

Female Education of Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*

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Abstract

Northanger Abbey is one of Jane Austen's six novels which contains rich connotation and profound implication. Female education is the theme of the novel. With the help of Gothic novels, Austen interprets the theme of female education in the framework of Catherine and Henry's love and marriage story, and explores how young men and women find their own marriage partners under the pressure of society and the times. Jane Austen expressed her progressive view of female education. She thinks that only relying on parents' education at home can not cultivate mature and rational qualified women. They also need to step into the society and read novels to get personal growth in these activities of communicating with others. In Austen's time, a popular educational concept strongly advocates that women should receive family education to ensure their physical and mental purity, and believes that novels will corrupt their hearts and lead them astray. Austen's view is progressive and positive at that time. She points out the importance of rationality to emotion and imagination, and defends the art of fiction including Gothic novels.

Keywords: Female Education, Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Northanger Abbey is one of Jane Austen's six novels. The novel has rich connotation, profound implication and many suspense. Since the publication of the novel in 1817, there has always been debates about whether *Northanger Abbey* is or is not a certain type of novel, and whether Catherine Moran is or is not a certain type of heroine. Until now, there is still no clear consensus about the novel and Catherine, or about Austen's motivation to compose the novel. Among these disputes, "The debate on the novel type and theme of *Northanger Abbey* mainly revolves around two questions—first, is the novel a mockery, parody or borrowing, imitation of Gothic novels? Second, is love the theme or one of the themes of the novel?" (Looser, 1995). The two topics are related to each other, and both involve the growth of Catherine. In fact, love is not the main line of the novel, and female education is the theme of the novel. Catherine and Henry's love story is only a tool for the author to show the theme of education. The Gothic elements in the works, whether parody or imitation, also serve for the educational theme.

Northanger Abbey tells the story of Catherine Morland, a lovely 17-year-old girl. The free atmosphere

of the Morland makes Katherine grow up to be a kind-hearted girl, but it also makes her thinking simple and naive, ignorant of the complexity of the outside world. After she entered Bath City following her neighbors, she really began to receive social education and grew up rapidly. Katherine met two brothers and sisters in Bath. The well-off Tilneys were upright and learned, and the poor Thorpes were greedy and ignorant. The two brothers and sisters have very different personalities and interests. In her communication with them and others, Catherine gradually understood the complexity of human nature, and understood that people's words and deeds can be inconsistent, so she was no longer blinded by appearances and could make accurate judgments.

In this process, Catherine's future husband, Henry Tilney, played a key role of "mentor". He guided her to think rationally and finally became matures. However, Henry was not perfect. He was a female expert with male authority and self-confidence. He told Katherine how to behave like a qualified woman, but his judgment of women was also biased. He defended his father and brother even though he knew their moral inferiority.

Catherine's attitude towards this "mentor" also changed with her growth. When she first fell in love, she was obedient to Henry and completely depended on his judgment. After a series of events, her independent thinking ability began to sprout. When Henry defended for General Tilney, she questioned Henry's judgment for the first time. He was no longer the spokesman of absolute authority. At the end of the novel, Catherine finally recognized the arrogance and hypocrisy of General Tilney. She was no longer blinded by Henry and made an independent judgment on the general's character. Catherine's process from completely depending on her tutor, questioning her tutor, and then being independent of her tutor reflects her mental growth track. More importantly, she also affects her tutor Henry in turn. Henry grew up under the autocratic oppression of his father. He used to keep silent in front of his father. Although he did not agree with the immoral behavior of his father and brother, he would not openly oppose it. Instead, he defended them everywhere in front of others. Although he appreciated Catherine's kindness and integrity, he could not be as frank as Catherine. After General Tilney rudely swept Catherine out of the house, Henry finally stood up for Catherine, bravely resisted his father's tyranny, protected their love, and finally married Catherine.

In this way, if the novel is centered on the theme of education, how does Catherine correctly understand herself and complete her educational process? Is it through the painful process of self-discovery? Or did other women of that time accept the norms of male power? What role did Gothic novels play in her growth? Did it mislead her or help her?

