Summary

Although a plain girl, Catherine Morland believes she is destined to become a heroine like those in her favorite gothic novels. She might, however, have spent her entire life in Fullerton, the small village in which she was born, had not Mrs. Allen, the wife of a wealthy neighbor, invited her to go to Bath. There a whole new world was opened to Catherine, who was delighted with the social life of the colony. At Bath, she meets Isabella Thorpe, who is more worldly than Catherine and takes it upon herself to instruct Catherine in the ways of society. Isabella also introduces Catherine to her brother, John Thorpe. He and Catherine’s brother, James Morland, are friends, and the four young people spend many enjoyable hours together.

Catherine meets Henry Tilney, a young clergyman, and his sister Eleanor, with whom she is anxious to become better acquainted. John thwarts her in this desire, and Isabella and James aid him in deceptions aimed at keeping her away from Henry and Eleanor. After Isabella and James are engaged, Isabella doubles her efforts to interest Catherine in her beloved brother. Although Catherine loves her friend dearly, she cannot extend this love to John, whom she knows in her heart to be an indolent, undesirable young man.

While James is at home arranging for an allowance so that he and Isabella can be married, Henry Tilney’s brother, Captain Tilney, appears on the scene. He is as worldly as Isabella and, even more important to her, extremely wealthy. Catherine is a little disturbed by the manner in which Isabella conducts herself with Captain Tilney, but she is too loyal to her friend to suspect her of being unfaithful to James.

Shortly after Captain Tilney arrives in Bath, Catherine is invited by Eleanor Tilney and her father, General Tilney, to visit them at Northanger Abbey, their old country home. Catherine is delighted; she always wanted to visit a real abbey. She quickly writes for and receives a letter of permission from her parents. Henry arouses her imagination with stories of dark passageways and mysterious chests and closets.

When the party arrives at Northanger Abbey, Catherine is surprised and a little frightened to find that the Tilney’s descriptions had been so exact. When she hears that Mrs. Tilney died suddenly several years previously, Catherine begins to suspect that the general murdered her. At the first opportunity, she attempts to enter the dead woman’s chambers. Henry finds her there and assures her that his mother died a natural death. Catherine is almost disappointed, for this news destroys many of her romantic imaginings about Northanger Abbey.

For more than a week after this event, Catherine worries because she receives no letter from Isabella. When a letter arrives from her brother, James, she learns the reason for Isabella’s silence. He wrote that Isabella was engaged to Captain Tilney. Catherine almost becomes ill when she reads the news, and Henry and Eleanor Tilney are as disturbed as she. They know that only greed and ambition drew Isabella from James to their wealthier brother, and they fear for his happiness. They believe, however, that the captain is more experienced
with such women and will fare better than had James.

Shortly afterward, Catherine receives a letter from Isabella telling the story in an entirely different light. She pretends that she and James had just had a misunderstanding and begs Catherine to write to James in her behalf. Catherine is not taken in. She wastes no time in sympathy for her onetime friend and believes her brother fortunate to be rid of such a schemer.

A short time later, the general goes to London on business, and Eleanor and Catherine are alone at the abbey. Henry’s clerical duties compel him to spend some time in his nearby parish. One night, soon after the general’s departure, Eleanor goes to Catherine’s room. In a state of great embarrassment and agitation, she tells Catherine that the general returned suddenly from London and ordered Catherine to leave the abbey early the next morning. Because she loves Catherine and does not want to hurt her, Eleanor gives no reason for the order. In great distress, Catherine departs and returns to her home for the first time in many weeks. She and her family try to forget the insult to her, but they cannot help thinking of it constantly. Most of Catherine’s thoughts are of Henry, whom she fears she might never see again.

Soon after her return home, Henry calls on her and explains why his father turned against Catherine. When the Tilney family first meet Catherine, John Thorpe tells the general that she is the daughter of a wealthy family and that the Allen money will also be settled on her. He brags because at the time he himself hopes to marry Catherine; when Catherine rebuffs him, and after his sister Isabella is unable to win James again, John spitefully tells the general that Catherine had deceived him. Although she never implied that she is wealthy, the general gives her no chance to defend herself.

