

**Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Gălbează), *Jane Austen's Dark Side: "Northanger Abbey"*, București, Editura Universitară, ISBN 978-606-28-1370-3, 2021, 176 p.**

*Jane Austen's Dark Side: Northanger Abbey* makes a significant contribution to the research focused on Jane Austen's life and literary work, as it thoroughly reexamines intriguing elements, such as the novel's dark dimensions, the Gothic (parodic) influences, and the skillful social satire permeating her posthumous novel, *Northanger Abbey*. In her study, Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza) tackles the thematic depth and dark subtext lurking beneath an apparently sturdy, sensible and well-structured world, bringing to surface troubling collective mentalities. She reveals that behind the traditional veil of Austen as a writer of genteel rural stories, lies a master of subtle social criticism and an investigator of the elusive nature of reality.

Although vital for the comprehension of Austen's writing style and evolution, *Northanger Abbey* is one of her less known novels. At the first glance, it is merely considered a Gothic parody. However, the comprehensive analysis carried within the study shows Austen's reflections and distortions of Gothic conventions, and a world reigned by both realism and parody. In other words, Alina Buzarna-Tihenea's study examines the novel's complex, hidden facets; irony intertwines with a subtle dark aura that also permeates the social setting. Additionally, her exploration of the protagonist's fictionally influenced interpretations mirrors the social tendencies subtly marked by sensational literature.

The book is structured into three chapters, each focused on a different aspect, following a concentric approach. The study sets off by analyzing the social and cultural environment of eighteenth-century Britain, to outline the general framework that influenced Jane Austen's personality, perspectives and writing style. It then presents a biographical overview of Jane Austen, with an emphasis on the so-called scandalous or mysterious elements marking her life; this account is mainly focused on her thrilling educational "adventures" (e.g. life-threatening or Gothic like educational institutions; young Austen's access to "liberal" or "less respectable" pieces of literature), Austen's efforts to conceal her identity as a writer, her failed romantic relationships, her occasionally unconventional behavior at some social events, and the influence of the fashionable city of Bath on her work. The chapter also examines a series of contrasting perspectives on Jane Austen's personality and the evolution of her writing career. The last section of this chapter is focused on the diverse and even contrasting perspectives on Austen's work, vacillating between praise and fierce criticism.

The second chapter begins with an outline of Gothic romances before focusing on the difficult and winding path *Northanger Abbey* took to publication. It continues with an exploration of the novel's mixed critical reception. The chapter also includes an analysis of the novel, focusing on its Gothic romance elements and parodic dimension. Alina Buzarna-Tihenea analyzes, for instance, how the protagonists, Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney, break out of the

mold of Gothic heroes; the heroine lets herself captured by a fulminating imagination that dangerously alters her perceptions of reality. The last section of this chapter develops the analysis of the novel's Gothic-like elements, while also interpreting it as a gothic parody. Particular attention is given to scenes that subtly recall of the dangers faced by Gothic heroes. The study also highlights how the Gothic parody actually hides frightening aspects of everyday reality, entailed by social norms (such as women's incarceration in the domestic sphere; the Gothic villain represented by cruel figures like General Tilney, who is obsessed with control). Moreover, Catherine Morland's inexperience mirrors the flawed female education encouraged by the patriarchal mentalities of the era and the overwhelming influence of fiction on young impressionable minds. Thus, the author unveils Austen's novel as more than mere satire; it also highlights fictionally-shaped perceptions of the real world. Catherine Morland serves as an example of the perils entailed by unrestrained imagination. Alina Buzarna-Tihenea also makes reference to other works that explore the relationship between reality and fiction, such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, thus opening the path towards wider interpretations and contextualizations.

The third chapter delves deeper into the Gothic elements permeating Austen's novel and explores their subtleties, reversing the idea of parody. One such instance is represented by the topic of education explored from Gothic lens – Catherine Morland undergoes a process of initiation, shaped by her experiences in Bath and the so-called Gothic adventures she embarks upon at Northanger Abbey; from this perspective, *Northanger Abbey* can be viewed as a bildungsroman. Henry Tilney's attempts to educate Catherine, steering her through the sophisticated social threads are also noteworthy in this regard. The theme of education extends to the novel's readership, as Austen teaches readers broader lessons about reality versus fiction, truth versus appearances and illusions. Another element addressed by the study is Henry Tilney's speech meant to pull Catherine Morland out of her Gothic fantasies. However, the study argues that this speech ultimately portrays the real world as a Gothic prison, where mentalities and social rules metamorphose into a dungeon of illusory openness. Lastly, the significance of the seven Gothic novels on Isabella Thorpe's reading list is addressed, reinforcing the fragility of the boundaries between reality and fiction and revealing Austen's engagement with the Gothic genre.

Alina Buzarna-Tihenea's book underscores Austen's darker side lurking beyond humor and satire, which is less explored in the literature and mirrored in *Northanger Abbey*. This approach bestows an innovative nature to the study, as readers are introduced to an alternative interpretation of this apparent comedy of manners, with worrisome psychological and instructional stakes masked by rigid social conventions. Gothic fiction is shaped into a mechanism that unveils real concerns haunting Austen's era, suggested by the interactions between Catherine Morland and the other characters. The heroine's inner struggles, stirred by a social setting permeated by contradictions, are crucial to the comprehension of the deeper message conveyed by the novel. By interweaving Gothic elements, social satire and nuanced narrative techniques, *Northanger Abbey* emerges as a skilled reflection on the leverage of literature on perceived reality.

Moreover, as previously noted, the book creates thought-provoking connections between *Northanger Abbey* and contemporary fiction, such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, exhibiting the pertinence of Austen's concerns in modern literary settings. It also broadens the discussion on the impact of fiction on readers' perception, reinforcing the study's exhaustive analytical scope and strengthening its argument that fictionally constructed realities can have far-reaching consequences.

The masterfully argued style characterizing the study supports the meticulous theoretical analysis, complemented by pertinent examples drawn from both the literature and Austen's novel. The logically structured ideas shrouded by a mesmerizing story-like aura allow readers to easily immerse themselves into the study. This approach facilitates the comprehension of the ideas, also making them accessible readers beyond the academia. The thoroughly documented nature of this book, demonstrated by its extensive and up-to-date bibliography, further solidifies its academic value.

Alina Buzarna-Tihenea's book represents an important and original contribution to modern Austen studies, providing a solidly researched perspective on one of her most undervalued fictions. The exploration of Gothic elements, satire and fictitious concerns entails new viewpoints on the intricacy illustrated by Austen's fictional realm. It is an essential resource for both academics and general readers seeking to boost their comprehension of this mesmerizing novel. Ultimately, this invitation to rediscover *Northanger Abbey* from a challenging perspective takes the reader beyond the apparently picturesque landscape of the respectable and tranquil British countryside into the murky shadows of Gothic realistic horrors.

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