II. Attitude towards Novels (Including Gothic Novels)

The most common background of Gothic Novels in the 1790s is the conflict between female desire and family tradition—the daughter's lover conflicts with the order of laws, while the father insists on promoting marriage. The conflict between the tyrannical father and daughter in marriage is a prominent feature of Gothic novels. The father demands a marriage between families of equal social rank, while the daughter pursues love. This prominent feature also exists in *Northanger Abbey*. It should be said that there is a certain Gothic reality for Catherine, her marriage has been hindered. Of course, now we can say that it was the marriage customs of the society at that time. The novel only reflected a kind of social reality. However, Gothic novels reflect the social reality in their own unique ways. There is no essential difference between them. As far as the marriage described in the novel is concerned, it is "Gothic marriage" (Miles, 2003). For example, smart and beautiful young women are the protagonists. These women have to go through some kind of suffering before they can succeed. Finally, they will marry a rich young man. These features are

the same in the so-called realistic novels and Gothic novels at that time.

There are many dialogues about novels in this novel, mainly focusing on two questions: first, what is a real and good novel, or what characteristics a good novel needs; The second is how to read novels without being misled. In the fifth chapter, Catherine and Elinor compare the novels (including Gothic novels) with the *Spectator Magazine*, from which we can see Austen's attitude. The narrator directly commented that no matter which article in the *Spectator Magazine*, "its content and style are impossible to make an elegant young man disgusted" (Austen, 1997). It is not difficult to see that Austen is defending novels (including Gothic Novels). Even after the disillusionment of "the vision of romance", Catherine still thinks that "Mrs. Radcliffe's works are very attractive, even her imitators' works are also very attractive" (Looser, 1995). Maria Jerinic has made a penetrating summary of this issue: "*Northanger Abbey* is a novel that appeals to women to believe in their understanding. At the same time, it encounters the dialogue and ideas about literature of men who were exercising social power at that time. It is not so much a mockery of *Udolph* as a critique of the ideas that poisoned literary women in the 18th century" (Looser, 1995). Austen himself also asked her readers: "let those critics curse imaginative works in a very boring way, and let them discuss every new novel with the cliches that are now full of newspapers. We should not abandon each other. We are an injured body" (Austen, 1997: 27). Note the last sentence here—"We are an injured body". Obviously, Austen has entered the textual world and can't help speaking for women here. Austen's charm lies in her delicacy and profundity hidden in trivial details (Liu xiamin, 2006). If *Northanger Abbey* simply tells a love story similar to Cinderella, it will not be "exquisite and profound". Austen is taking advantage of an old plot mode to participate in the popular discussion about women's education at that time. At the same time, she expresses her own views on the relationship between novels and real life, which is the core issue concerned by novelists. Catherine's learn not only about life, but also about how to read novels. So Richard and Gregory (2003) simply sum up that "learning is the main content of this novel."

III. Using Love Story to Deduce Educational Theme

The *Northanger Abbey* discusses how women deal with reason and imagination, how to read and understand the novel correctly, how to understand the relationship between the novel and the real world, how to find the right person, how to deal with the unpleasant things in life and so on. In a word, "Austen intends to express women's rational judgment and self-control, full learning potential; They grow up from ignorance to knowledge, and acquire knowledge from setbacks" (He, 2001).

