

Artificiality and fallibility in northanger abbey



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Jane Austen, through the development of socially conscious female characters, is able to render a remarkably accurate depiction of the social structure present during the late 18th century. Her social commentary, however, highlights certain unbecoming qualities in both her protagonists and antagonists, particularly their artificiality. This feature of her writing is especially evident in her satiric novel *Northanger Abbey*. While Austen is clear in her criticism of characters such as Isabella and John Thorpe, neither of whom is in Catherine's favor at the end of the novel, the author appears to be far more accepting of the affectedness of General Tilney, who is portrayed as a severe but fair man. Through the artificiality of her characters and the claims she makes about them, Austen weakens the motifs she intends to exemplify, making her an unreliable author.

General Tilney is consistently illustrated as a strange man with a somewhat severe manner. Despite this, the text never truly suggests that he is a bad man. He is kind enough to invite Catherine to stay with the Tilneys at *Northanger Abbey* and, although he is concerned with superficial things such as the grandeur of his home and the wealth of his childrens' spouses, the text suggests that he wants only the best for his children. Near the end of the novel, Catherine even admits that General Tilney's interference in their marriage may have actually strengthened the bond between her and Henry, for which she thanks the general: "...the General's unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to the their felicity, was perhaps conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled by whomever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or

reward filial disobedience" (Austen 235). Despite Catherine's fairly positive opinion of him at the end of the novel, the general still proves to be quite artificial early on when, after trying so ardently to impress her in hopes of securing a wealthy wife for Henry, he rudely casts her out of his home without explanation upon hearing from John Thorpe that Catherine's family is poor. Austen tries to forgive General Tilney's bad behavior by stating that his conduct may have strengthened the bond between Henry and Catherine, yet his actions were undeniably callous, regardless of the end product. His superficial treatment of Catherine is based entirely off of his focus on money, and this quality makes it difficult to accept the positive light that Austen attempts to shine on him at the end of the story, causing her to appear unreliable as an author.

The most artificial character of Northanger Abbey is arguably Isabella Thorpe. Although she initially appears to be perfectly friendly and immediately forms a close bond with Catherine, the text makes it clear that she is somewhat superficial and would be content gossiping the day away. On several occasions, she gloats her apathy toward financial status, claiming that "[her] wishes are so moderate that the smallest income in nature would be enough for [her]. Where people are really attached, poverty itself is wealth; grandeur [she] detest[s]" (112), as well as that " a [small] income would satisfy [her]... [She] hate[s] money" (128). The reader, however, later finds that upon learning of her fiancé James Morland's modest income, she immediately begins to flirt with Fredrick Tilney and eventually calls off the wedding. The reader even catches Isabella contradicting her earlier quotes when speaking to Catherine of her undesired gentleman caller, John Thorpe:

“ You have both of you something, to be sure, but it is not a trifle that will support a family nowadays; and after all that romancers may say, there is no doing without money” (135). Even though Isabella claims on multiple occasions that finances do not concern her and that wealth even creates a deficit in relationships, she completely flips her argument in both her actions and opinions when she abandons James and tells Catherine that romance is not enough to support a family with modest income. Although Isabella is portrayed in an increasingly negative light as the plot progresses, she commits actions that are rather similar to those of General Tilney, but it is the products of their activities that appear to decide the author’s view of them. The characters’ actions are similar in that they both send away their respective Morlands upon finding that they are not wealthy, but their rewards differ: General Tilney is somewhat respected for the sternness that strengthened Henry and Catherine’s marriage, while Isabella is scorned by the narrator and essentially forgotten by the end. The narrator’s unequal judgment of each character again suggests that Jane Austen is unreliable in her portrayal of the morals she wishes to convey.

In addition to the artificiality of Austen’s characters and the inconsistencies that they produce, the narrator also illustrates the same trait in her description of Catherine. Throughout *Northanger Abbey*, Austen repeatedly refers to Catherine as the story’s heroine. As early as the first pages of the novel, Austen builds Catherine up as the unsuspecting hero: “ No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born a heroine” (13). Naturally, because of frequent recurrence of this description, the reader spends the entirety of the story waiting for Catherine

to prove herself worthy of the title. Spoiler alert: she doesn't. A heroine is admired for her courage and noble qualities, and although Catherine is consistently portrayed as having good nature and fair judgment, at no point does she truly verify that she is a great person herself. By failing to show what she repeatedly tells the audience to be true, Austen again illustrates her unreliability as a narrator.

Jane Austen is an author of critical acclaim within the literary world, but, like any other author, her writings exhibit many flaws. Her account of *Northanger Abbey* creates a social commentary in which she attempts to criticize the superficial foci of the era's social scene. Her success in conducting an efficacious critique, however, is hindered by inconsistencies in the artificiality of her characters and their descriptions. Through the artificiality of her characters and the claims she makes about them, Austen weakens the motifs she intends to exemplify, making her an unreliable author in her account of *Northanger Abbey*.

Bibliography

Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Print.