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## BOOK REVIEW

**JANE AUSTEN'S DARK SIDE:  
NORTHANGER ABBEY**

**Author: Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Gălbează),  
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Alina Buzarna-Tihenea's study scrutinizes a less frequently debated dimension of Jane Austen's first drafted but posthumously published novel, *Northanger Abbey*, highlighting the novelist's dark and satirical nature. The author's main goal is to analyse how the British author interweaves irony and Gothic elements to create a landscape of her contemporary society, infused with subtle criticism.

The study tackles the Gothic imprints of *Northanger Abbey* and how Austen undermines the clichés of the genre while satirizing the social trends of her time. It also roams into the obscure depths of the protagonist Catherine Morland's imagination, which is permeated by Gothic fiction, leading to distorted perceptions and misunderstandings of reality. As Alina Buzarna-Tihenea demonstrates, the novel operated on multiple interpretation levels, employing narrative construction subtleties and Austen's masterful balance of irony, humour and suspense. According to this study of the novel's hidden meanings, on a surface level, *Northanger Abbey* parodies Gothic fiction, while on a deeper level, it meditates on the influence of literature on the reader's mind. Furthermore, the research suggests that the true Gothic horrors are hidden right before our eyes, as certain characters' personalities and actions invite readers to reflect on the true nature and form of the evil lurking in Austen's contemporary society.

One of the strengths characterizing this book is represented by its scrutinization of how Austen tackles several Gothic elements in her novel not only to demystify them, but also to reveal how Gothic evil can be embodied outside fiction as well. Mesmerized by fashionable and mysterious dark stories, Catherine Morland is carried away by fictional thrills and erroneously thinks that General Tilney is a Gothic tyrant who has either imprisoned or murdered his wife. From this perspective, the volume analyses the relationship between fictionally-induced viewpoints and

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reality. On the one hand, the findings reveal that *Northanger Abbey* is more than just a Gothic parody; it is also focused on the ways in which fiction can distort the perceptions of young and naïve minds. On the other hand, the authoritative General Tilney is more than meets the eye, as he also represents the rigid patriarch whose cold-heartedness, rigor and practicality evoke Gothic-like horror. The study also addresses the social satire, irony, and subtle humour that characterize Austen's novel, arguing that not only does the British author criticize the excessive thrills of Gothic literature, but also comments on her contemporary social landscape.

Each of the three chapters that make up the study plays an important part in its argumentative structure, which delves deeper and deeper into the novel's issues. The first chapter outlines the socio-cultural context of eighteenth-century Britain, characterized by an array of contrasts. On the one hand, this setting was dominated by technological advances that revolutionized the living standards of the time; on the other hand, poverty, violence, and social taboos were also permeating the social environment. This first chapter also examines Jane Austen's biography, shedding light on several interesting details regarding her private, mysterious life. Thus, it presents a less idealized portrait of this British author, analysing the influence of gossip and criticism on her life and work, emphasizing her attempts to shield her personal life from the public scrutiny – evident in her decision to publish anonymously and in her sister Cassandra's destruction of her letters after her death. This contextualization provided by the first chapter reveals Austen both as an observer and sharp critic of social etiquette and practices.

The second chapter presents the main features of Gothic fiction and highlights the elements that have entailed its parodies. Furthermore, it exhibits a series of critical perspectives on *Northanger Abbey* and places into the limelight its protagonists, Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney, who, at a first glance, appear as subversions of typical Gothic heroes. Moreover, the characters bridge fiction and social reality; for instance, Catherine's imagination spawns her own thrills, Henry intermingles reason and irony, and General Tilney emerges as both a Gothic villain and a pragmatic and authoritarian figure. According to Alina Buzarna-Tihenea, certain passages in the novel can be interpreted both as Gothic and parodic, revealing how Austen reshapes Gothic stereotypes. Thus, a dual function is revealed, as Austen debunks the irrational fears induced by Gothic fiction while simultaneously implying that sometimes reality can be just as terrifying as horror fiction.

The third and final chapter of the book delves even deeper into the hidden substrata of the novel, particularly into the theme of education, highlighting the didactic purpose of *Northanger Abbey*. The study argues that the novel serves as an instructional work, furnishing a wide array of lessons about social mores, the nature of friendship, the perils of excessive imagination and the reading process. Not only does Austen design a masterful parody of Gothic fiction, but she also incorporates and validates certain Gothic aspects, hidden within the deeper layers of the text. The

novel invites readers to meditate upon the ways in which fiction distorts the perception of reality. It is noteworthy that the critical approach employed in this chapter – focused on Austen's problematization of the relationship between reality and fiction – stems from Paul Morrison and April Alliston's modern approaches of the novel.

Buzarna-Tihenea further analyses Henry Tilney's speech, in which he attempts to bring Catherine Morland down to earth, criticizing her naivety and exaggerated imagination influenced by Gothic fiction. According to the author, this speech subtly exposes the reality of a panopticon, a form of open prison created by societal norms. This multifaced interpretation triggers the conclusion that reality can be as overwhelming as Gothic fiction, the social conventions acting as invisible chains that constrain individuals and limit their freedom. By analysing the list of Gothic novels that one of the characters recommends to Catherine Morland, the chapter also draws attention to the problematic boundaries between reality and fiction, also evidencing Austen's purpose to highlight the hidden influence of this fiction genre on the mentalities dominating the respective times.

The detailed analysis performed by this study represents an important contribution to the critical approaches applied to *Northanger Abbey*; it also sheds light on Austen's interminglement of social observation and satire. It challenges the traditional perception of Jane Austen as a rational and respectable writer, placing into the limelight a more labyrinthine author, who invites readers to roam into the prudence and hazards of excessive imagination, and beware of the dangers of an inflexible patriarchal society.

*Jane Austen's Dark Side: Northanger Abbey* enriches the scholarly discussion surrounding Austen's life and work, highlighting that her posthumous novel is more than a Gothic parody mainly dedicated to young adult readers; it is a complex work tackling the depths of a network interwoven by perception, fiction and reality. By combining cultural context and textual investigation, this study maintains a rigorous yet accessible academic style. Its well-argued and innovative nature furnishes a refreshing perspective on *Northanger Abbey*, enhancing its value both in the scholarly realm focused mainly on British literature and Gothic studies, and in the world of general readers. The solidly documented perspective upon the novel is also evidenced by the rich bibliography and strong argumentation style, which recommend this study as a valuable and essential resource for those interested to enhance their understanding of Jane Austen's work and modern literary criticism. Alina Buzarna-Tihenea's approach provides an interesting and rejuvenating contribution to literary studies, in general, and to the analysis of Austen's narrative complexity, as mirrored in one of her darkest and most intriguing novels, in particular.

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