

Satire feminism and coming-of-age in northanger abbey



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A half-abandoned, eerie abbey, two lovers who can't be together, a mysterious death, and nearly 200 pages of suspense: Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is a melodramatic, brilliantly crafted satire of the gothic romance novel. Through its subversive, female-first lens, the novel at once flips genre conventions on their head while also functioning as a love-letter to romance at the same time. Austen's caricature of Catherine's naivety, looks, and girlish thoughts all play into the pastiche of 18th century gothic literature.

Austen weaves satire and subversive femininity throughout the novel to walk readers side-by-side Catherine as she goes from a bookish teen to a well-read married woman. Austen's young heroine, Catherine Morland, is the quintessential anti-heroine — she's nothing to look at, enjoys boyish activities, and is rather bookish. At the plot's outset, Catherine is handed off to the wealthy, childless Mr. and Mrs. Allen to relax and socialize in Bath over the winter. It is there, under the watchful eye of the Allens, that she meets a handsome young bachelor, Henry Tilney, and is asked to stay with his family at Northanger Abbey. This classic romance holds no surface-level surprises.

Like all traditional love stories, it ends with Catherine and Henry getting married, despite Henry's father's objections. Yet Jane Austen uses these traditional elements to poke fun at the genre and its tropes — namely, courtly love, spooky abbeys, and suspense. Austen's playful satire is evident from the moment she begins describing Catherine Morland. In stark contrast to the classic beauties of the romance genre, Catherine is characterized by her thin, awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair and strong features (Austen 5). By making Catherine more human and easier to sympathise with, Austen seems to say that even ugly ducklings can wind up

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with a Prince Charming — an encouraging, affirming feminist manifesto for the time. Austen continues the subversion by detailing Catherine as a normal person — one who struggles to learn fables, music and writing; instead, she just wants to roll down slopes outside (Austen 5). Readers are drawn in to Catherine's simplicity and occasional vapid tendencies, and thus are more inclined to root for her throughout the novel. The development of Catherine's character allows opportunities for dramatic irony within the text, specifically, when she speaks to a potential suitor, John Thorpe, about marriage. While Thorpe hints incessantly about wanting her hand, Catherine remains too dense to realize his intentions. She treats him kindly and says she would be happy to see him again, when really, she cannot stand him (Austen 87). The dramatic irony leaps out at the reader here, as they understand Thorpe's intentions, and flinch in embarrassment for poor, foolish Catherine. Although the term feminist was not around in the 1700's, Austen herself is a considerable example of what an 18th century feminist looks like.

Many women were educated and literate, but not many went around writing novels instead of keeping house. Austen extends her own trailblazing emphasis on book smarts by presenting Catherine and Isabella as friends and avid readers; And although Isabella is described as beautiful and desirable, she is also fond of reading. Austen actually makes a theme of intelligent, literate women throughout the novel, as Eleanor Tilney is an avid reader as well. The message here is clear: a strong woman is a smart woman. What's more, Eleanor's brother, Henry, encourages women to keenly think about social and political issues. He asks Catherine to consider that, If reading had not been taught, Mrs. Radcliffe would have written in

vain - or perhaps might not have written at all (Austen 77). Indeed, Henry's encouragement can be seen as Austen encouraging women to push themselves to understand subjects once deemed manly, such as, history, mathematics, and topics that vex or weary a person. This is further seen when Catherine, Eleanor, and Henry chat on their walk through Bath (Austen 76). Throughout the novel, Austen addresses her audience as the narrator. She astutely points out that she will not, adopt ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, then asks, If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? (Austen 21).

Austen asks readers to consider the implications of women reading novels. She makes her parody clearer later in her monologue, when she writes, (on women reading novels), [it is] only some work 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 (Austen 22). Austen uses this opportunity to toot her own horn, and jests at how reading novels may be seen to the non-novel-reader, but in actuality, they teach lessons of human nature, language, and wit. It would be daft to assume Austen to be wholly serious, as the nature of *Northanger Abbey* is exaggerated. Her satire brings a deeper awareness to the power of reading, especially to the young, impressionable women of *Northanger Abbey*. To the heroine, Catherine, life is not dull or unlovely, like herself, but instead it is brightened and comes alive through her enjoyment of gothic novels.