After Henry tells his story, he asks Catherine to marry him. Her parents give their consent with the understanding that the young couple must first win over the general. Henry returns home to wait. Eleanor’s marriage to a wealthy peer proves an unexpected aid to the lovers. The general is so pleased at having his daughter become a viscountess that he is persuaded to forgive Catherine. When he also learns that the Morland family, though not wealthy, could give Catherine three thousand pounds, he gladly gives his consent to the marriage. In less than a year after they meet and despite many hardships and trials, Catherine Morland marries Henry Tilney with every prospect of happiness and comfort for the rest of her life.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 1 Summary

*Northanger Abbey* was the first novel Jane Austen wrote (around 1798), but it was not published until after her death in 1818. The story follows teenager Catherine Morland as she makes her way through the British society of her time. In this story, Catherine loves **Gothic novels**. Some critics have suggested that *Northanger Abbey* may have been written as a parody of that genre.

Catherine Morland is the daughter of a clergyman. Richard Morland and his wife have ten children; Catherine is the fourth oldest. At the age of ten, Catherine is described as a skinny girl with dark, lank hair and colorless skin. She is plain looking and does not care about her appearance. Cleanliness and education are of little interest to her. She would rather be playing cricket with the boys or rolling down a grassy field than practicing music, drawing, or learning French, the entertainments of most girls her age.

Catherine is very attentive and patient with her siblings and gently cares for the six sisters and brothers born after her. She loves small animals like mice and birds, is not quarrelsome with her parents or older brothers, and abhors being confined indoors.

As Catherine matures from ten to fifteen, her parents notice physical changes in their daughter. Her features are softened by the extra weight she puts on, and her attention is diverted from dirt to the refinement of nice
clothes. Her parents are often overheard saying that Catherine has become “almost pretty.”

Although Catherine prefers riding horses to reading books, she does enjoy novels. It is through books of fiction that Catherine forms her opinions of who might be considered a hero and what that entails. Her definitions of heroism have nothing to do with the life around her, though. There are no young men upon whom she can invest the information she has gleaned from the fictional tales in which she indulges. None of her family’s friends have sons her age. There are no young men in her town or in neighboring villages. There are no young lords to stir her passions.

When she turns seventeen, a friend of her father’s, Mr. Allen, who is described as a warm-hearted man, must travel to Bath to treat an ailment. Mrs. Allen surmises that if a young girl cannot find adventures at home she must go elsewhere to find them, so she Allen asks the Morlands if Catherine might travel with them. When the Morlands consent, Catherine is extremely thankful.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 2 Summary**

Catherine prepares for her departure with the Allens to Bath. Catherine’s mother does not make a fuss over her leaving; she merely warns Catherine to keep warm so that she does not catch a cold. Mrs. Allen’s concern is not due to a lack of love for her young daughter on her first venture into society but rather a lack of experience. Mrs. Allen knows very little about the potential mischief of some young men toward young, innocent girls, so she does not know to warn her daughter. Catherine’s closest sibling is her younger sister, Sally (who sometimes prefers the name Sarah). She does not, as some other sisters might have, insist that Catherine write to her every day that she is gone. No, the Morlands approach Catherine’s departure with a very modest spirit. The attitude seems to be that Catherine will not be gone long, and one day she will return.

The trip, much like the reactions of the Morlands, is quiet. Catherine and her companions, the Allens, encounter no storms along the road. Neither are they bothered by any thieves. Catherine looks about the countryside, but she does not set her eyes upon any young man who might incite her imagination into proclaiming him to be a possible hero.

Once settled in Bath, Mrs. Allen examines Catherine’s wardrobe and finds it lacking. The first outing of Mrs. Allen and Catherine is to procure new dresses. Soon afterward, Mrs. Allen is ready to chaperone Catherine to her first ball. Catherine’s hair is cut, and she dons one of her new outfits. The Allens announce, upon seeing her so dressed, that Catherine is sufficiently prepared for admiration from any young man who should see her.

They are late in arriving to the ball because Mrs. Allen takes very long to dress. By the time they reach the ballroom, it is so crowded the women have difficulty passing through. Catherine was hoping to find a place to sit and watch the dancing, but all they manage is to stand behind a wall of people far from the dance floor. They finally find a spot on a balcony, from which Catherine can look down at the people dancing. The commotion excites Catherine, and she wishes she could join them. But no young or old man approaches to ask her to dance. This disappoints Mrs. Allen. She continues to state that she wishes Catherine could dance. This does not make matters much better; it only emphasizes Catherine’s disappointment.

