

Realism or romance



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The realistic novel, characterized by its presentation of reality and rational philosophy, was a genre created in response to the romantic, or “ gothic,” novel and which was characterized by sensationalist escapism. In contrast to romanticism’s poetic and dreamlike language, the diction of the realistic novel was more natural and simple-often making use of satire or dialogue. Realism tended to focus more on character study rather than on actual plot, and lacked the fantastic events of the gothic novel. However, Jane Austen’s novel *Northanger Abbey* broke from the conventions of both literary techniques in that it utilized aspects from both realism and romanticism. Austen’s use of dialogue and satire, as well as the ordinary events depicted through the novel, highlight the realistic aspects of the work. Rather than employing the flowery, romantic words recalling those used by writers such as Pope, Grey and Thompson (5), this piece uses matter-of-fact dialogue between the characters to describe the events. For example, Henry Tilney’s interaction with Catherine (15) is comprised mainly of dialogue, and relies upon their speech rather than on narrative description. The speaker uses tone and free indirect discourse as a means of revealing the minds of the characters, who are arguably more important to the realistic novel than the plot. Free indirect discourse allows the readers insight into the characters’ emotions and thoughts in scenes through the voice of the narrator without the use of dialogue. As Catherine explores the Abbey for the first night, the storm and the “ characteristic sounds” make her feel as though “ she really [is] in an Abbey” (138). This reveals her own misconceptions of *Northanger Abbey*, and the expectations she has of its similarities to the setting of a true gothic romance. These aspects help to show more of the characters’ inner thoughts, allowing the narrator to reveal their development throughout the

novel. The ordinary qualities of the characters in *Northanger Abbey*, and particularly that of Catherine, are used to allocate a sense of reality to their individual personas. The novel's heroine, Catherine, lacks the characteristics of the typical gothic romance heroine. The reason for her "strange, unaccountable character" is that she does not have any of the remarkable qualities or extraordinary talents so often found in the gothic novel heroines, but rather is described as decidedly "ordinary" (4). However, Catherine's maturation is evident toward the end of the novel; she has developed the ability to see people for who they are (especially Isabella and General Tilney). Upon reading Isabella's letter describing what occurred with Frederick Tilney, Catherine finally realizes the "inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood" that have revolved around their friendship, and declares the contents of the letter "disgusting...empty, and...impudent" (182). This reveals how Catherine is now able to see Isabella's true nature. Her interaction with Henry and willingness to speak against his brother Frederick, declaring that she "must say that [she does] not like him at all" (182), shows a newfound independence and further growth in that she is now speaking up against Henry, whom she fears offending. After General Tilney abruptly makes Catherine return home, her ability to speak up about it to Eleanor rather than accept it quietly reveals her growing maturity. Although "it [is] with pain" that Catherine speaks up at all, she mentions her anxiety about the General's behavior for the sake of her friendship with Eleanor. The darker tone of the second half of *Northanger Abbey* as well as the theme of the gothic novel infuse the piece with elements of romanticism. Catherine's obsession with gothic novels, as revealed through her discussions of *Udolpho* and the importance of reading such novels with

Isabella (29), shows the idealized view of the genre by people of the time period. Catherine's exploration of Northanger Abbey sets the mood for the second half of the novel; she views the dark and mysterious mansion to be the optimal gothic setting. Her fantastic imaginings of what she finds within the manor as well as the mystery she creates surrounding the late Mrs. Tilney set the mood for an atypical gothic piece. However, her fantasies are shattered when the house is discovered to be an ordinary manor and those living within no more fantastic than Catherine herself. While bracing herself for an amazing adventure "just like a book" when Henry indulges her fancy in the carriage ride to the Abbey (131), her fantasies of mysterious papers and dark corridors are broken when the things she discovers are "scarcely more interesting" (143) than a washing bill and a wife who passed away from natural causes. Austen places this ordinary, anti-gothic heroine in a supposedly gothic novel-like setting as a means of incorporating gothic themes into her realistic novel. Although a realistic novel, *Northanger Abbey* utilizes romantic themes in an effort to satirize the gothic genre. Although the diction, structure, characters and events are realistic, many characteristics of the piece draw on romantic themes. Austen places "normal" characters such as Catherine into mundane circumstances to reverse the theme of the extraordinary gothic heroine going through unbelievable experiences. The writer places Catherine into situations that a gothic heroine might embark on, and purposely makes them ordinary. Austen also makes direct references to novels throughout this story. Her excerpts from romance writers as Gray, Thompson, Pope and Shakespeare are satirically placed, showing how Catherine, a realistic character in a realistic novel, seeks the life of the gothic heroine through "the memories

[of] these quotations” (5). Austen later makes a direct reference to novelists of the time period and their practices of putting down other novelists (25). These themes, used in conjunction with the realistic setting and characters of the novel, mock the romantic genre and its various absurdities.