

Option (a) discuss
fidelity and betrayal in
northanger abbey



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The use of fidelity and betrayal throughout the novel *Northanger Abbey* accentuates the social and political unrest in England at the time of its composition. The 1790's were a time of particular unrest, particularly for the aristocratic upper classes who expressed feelings of extreme nervousness about the knock-on effect that the French Revolution might have in England. The consistent twisting and turning, from promises to broken promises, fidelity to betrayal, from gothic themes to sentimental realism, reflect the turbulent times in which the novel was set; and particularly the deliberate shift into a parody of typical gothic conventions helped Austen enhance the difficult, unstable and sometimes horrific experiences for women in this agitated patriarchal society. This essay will highlight how Austen's use of language and structure emphasises the fidelity and betrayal throughout the novel; how the writers bending and merging of the rules of different written genres heightens these two themes, which in turn underlines its contextual anxieties. Throughout the novel Austen offers up gothic situations but then deals with them realistically; an example of this is seen in Catherine's abduction at the hands of John Thorpe, which mirrors the typical kidnap scenes that late eighteenth-century gothic writers would incorporate into their novels. After being ignored in her request to 'get out this moment', Catherine 'having no power to get away, was obliged to give up the point and submit' (Austen, p. 62). This scene deals with the themes of fidelity and betrayal on many levels; it highlights Austen's betrayal from sentimental realist literature by incorporating gothic scenes, it then betrays the gothic genre by turning the kidnap of Catherine into nothing more than a dull 'tourist excursion' that does not even make it to her expected gothic scene at Blaize Castle. It also highlights the betrayal of John Thorpe's trust in <https://assignbuster.com/option-a-discuss-fidelity-and-betrayal-in-northanger-abbey/>

refusing to allow Catherine to get out and undertake her previous engagement with the Tilney's (Correa, p. 45). The language used by Austen to express Catherine's anger underlines how women were left helpless at the hands of domineering men; by saying she 'had no power' and had to 'submit' to his wishes emphasises how even the shallow character of John Thorpe has the power to control women in the patriarchal society that surrounds the novel. His fidelity is betrayed by his ability to manipulate and remove what is considered by Henry Tilney as the only power left to women at the time, the power of choice. This intensifies the difference between Thorpe and Henry Tilney who understands that women own 'the power of refusal', and highlights the 'symmetrically counterpoised' characters of the Tilney's and Thorpe's (Austen, p. 54) (Correa, p. 45). The contrasting balance of characters between the Thorpe's and the Tilney's enhances the themes of fidelity and betrayal throughout the novel; and also helps to underline the difficulties that women faced at the time. If Catherine is considered the heroine, then Isabella offers the role of anti-heroine. Her transparent fidelity is clearly underlined through her feigned devotion to Catherine's brother James, and as she says with typical hyperbole 'Had I the command of millions, were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice' the reader feels the full force of Austen's ironic wit as the impending betrayal of James's affections with the emergence of Captain Tilney hovers just beyond the horizon (Austen, 87). Isabella's fickle friendships and emotions emphasise the tenuous gap between fidelity and betrayal that permeate throughout the novel. What they also highlight is the tenuous role that women had at the time of the novel, and the extremes that young women had to go through to achieve stability in a society governed by men.

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Her betrayal of James and by association of Catherine can be seen on the one hand as an act of ruthless cold-heartedness, but also as an act of survival. Her misconception of wealth that would be attained through a marriage to Morland, when realised provides a frightening future for a woman who is always expected in societies such as those found at Bath to look decent, fashionable and well respected. It is no surprise also that the role of Captain Tilney, who breaks both Isabella's engagement to James, as well as his own is played down in a patriarchal society. Henry's smooth discussion leads Catherine to reflect with the use of free indirect discourse that 'Frederick could not be unpardonably guilty, while Henry made himself so agreeable' (Austen, p. 161). This acquiescence by Catherine can also be seen as a betrayal of Isabella, as instead of attempting to try and salvage some respect for her former friend's nature she allows the bonding defence of Henry's towards Frederick to overpower her and concedes to male dominance. Isabella's role as the anti-heroine is used to satirize 'sentimental representations of friendship', as her associations and close companionship with the characters in the novel are used to boost her marriage prospects and status in society rather than express genuine affection (Correa, p. 46). She has no reservations over exchanging fidelity with betrayal, and this highlights the unenviable role that women with ambition faced at the time. In contrast Eleanor Tilney's character displays no hidden agenda, her attitude and un-exaggerated language is spoken 'with simplicity and truth, and without personal conceit', a point that reinforces the difference between her and Isabella (Correa, p. 49). However, Eleanor's confession to Catherine that she is only a 'nominal mistress' as she delivers the horrifying news that Catherine must leave Northanger Abbey immediately reminds the reader of <https://assignbuster.com/option-a-discuss-fidelity-and-betrayal-in-northanger-abbey/>

the status of women, and how the respectable, educated, and polite Eleanor accepts her place as a substitute to the male dominance of the General (Austen, p. 166). This submission and acceptance contrasts directly with Isabella's wild determination, and highlights how the privileged woman, represented by Eleanor can become easily accustomed to a comfortable role in patriarchal society, whereas a less fortunate woman such as Isabella must use whatever devices are available to achieve similar status.