During a break from the dancing, Catherine tells her companion that it is sad they know no one at the ball. They are sitting at a table, waiting for tea with no one to talk to. Catherine feels uncomfortable, as if everyone were staring at them and wondering why they were there. Shortly afterward, Mr. Allen joins them. He, too, is disappointed that Catherine has not been asked to dance. He promises her that the next ball will be more fulfilling for her. Catherine is not completely at a loss, though, for when she walks around the room after the crowd has thinned out, she hears several gentlemen comment on her beauty.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 3 Summary

In the next few days, Catherine and Mrs. Allen spend much of their time shopping and roaming the streets of Bath, exploring places they have never seen before. One day they go to the Lower Rooms, a place of gathering, and Catherine meets a young man. James King, the master of ceremonies, introduces Catherine to Henry Tilney, a twenty-four-year-old clergyman.

Tilney begins a conversation with Catherine; he asks when she arrived at Bath and what she has done since she has been there. Catherine finds the young man refreshing and well mannered. He teases her about writing in her journal when she gets home that night. He even suggests how she might describe having met him. He says she will probably state that she was harassed by a strange young man who made her dance with him and made her feel uncomfortable. After laughing over this, Tilney suggests another possible journal entry, one that is more flattering. He tells her to describe him as a very agreeable young man who seems like an extraordinary genius. She is to write that she has met a young man so interesting that she hopes to see him again.

Mrs. Allen joins their conversation but talks of nothing but dresses. Mr. Tilney, it turns out, knows a lot about fashion and fabric. He claims to buy material out of which his sisters make dresses. He knows what types of material are better than others. Mrs. Allen asks Mr. Tilney to give his opinion of her dress and Catherine’s. He likes the one Mrs. Allen is wearing but suggests that Catherine must have spent too little money on hers, and he is concerned the dress will soon fray. Catherine is slightly embarrassed by this conversation, thinking that Mrs. Allen has spent too much time absorbed in a frivolous subject. But the couple soon leaves Mrs. Allen’s company as the dancing has begun.

As they walk toward the dance floor, Mr. Tilney notices the strange expression on Catherine’s face and asks what she is thinking about. She had been considering his personality, thinking him somewhat foolish. She does not want to expose her thoughts to him, so she tells him she was not thinking about anything at all. Mr. Tilney suggests that they are destined to become acquainted with one another, so she should be honest with him—she should merely tell him that she would rather not share her thoughts with him. This is exactly what she tells him.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 4 Summary

The next day, Catherine is anxious to return to the Lower Rooms with Mrs. Allen in anticipation of meeting again with Henry Tilney, and she rushes Mrs. Allen out of the house. The meeting room is crowded but there is no sign of Mr. Tilney. Again Mrs. Allen bemoans the fact that she and Mr. Allen have no acquaintances in Bath. She believes this puts her and Catherine at a great disadvantage. Catherine has grown tired of hearing the same complaint but feels a sense of ease when a woman turns toward Mrs. Allen. This woman says she knows Mrs. Allen and calls her by name. She has to remind Mrs. Allen of tidbits of the past history shared between them before Mrs. Allen remembers her. The woman is Mrs. Thorpe, a widow and mother of six children, about whom she proudly boasts.

Mrs. Thorpe’s son John is at school at Oxford. Edward is at a school called Merchant Taylors’, and William is at sea. Mrs. Thorpe begins to talk about her three daughters as she sees them walking toward. She is particularly focused on the eldest, Isabella, whom she believes is more beautiful than her other two daughters.

When Isabella arrives at her side and is introduced to Catherine, Isabella mentions Catherine’s brother James and states that Catherine favors him in her good looks. She tells Catherine that James Morland made friends with her brother John. Catherine is surprised of the connection until she remembers that her brother James had mentioned making friends with someone with the last name of Thorpe. She recalls that James had spent the past Christmas at the Thorpe house. This relationship between the families make Isabella and her sisters feel
as if they already know Catherine, and they immediately take her into their confidence. Catherine so enjoys
their conversation that she forgets all about her disappointment at not seeing Mr. Tilney that day.

Isabella especially takes to Catherine. As they walk around the room, she relates all the information she has
learned about the young people in her society. She is four years older than Catherine is, and she is much more
experienced. Isabella points out the various expressions of young couples as they pass. She interprets the
flirtations they witness. She talks of fashions in London compared to the way people dress in other towns she
has visited.