As a means to awaken her readers to the power of the novel, Austen playfully parodies the romance genre's tropes — and in doing so, helps readers elevate their comprehension and analysis of the genre in kind. George Levine, novelist and professor of English at Rutgers University, focuses on science in literature of the Victorian era. He writes, Catherine must, on terms of the genre Jane Austen adopts, marry the hero (Levine 336), he goes on to say, It is no accident, I think, that in the only direct parody in any of her major novels, Jane Austen includes explicit and unequivocal praise of the very fiction she seems to be mocking. She does not pretend to be writing a true history, but to be a novelist writing a novel. Rejecting solemnity, she praises novels-in the delightful excursus in chapter 5-as products of "" genius, wit, and taste"" which afforded more "" extensive and unaffected pleasure"" (Levine 336). Levine's analysis demonstrates that Austen hoped to appeal and awaken her audience to the silliness of the genre, while reinforcing the importance of education and reading.

Considering how Austen crafted the satirical *Northanger Abbey* as a dramatically sarcastic work of gothic literature, she also suggests its power. We can look to Catherine's love interest, Henry Tilney, for further meta-commentary. As Melissa Schaub asserts in her article, *Irony and Political Education in Northanger Abbey* Henry Tilney serves as Austen's voice in the novel. Henry is there to make readers think deeper and further analyze the meta-level workings within the novel. Schaub writes that *Northanger Abbey* does indeed educate the reader, both in literary and political issues. In achieving this education the ideal reader would surpass not only Catherine, but also Henry (whom many readers have regarded as Austen's mouthpiece

in the novel) (Schaub). This is seen clearly when Catherine and Henry engage in their first conversation about literature. Henry says plainly, The person, be in gentlemen or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid (Austen 74). He goes on to chastise the use of the word nice (Austen 76), something Austen would have likely stated herself if walking with her instead of Henry.

Without Catherine, the naive, childish heroine, Austen's voice, and the theme of intelligible women would have been less impactful. Catherine's character allows her to be consumed in gothic literature. Her enjoyment of gothic literature pushes her to have her own thoughts, and come to her own conclusions; a decidedly feminist theme for the 18th century. She begins to see life in a new, albeit gloomy, light. John Mathison, literary analyst on the Brontes and Austen, describes Catherine's awakening through her passion for gothic novels. He states, She enjoys them so much that their attitude toward life becomes hers her enjoyment makes her more fully alive and capable of various experiences and the Gothic novels make Catherine aware of her own ignorance and follies (Mathison 147). Catherine's discovery of gothic literature is a catalyst for her growing up. She becomes more adventurous, venturing out on carriage rides with John Thorpe (Austen 40), and accepting the invitation to stay with the Tilneys at Northanger Abbey (Austen 93). Catherine is frustrated with Austen's egotistical antagonist, John Thorpe, although he provides readers with some comedic relief.

Catherine is easily persuaded by John Thorpe, and often upset by his controlling and arrogant behavior. After John convinces Catherine to ride in the carriage with him, he says to her, ' You will not be frightened... if my <https://assignbuster.com/satire-feminism-and-coming-of-age-in-northanger-abbey/>

horse should dance about a little at first setting off. He will, most likely, give a plunge or two, and perhaps take the rest for a minute; but he will soon know his master. He is full of spirits, playful as can be, there is no vice in him' (Austen 40). Readers who pick up on the subliminal here can make assumptions at what Thorpe is really jesting at — and it is likely not his horse. Catherine also becomes more aware of her childish follies through gothic literature. Henry Tilney easily teases her on the way to Northanger when he describes the room she'll be staying in, and she exclaims, This is just like a book (Austen 106). Upon arriving, Catherine sees how silly she acted because of her obsession with the gothic. Catherine's obsession with gothic novels and her time spent away from home elicits her metamorphosis into a young woman. She delights in life more at the end of the novel than ever before, and finds herself empowered by her continued dedication to reading and self-education. Austen gives Catherine the freedom to speak up for herself and to win in the end, being home among family and able to marry her love, Henry Tilney, which was unrequited until the last chapter of the novel. Furthermore, Austen sheds an important light on gothic literature, and all literature, by encouraging readers to understand why bright women are of value, and why exposure to literature is paramount to self-development.