

Ann Radcliffe

(1764-1823)

Biography

Ann Radcliffe was born in London in 1764. She got married in 1787 and led an apparently peaceful and uneventful life, full of journeys to picturesque spots (but not to Italy).

In 1789 she published her first novel *The Castle of Athlin and Dunbayne*, where her feeling for nature started unfolding. In 1790 *A Sicilian Romance* was published and in 1791 *The Romance of the Forest* appeared, set in the wild scenery of the Alps. Radcliffe's most famous novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was published in 1794: set in the Apennines, it depicted a powerful gloomy castle. Her last novel, *The Italian or the Confessional of the Black Penitents*, appeared in 1797. She stopped writing for reasons unknown so that many legends spread about her, including fits of madness and depression. She died in London in 1823.

Main works

The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794)

It was a very well-paid novel (Radcliffe received £500 for it, which shows her popularity and the appeal of her works), and sometimes it echoes Milton and Shakespeare. It is set in a castle in the Apennine mountains in Italy, the atmosphere is made gloomy and frightening by secret plots, hidden passages, abductions and, of course, the supernatural.

The Italian (1797)

It shows her most successful character, the evil priest Schedoni brooding over his secret guilt, who will be a model for the dark, Byronic hero created by Lord Byron a few years later. The novel is partly a response to Lewis's *The Monk* (1795), but it has multiple points of view, a more impressive villain and a more coherent plot compared with Lewis's work.

Schedoni is the son of an impoverished nobleman, he pursues schemes and intrigues for his own progress. He is also guilty of murder. Yet, he never repents, not even in the dungeons of the Italian inquisition, where he dies after poisoning a rival priest. As Ambrosio in Lewis's *The Monk*, the book reflects anti-Roman Catholic feelings on the part of a late-eighteenth-century audiences.

Keywords

A new gothic

Radcliffe's contribution to the Gothic genre is mainly the use of the supernatural explained: the mysterious, horrific events she introduces to scare the reader are eventually given a natural explanation, so that the rational dimension seems to account for nightmarish emotions, restoring balance and reassuring the female readers in particular, after the anxieties aroused by the novel.

Heroines

In all the novels by Radcliffe, 'a beautiful and solitary girl is persecuted in picturesque surroundings, and, after many fluctuations of fortune, during which she seems again and again on the point of reaching safety, only to be thrust back into the midst of perils, is restored to her friends and marries the man of her choice' (J.M.S. Tompkins).

This heroine is often wise but curious and endowed with acute sensibility. Her quiet nature is put to the test by circumstances that often arouse her wild imagination: troubles and distress are overcome only when she manages to keep her emotions under control by means of reason. Her most usual activity is travelling, both outdoors and indoors, as if she were a female picaro: she crosses mountains and rivers, storms and mist and explores corridors, vaults, abandoned wings, secret rooms and dark passageways in deserted castles. All this movement casts more mystery on the story, because of the unfamiliarity of the character with the setting, which is often obscure and dimly perceived.

Landscape

In preferring obscurity to light, Radcliffe is in line with the theory of the sublime by Edmund Burke. Her novels are characterised by the search for effects of terror, often granted by a skilful use of the natural scenery as a sublime and mysterious background to (apparently) supernatural events. Sight is definitely the door to enter the writer's picturesque landscape: this is the reason why so much attention is given to the heroine's point of view, to her gaze, trying to filter new sensory data. The landscape is almost a psychological character in her works, whose obscurity interacts with the heroine's perception to create awe and terror, the basic effects of the sublime.