There is so much to talk about that Isabella insists on walking home with Catherine so she will have more
time to talk to her. This attention so excites Catherine that even after Isabella has left her at the door,
Catherine runs upstairs so she can watch Isabella walk down the street. She notices Isabella’s fashionable air
and social confidence and is very thankful she can call Isabella a friend.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 5 Summary

Catherine and Isabella become inseparable, but this does not keep Catherine from wondering about Mr.
Tilney, who seems to have disappeared from Bath. Every time Catherine goes for a walk, she looks for him.
She talks to Isabella about him, and Isabella suggests that Mr. Tilney is probably a good man. Isabella adds
that maybe Catherine should have been a bit more forthcoming about her interest in him. Maybe that would
have kept him in Bath.

Catherine goes to the theater in the evening with Isabella. They go together to the ballroom to dance. There is
never any sign of Mr. Tilney no matter where they go or when they are out. However, rather than dismaying
Catherine, his absence only increases her interest in him. She cannot get him off her mind.

Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Thorpe also form a friendship. They, too, spend a lot of time together. They do not have
a lot in common except that they both enjoy having a friend with which they can talk. Mrs. Thorpe is
constantly talking about her children, and Mrs. Allen only talks about clothes and fashion. She is secretly
pleased that her clothes are of better quality than Mrs. Thorpe’s are.

Catherine and Isabella see each other every day. They most often spend their days out on the town, but even
when it rains, they visit one another’s houses and read together. They prefer reading novels, mostly light
reading, which is often criticized by literary reviewers. But they pay little attention to the critics and continue
to enjoy their tales of heroes and heroines.

The narrator interjects to editorialize about the nature of fiction and how it is perceived. Novels are read
mostly by women, the narrator informs the reader. These women mostly read in the privacy of their homes.
When someone enters the room where they are reading, they tend to put the book down immediately as if they
are ashamed of what they are reading. They know the novels they enjoy are not as deep as are books of history
or philosophy. They are aware that much of the fiction they love is referred to as “trash.”

The narrator adds that novelists are completely underrated. Novelists work hard at their creations, which
require genius and wit. A novelist, the narrator writes, must know human nature in all its varieties and must
also master language. In contrast, books that people are told are important or that cover a more serious subject
are often dull to read and contain “unnatural characters.” They also discuss topics that are no longer favorable
to the reader.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 6 Summary

Catherine is late for a meeting with Isabella. When she arrives, Isabella chides her for making her wait so long, though Catherine notes she is just a few minutes late. Isabella will not hear this and complains she has been waiting forever—she has a tendency for exaggeration. Isabella asks what has kept her, and Catherine explains that she lost track of time because she was so involved in the novel she had been reading. She tells Isabella that she is reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, written by Ann Radcliffe and one of the most popular books of the late eighteenth century. *Udolpho* is now considered the archetype of Gothic novels.

As they stand in the Pump Room, a social center in Bath, Catherine and Isabella discuss other books they plan to read as they watch the people who are milling about. Their discussion changes from novels to women, and Isabella tells Catherine she will always be able to depend on her friendship. She will promote Catherine to her male friends, proving that women can be supportive of one another. Isabella tells Catherine about a woman she knows, Miss Andrews, who is not as pretty as Catherine is. However, Isabella tells all her young men friends that Miss Andrews is like an angel and they must agree with her or she will not dance with them. Isabella seems to say this to impress Catherine that she is a woman who is not jealous of other females.

Isabella then goes on to tell Catherine about how many men she has seen staring at Catherine. Catherine has not noticed this attention. It is because she is indifferent to men, Isabella says. She only thinks of Mr. Tilney. This must mean that Catherine is in love with him, Isabella says. Catherine denies this, stating that she only met him that one time and has not seen him since.

It does not take long before Isabella is talking about men again; she notices that two handsome men standing at a distance have noticed them. Isabella suggests that she and Catherine move to the other side of the room to get away from them. She insists that she will not look at them, but she asks Catherine to see if they are following them. When Catherine confirms that they are not, Isabella is disappointed. She turns to see that the men have left the room. Isabella appears to change the subject, telling Catherine that they should go to a nearby shop where she has noticed a hat much like Catherine’s that she wants to buy. Then Isabella hesitates, remarking that if they leave too soon they might bump into those two men who have recently left. When Catherine says they could wait a few minutes to assure they will not meet the men, Isabella says it is no matter. She leaves immediately and encourages Catherine to increase her speed as they walk in the same direction as the two young men.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 7 Summary

As Isabella and Catherine follow the two men from the Pump Room, they are barred from crossing the street by a carriage that is racing past them. When the carriage stops, they recognize the two men inside it as James Morland, Catherine’s brother, and John Thorpe, Isabella’s brother.

