbey. She insisted in becoming a heroine herself, and her vivid imagination produced phenomena that certainly provoked fear. For example, on the first days she tried to resolve mysterious facts within her own room, but they ended up being stupid suppositions that made her feel ashamed because all of them had rational explanations. After that, she created her own suspicions about General Tilney, construing him as a tyrannical father whose presence created tension

among Henry, Eleanor and Catherine. Thus, she supposed that he had done something horrible. Catherine suspected that he was able to kill his own wife, Mrs. Tilney, as she had died in strange circumstances according to Catherine's mind. Her imagination went beyond the limits of reason and she even saw evidences of the crime in General Tilney's attitude. The "unpractised eyes of Catherine" (157) did not see that Henry's father was a controlling man and he was planning Henry's marriage. However, Henry realizes about Catherine's suspicions about his father as she considered General Tilney a murderer. When Catherine's thoughts were exposed to Henry she was aware of her great mistake about Henry's father. As a result, she was very ashamed of her exaggerated imagination that led her to a terrible misinterpretation. This was the major moment of the parody of the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*, that can be understood as the dichotomy between idealized facts against reality.

Afterward, as the narrator says, "the anxieties of common life began soon to succeed to the alarms of romance" (189). Catherine finally accepts real life again and learns to reject the fantasy, so common of Gothic fiction. For example, she realizes that General Tilney was not a murderer, although he was not an agreeable man either. After all, she was right in something; Henry's father was a calculating man that thought that Catherine was rich:

She had from the first been so fortunate as to excite in the General; and by a recollection of some most generous and disinterested sentiments on the subject of money, which she had more than once heard him utter, and which tempted her to think his disposition in such matters misunderstood by his children. (195)

Catherine did not suspect his real intention, and she really thought that the General's flatteries towards her were sincere, but they were not. She perceived that when she was forced to leave the abbey, rudely, as Catherine could not choose the day of her departure, nor to notify her parents that she had to abandon the Abbey. The General ordered Catherine's departure and she felt humiliated and depressed when she arrived home in Fullerton. Henry was not in Northanger Abbey when she left, and Eleanor was really affected by her father's decision. General Tilney had discovered, by John Thorpe, that the Morlands were not rich, and that they actually were a very modest family. Again, John Thorpe behaves as the villain of the novel, affecting Catherine's situation. But, as a typical feature of the Female Gothic, the story has a happy ending. The

denouement of the story gives us Henry Tilney's and Catherine Morland's marriage after having obtained the desired General's permission. This decision was possible because of Eleanor's marriage to a modest and humble boy, obviously not rich. However, the young boy inherited a fortune and a title and General Tilney accepted both his daughter's and his son's marriages. This final episode could be seen as a parody of sentimental novels, in which the story is resolved happily.

5. Conclusion

Northanger Abbey was intended to question the main features of the Gothic genre, being parody one of its main characteristics. There are different forms of satire, and Austen employed the imitation of some Gothic characteristics but in a comical and exaggerated way. At the same time, *Northanger Abbey* reflects the social structure and the gender relations of the eighteenth century marked by the patriarchal system. Thus, the novel reflects proto-feminist ideas that are more or less evident in the relationships between the main characters and Austen's treatment of the conventions of the time. The novel reflects a society marked by patriarchy in which there were distinctions between men's and women's behaviors and habits. Thus, Jane Austen, concerned about gender issues, created a critique of the society, especially of the English middle-upper class of that time.

Jane Austen makes a serious criticism of two different aspects by means of parody and the use of comical features. On the one hand, she shows her perception of the Gothic genre, exaggerating its main aspects, such as suspense and terror, evident in the use of archaic settings, for example, the Abbey itself, although it does not seem to be as the settings common in Gothic fiction that the main protagonist had imagined. She had expected to find an ancient, mysterious and gloomy place, like the ones described in the novels she had read. Instead of that, she finds a restored and modern Abbey that has lost all its dark features and, as a consequence, does not produce fear or terror, as she had expected, but disappointment. A further important element is the stereotyped characters, such as the heroine, the villain and the hero. They are represented by Catherine Morland as the heroine, while John Thorpe and General Tilney play the role of villains and Henry Tilney is the hero of the novel. Their roles in the story are determined by certain characteristics and all of them have their own function. In this respect, the villains try to damage the heroine, but the hero, with whom she is in love, helps her and they end happily married. A common feature of Gothic fiction is that characters do not change and that the heroine of the novel does not evolve. However, in this novel, Catherine Morland develops and discovers how reality actually is. Finally, the presence of supernatural elements, which in this case were rationally explained at the end of the story. On the other hand, Jane Austen intends to reflect the social structure of that time and the gender relations that favored the development of the story.

She depicts many differences between the habits and customs of the characters according to their gender. Thus, Jane Austen tried to question the Gothic genre, but at the same time she created a critique of the society in which she lived. The novel reflects to what extent male and female attitudes are different from each other and how women play an established role in that society.

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