People generally believe that love is the theme of the novel: "Like the other five works of the author, *Northanger Abbey* is a love story." (Sun, 1997). But, in fact, the author just tells an old love story. Fortunately, the story is painted with strong Gothic color, otherwise the story is too plain, too simple or even superficial. Some domestic scholars believe that the theme of love and the irony of Gothic Novels "is relatively superficial, which is not conducive to our real interpretation of the subtleties of Austen's works" (Peng, 2004). This view is quite insightful. With a close reading of this novel, we can easily find the following facts—firstly, the author hardly narrates the romance between the protagonists (Catherine and Henry), but only introduces the social activities between several young men and women, as well as the calculation of marriage by the girls and their parents. The author also depicts Catherine's thoughts and emotions, but she does not focus on Henry Tilney. Henry seems to be passive in his love with Catherine. His character is also not fully displayed. What he plays seems just to be a cultural symbol. Second, the author never puts Henry in the narrative focus. "Austen deliberately avoids setting Henry as the narrative focus, and even refuses to observe what he knows and wants instantaneously like Isabella. The reason may be that she thinks that the observation of Henry will make the novel be treated as a pure love story with Cinderella motif, but the author's intention is not so. Love story is just a framework existing in the appearance of novel." (Peng, 2004) In other words, Catherine and Henry's love story, or rather the marriage, only provides an appropriate framework for interpreting the theme of education. Thirdly, the essential elements of Gothic novels, whether they are imitations or borrowings of literary conventions or discussions of Gothic novels, serve the education and growth of the heroine. If Catherine was once misled by Gothic novels, it was an extra cost for her education. She could not pay the "tuition fee". But the author tells the "detour" on Catherine's growth path, which plays a warning role. If Gothic novels help Catherine to a certain extent, then it is a part of her "learning content", which also becomes the proper meaning of the novel's educational theme. In fact, Gothic novels do help Catherine, and the author does not deny Gothic novels. What she wants to remind young readers is how to read them. Finally, a very important fact is that Austen left us an extraordinary question at the end of the novel. "The question of whether the book's intention is to support authoritarianism or encourage disobedience is left to those who are interested." This passage gives people an ambiguous ending, although it is still a happy ending. Critics regard the question raised here as blurring of the moral focus, which is a new phenomenon in the novel at that time. It is so new that it was not noticed when people first read the novel (Mary, 1999). This kind of ambiguous ending is not found in Austen's other five novels. This ending is actually the finishing touch of the novel. It reveals the information that young men and women how to find their own way out of marriage

under the pressure of society and the times. It involves more problems in the growth of young people than love itself.

So, what does Austen want to express in the theme of women's education? Catherine summed it up—reason. After the disillusionment of the vision of romance, Catherine "made up her mind to be very rational in whatever she judged or did in the future" (Austen, 1997). This means that both life and reading need to use reason to keep emotion and imagination moderate. The two basic features of Gothic novels are emotion and imagination. Readers can't let the emotion and imagination drive them; Similarly, we need to strive to maintain the balance between reason and emotion in life. That's the message from *Northanger Abbey*.

IV. CONCLUSION

Austen read widely and has a unique view on education. Her understanding of women's education is particularly profound, which is reflected in her novels. In the age of Austen, moral integrity handbook and Gothic novels were popular in the city, which had an important impact on the concept and cultivation of women's education, especially young women. Austen, who is very familiar with both of them, does not fully agree with their educational creed and cultivation path. Based on the novel *Northanger Abbey* written by Austen at the end of the 18th century, this paper expounds her enlightened and progressive ideas of women's education, and points out that the principles and methods of women's education recognized by Austen are essentially different from those recommended by the conduct handbook recognized by the mainstream society in Britain at that time. It shows that the heroines in Austen's novels are different from those in Gothic novels. From the perspective of the Enlightenment's profound influence on culture, education and literature in the 18th century, Austen's female education thought follows the empiricism epistemology represented by the British philosopher John Locke, which is a cognitive process from perceptual knowledge to rational knowledge, from rational knowledge back to practice, and from summarizing practical experience back to new rational knowledge.

In this novel, Austen fully expresses her views on women's education, and puts forward her own unique views on two key issues in the discussion of women's education in Britain at that time. One is that weather or not family education is better than school education. In Austen's time, educators and writers generally believed that women's education at home was more conducive to the cultivation of virtue, and they could only learn flashy skills in school, and their purity was at risk of being tarnished. In other novels, Austen does make a euphemistic criticism of these schools, but she does not think that family education is perfect. She

thinks that banning women from copper at home can not only guarantee her good conduct, but also make her know nothing about the world. In *Northanger Abbey*, she advocates that women should go out of the house and accept the baptism of the society to make up for the lack of family education. The second is whether women should read novels. This was the focus of the discussion on women's education at that time, because the literacy rate of middle-class women in the 18th century increased, and more free time and the popularity of mobile libraries made reading novels a major pastime for squires and aristocratic women. The popular views are generally divided into two groups. Conservatives think that novels will lead women astray and resolutely oppose novels, while progressive schools think that novels have the role of teaching and are conducive to women education. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen clearly points out that the novel has important value. By arranging for Catherine to indulge in Gothic novels, then to get rid of the illusion of novels, and finally to get a monument benefit from novels, it shows that novels are not monsters, but an excellent literary genre, which can not only give people entertainment, but also imperceptibly educate readers. As a reader, it is necessary to know how to treat the novel critically and extract the essence from its dross so as to gain valuable knowledge from the novel.

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