The women go to meet them, and Catherine is introduced to John, who is fairly handsome but quarrelsome. He argues with James about how fast they were going, how far they have traveled, and how long they have been on the road. John exaggerates the distance, speed, and duration. He also monopolizes the conversation. He tells Catherine about the man from whom he recently bought the carriage, how much he paid for it, and how strong his horse is. He asks Catherine if she has ever ridden in an open carriage. When she tells him she has not, he insists he will take her for a ride every day. Catherine wonders if this will be too much for the horse, but John insists that he drives the horse four hours each day because that is what keeps the animal in shape. When Isabella asks about going with them for a ride, John assures her there is not room for her.

As the four of them walk, Isabella notices the two gentlemen who had been in the Pump Room and is pleased that she is walking with her brother and James Morland. She wants to ignore the other two men, but after
passing them, she turns around three times to look at them. Meanwhile the conversation turns to a discussion of women as John, James, and Isabella discuss every woman they pass.

Catherine barely listens to their conversation. Her mind is elsewhere. When there is a break in their talk, Catherine asks if John has ever read *Udolpho*. John adamantly insists that he has not. Novels are filled with junk, he exclaims. They are not worth his time. If he does read fiction, he only reads works written by Ann Radcliffe. Catherine points out that *Udolpho* was written by Radcliffe. John’s error does not stop him. He continues to criticize fiction in general.

The four young people venture toward the Thorpe residence. When Mrs. Thorpe opens the door, John meets her with a handshake and tells his mother that the hat she is wearing makes her look like a witch. He then greets his sisters and tells them they are ugly.

When Catherine and her brother later walk home, James tells her how much he enjoys both John and Isabella. He believes Isabella is the most beautiful woman in Bath. He is happy to hear that Catherine enjoys Isabella’s friendship. When James asks how Catherine feels about John, she does not expose the truth of her feelings because she is well informed of James’s friendship with John. Instead, she tells her brother that she likes John very much.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 8 Summary**

It is evening, and James, Isabella, Catherine, and John go to the ball. John quickly excuses himself so he can enter the card room, leaving the other three behind. When James asks Isabella to dance, she tells him she will not dance until Catherine has a partner. However, only a few minutes later, Isabella tells Catherine—with much flourish—that James is so impatient to dance that she cannot refuse him. Isabella thus leaves Catherine to sit with Mrs. Thorpe and Mrs. Allen.

Catherine is depressed and feels like the other women who are sitting on the sidelines. She endures her discomfort by recalling heroines in her favorite novels who have fortitude and never complain in all their disagreeable situations. A few minutes later, she sees Mr. Tilney walking toward her. On his arm is a pretty young woman, whom Catherine assumes is his sister. Certainly the woman could not be his wife because Mr. Tilney had previously talked to Catherine as if he were a single man.

When Mr. Tilney and the young woman are introduced, it is confirmed that his partner is indeed his sister. She is a well-dressed woman who conducts herself with good sense and an unaffected manner. She shows good breeding, Catherine surmises. Mr. Tilney asks Catherine if she would like to dance, but before she can answer, John Thorpe returns. He insists that Catherine is his partner, and he pulls her toward the dance floor, where he continues his dull discussion about horses and carriages. While they dance, Catherine concludes that coming to a ball already engaged with a partner does not guarantee one will have a good time.

After completing two dances with John, Catherine returns to find that Mr. Tilney is dancing with someone else. So she joins in a conversation with Mr. Tilney’s sister. Catherine finds that this woman is very nice to be with. She does not exaggerate as much as Isabella does, and she comes across as being genuine about everything she discusses.

