

# Jane austen northanger abbey

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In Jane Austen's book "Northanger Abbey", one of the major themes and objectives within the novel is the nature and attitude of the society towards different genres of reading and literature. This essay will examine this theme according to the novel as a whole, the passage given and the devices with which Austen distinguishes her views on literature, as well as the views she has on characters which revolve around the theme of reading and literature. The essay will also examine the context behind the novel in terms of the status of reading and literature in that period of history in England and how this theme of reading and literature reflects on Austen's broader theme within the novel. The attitude of Austen towards reading and writing can be seen throughout the novel, as she mostly satires the common traits of gothic novels (Flavin, 2004). Austen's satirising of gothic novels is indicated to the reader in the first pages of the novel where Austen decisively describes the character of Catherine by making reference to the fact that Catherine's character does not resemble that of a heroine in a gothic novel. An example of this type of reference can be seen in the first line of the novel where Austen states "no one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her fancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine" (Austen, 1983: pp1005.) The novel also includes a theme of ongoing mockery of gothic novel conventions as Austen describes Catherine's family as normal. She goes so far as to state that Catherine's father does not lock his daughters up, which is a typical convention which occurs in the gothic genre, thus mocking the forms of gothic novels and the highly predictable nature of these novels due to these forms (Flavin, 2004). In the passage given, the parody of gothic novels that Austen carries throughout the novel is illustrated, although it is not attacking

or mocking these novels directly, Austen takes her satire of these novels further by stating several of the novels within that genre that display similar structures and conventions giving them an overall effect of predictability (Brooke, 1999). In the passage after Catherine has been informed of all the books Isabella has planned to read, she asks whether these books are all “horrid” (Austen, 1983: pp1020) thus demonstrating further the humour that Austen uses as a device to suggest the conventions of this genre as silly and banal (Brooke, 1999,). Another example of Austen’s satire of this genre in her novel is revealed through the character of Henry, who is teasing Catherine and embarks on telling an imaginary story, using the conventions of the gothic genre, to describe the events of Catherine’s first night in bath (Austen, 1983). The theme of the gothic novel genre advances when Catherine becomes obsessed with the ideas of the gothic genre, as she stays in Northanger Abbey and suggests that there are conventions of the book occurring around her (Flavin, 2004). Although Austen expresses mockery within her novel “Northanger abbey”, her mockery is of a humorous nature, indicating that she does not completely rule out this genre of literature (Brooke, 1999). Therefore, the theme of reading and literature within “Northanger Abbey” plays a large role in describing not only the gothic genre, but also the culture surrounding literature during the time the novel was produced and thus the subject of gothic genre which is continuous in the novel plays a leading role within the theme of literature and reading in the novel. Right the way through the novel the subject of literature progresses, as Austen creates characters who relate to this literate theme, as she distinguishes characters and allows more insight of a character through the

discussions about these characters literary tastes (Brooke, 1999). For instance she describes the views on novel reading of the time through the character of John Thorpe, who immediately dismisses Catherine's thoughts on novels, more specifically her thoughts on a gothic novel called Udolpho . Mr Thorpe states " Udolpho! Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do. " (Austen, 1983; pp1026) Therefore John ' s reaction reflects the general attitude of the time about novels during this period, one of the attitudes held, being that novels are a waste of time and a person cannot gain anything from reading a novel. However, before this incident occurs there is a part in the novel where it seems that Austen herself is talking to the reader, and stating that society and writers should not be critical of one another but rather leave that to the critics as novel writers are " an injured body" "(Austen, 1983: pp1019). This passage and the character of John Thorpe's himself suggest Austen's feelings of the general opinion of the society of novels as a pointless skill being in very bad taste (Austen, 1983). Another character that can be identified through their literary views is Isabella, as she continuously makes reference to a friend named Miss Andrews, which is in the given passage, and this suggests that she receives information on books continuously and has no real insight of her own in terms of the literature (Austen, 1983). Isabella further induces this image as she is highly fixated on obtaining social appreciation. Henry Tilney is a another character that Austen allows for character insight through his views on literacy, as he in a playful manner objects to Catherine's assumption that he does not read novels and states that " the person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid"

(Austen, 1983: pp1060), which suggests that Henry is a more gentle and intelligent man than that of John Thorpe. The novel further asserts this through their characters and the disagreement that Catherine and John Thorpe engage in (Brooke, 1999). Catherine is a character who not only mediates between these two male characters whose views on literature are opposing, but also develops in terms of her views on literature. Her social habits also change and develop. Hence, she is a character that starts off tending towards ignorance, but instead grows intellectually as depicted by her growing literary knowledge and broadening scope of opinions. Her personal social ability is also an example of her growth as a character. Therefore, Austen uses the theme of literature and reading to define her characters and develops these characters through not only their personalities but their opinions in terms of reading and literature, thus reading and literature plays a large role in Austen novel “ Northanger Abbey”. The literature and reading theme within the novel reflects on the broader messages that Austen is trying to convey in the novel and other main themes of the novel (Brooke, 1999). Austen’s novel “ Northanger Abbey” comments on the systems and conventions in place within the society through the main theme within the novel (Brooke, 1999). She demonstrates the society’s conventions using a number of themes such as attitudes towards literature and reading. Austen does not only discuss the convention of literature during the time in which the novel was written, she also represents the gender politics of the time through the comments that Henry makes that neither a “ gentleman nor lady” (Austen, 1983: pp1060) should deny themselves the pleasure of reading a novel. This demonstrates

the gender politics of the time and the idea that men are seen as reasonable beings whilst women are perceived as irrational ruled by emotion, where rational thinking men do not read novels for pleasure but rather pursue knowledge (Brooke, 1999). Therefore the theme of literature and reading plays a large role in the novel "Northanger Abbey" in terms of reflecting Austen's large thematic concerns. In conclusion, "Northanger Abbey" can be seen as an analogy of the society in play at the time that the novel was written, in which the theme of literature and reading plays a large role in forming ideas of the society. This is shown using the societal conventions of literature, gender roles and conventions. The theme of literature and reading not only reflects the larger thematic concerns of the novel, but also plays a large part in forming the characters of Austen's novel; a novel which is both a comment on society and an exploration of human nature. Reference list: Louise Flavin, Jane Austen in the Classroom; viewing the novel/reading the film. Peter Lang Publishing Inc: New York. (2004) Tim Luscombe, Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey. Nick Hern Books Limited: London (2005) Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke, Jane Austen: Illusion and reality. (Chapter 7). D. S Brewer: Cambridge. (1999) Jane Austen, the complete novels of Jane Austen. Penguin Film Ltd: London (1983). (Brooke, 1999) (Flavin, 2004)