Isabella finally reappears. She blames Catherine’s brother for her absence. Isabella claims she has been looking for Catherine all this time but James was too lazy to help her. When James asks Isabella for another dance, she refuses him. She states that the custom does not allow so many dances with the same partner. People will think they are serious, she says. When she asks Catherine to confirm this, Catherine says she has never heard of the custom.
Catherine is distracted from the continuing banter between Isabella and James as she looks around the room for Mr. Tilney but cannot find him. When John Thorpe reappears and asks Catherine to dance again, she tells him she is too tired.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 9 Summary

Catherine was very disappointed with the ball the night before. However, her spirits are restored upon awaking from a nine-hour sleep. Her plan for that day is to seek Miss Tilney at the Pump Room. Of all the people she had dealt with at the ball, Miss Tilney was most on her mind—with the exception of her brother. Catherine will wait until noon and then go by herself to the Pump Room and renew her acquaintance with Miss Tilney.

While she is reading in the parlor with Mrs. Allen, who is working on a sewing project, there is a loud knock on the door. When Mrs. Allen looks out the front window, she sees two carriages: one is empty and the other is occupied by James Morland and Isabella Thorpe. The sound of heavy footsteps comes up the stairs.

John Thorpe speaks to Catherine as if she has been keeping him and his party waiting. He asks why she is not ready, seeing as she probably has been anticipating his arrival all morning. Catherine does not know what John is talking about. He asks why she did not pay attention to their discussion the night before. They had made plans to go for a ride out into the country.

Though this is all news to Catherine, she gives in, changes her plans to seek out Miss Tilney, and quickly dresses. By the time she steps into the carriage, Isabella is all but exasperated by how long it took Catherine to get ready. She complains but then loudly tells Catherine’s brother how very much she loves his sister.

During the entire duration of the ride, John rattles on about how good he is at just about everything. He repeats his compliments about his mastery of his beautiful horse. He proclaims the superiority of his carriage over the one Catherine’s brother is steering and says the other is all but falling apart, until Catherine fears for her brother’s safety. As John prattles on, Catherine begins to evaluate John’s character and realizes that he is very boastful and dishonest. He is capable, Catherine discovers, of giving two varied accounts of the same story, distorting one from the other, depending on how it affects his vanity. For example, at first he calls Catherine’s brother’s carriage a piece of junk. When Catherine worries that her brother might have an accident due to the carriage’s unreliability, John then says he would not have encouraged James to take such a long ride if he did not think the carriage was safe.

When they return home, Catherine is exhausted by John’s incessant bragging. Later, after learning that Mrs. Allen went to the Pump Room and saw both Mr. Tilney and his sister, Catherine is distressed at having spent such an unpleasant day with John Thorpe when she could have had a chance to talk in depth with the Tilneys.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 10 Summary

Mr. and Mrs. Allen, Catherine, her brother James, and the Thorpes go to the theater together. While they wait for the performance, Isabella wants Catherine to look around the audience to see if Mr. Tilney is there. She is very anxious to see what he looks like. She says he can hardly be expected “to exist” until she does.

Isabella quickly forgets this topic, though, and switches to one more personal. She talks about how much she and James are alike. Their opinions about every subject are identical, she declares. She looks over at James at this point and tells him that he is not to expect one word from her because she will be completely absorbed in conversation with Catherine—but not two minutes later, Catherine finds Isabella’s attention drawn away from her. Isabella and James are whispering to the exclusion of Catherine.
After the theater, the three of them continue on to the Pump Room, where a dance will soon be held. All the while they are walking, Isabella and James continue their private discussions but turn to ask for Catherine’s opinion on something without giving her the details of their conversation. Once at the Pump Room, Catherine welcomes her separation from them as she joins Miss Tilney. The young woman provides Catherine with a refreshing supply of simplicity and truth compared with Isabella. Catherine’s interest in Miss Tilney is renewed. Here is a woman without a hint of conceit.

All the while Catherine is there, she tries her best to avoid John Thorpe. When he does appear, Catherine attempts to hide from him by turning away or hiding her face behind her fan. She is excited when she sees Mr. Tilney approaching as if he were seeking her out. As soon as Tilney asks her to dance, John Thorpe intervenes, stating that he thought he had asked her first. Catherine denies this, but Thorpe insists, saying he had asked her a few days prior. When Catherine insists this is not true, Thorpe accuses her of playing a “shabby trick” on him. He complains that his friends will think him foolish because he had already told them he was going to dance with the prettiest girl in the room. Catherine says he should have nothing to worry about because surely they will not think he meant her.

Finally Catherine frees herself from Thorpe and dances with Tilney. While they are so engaged, Tilney compares dancing with marriage. Dancing involves a man and woman, as does marriage. The union is formed for each other’s advantage, and there is a bit of security provided when the woman agrees to a partner. Tilney is hinting at the interruption that Thorpe had caused, suggesting that he will have to give up Catherine every time another man comes around to ask her to dance. He would rather have greater security. When he asks her to dance, he wants her to give him her full attention. Catherine responds by telling him that she has no interest in talking with anyone else in the room.

At the end of the evening, Catherine makes plans with Mr. Tilney and his sister to meet the next day for a long walk in the countryside.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 11 Summary

Catherine wakes up in a happy disposition, anxious for her walk with Mr. Tilney and his sister. But as she stands at the front window, watching the darkening skies, she fears that it will rain. Soon it does. Though her spirits are dampened, Catherine holds out hope that the clouds will clear before it is time for the Tilneys to appear at her door. They have promised to be there at noon.

At twenty after twelve, the rain continues and the Tilneys have not approached her door. Catherine discusses with Mrs. Allen the prospects of walking after such a downpour. It will be dirty, Mrs. Allen warns.

Shorty afterward, two carriages appear, as they did several days before. James Morland and Isabella are sitting in one. John Thorpe is in the other. John bangs on the door and comes in, insisting that Catherine dress as quickly as possible so they can begin their journey to Blaize Castle. Upon hearing of the castle, Catherine conjures up images of Gothic charm she has read about in her favorite novels. She wants to know if it is a real castle. John assures that it is. But she is torn. She tells John she has arranged a previous engagement with the Tilneys. At this, John acts surprised. He tells her he just passed the Tilneys. They were in a carriage, going in the opposite direction.

Catherine surmises that maybe the Tilneys had thought it too dirty to go for a walk. John confirms this, stating that the mud is at least ankle deep. Reluctantly, Catherine agrees to join his party. She rushes upstairs to dress, and soon they are off.
As they drive down the streets of Bath, John mentions that a curious woman had been staring at Catherine as they passed by. He wants to know who she was. Catherine turns to see Miss Tilney walking with her brother. At seeing them, Catherine is shocked. She wants to know how John could have deceived her so. John declares that he could have sworn it was Tilney he had seen earlier, riding out of town. The man looked just like him. Catherine also notices that there is no mud on the streets. Catherine insists that John stop the carriage immediately. John laughs as he spurs his horses on even faster than before. Even when Catherine yells at him, John does not slow his pace.

About halfway to their destination, James stops his carriage and tells John that it is taking them too long. They should have left earlier. They will not be able to make it to the castle and still have daylight left to make it back home. John curses James’s slow horses, but he agrees to go back.

Upon arriving at the Allens’ house, Catherine learns that Mr. Tilney and his sister had come looking for Catherine. They were surprised that she was not there and that there was no message for them. Catherine goes to bed in tears.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 12 Summary

Catherine sets out to walk to the Tilneys’ house. Upon arriving, she knocks on the door and is greeted by a butler. She asks if Miss Tilney is at home. The butler says he thinks she is, but he then he returns and says he was mistaken. Miss Tilney had just recently left.

Catherine is perplexed. She senses that the butler is not being honest. She walks away but looks back, thinking she might see someone at the window. She sees no one. After walking but a short distance from the house, however, she turns back again and sees someone leaving the house. It is Miss Tilney with her father. Catherine feels that the Tilneys are shaming her by refusing to see her because she missed the appointment with Miss Tilney and her brother the previous day.

That evening, Catherine goes to the theater with Mr. and Mrs. Allen. She searches the audience, hoping to see the Tilneys. It is not until the play is all but over that she finds Henry sitting with his father. She feels that Henry is avoiding eye contact with her, as he is completely absorbed in the play. For her part, Catherine is distracted from seeing any of the remaining acts of the play. Finally Henry looks at her, but there is no smile on his face upon recognition. He merely bows his head toward her, cordially and without any feeling.

After a while, Catherine looks back to where Henry had been sitting. Henry’s father is still there, but Henry’s seat is vacant. She hopes Henry is on his way to talk to her. In a few minutes, he approaches the box where Catherine is sitting. First Henry speaks to Mrs. Allen. Once he turns to Catherine, she immediately apologizes for having missed her walk with him the day before. She explains how she had been misled to think he had gone out of town and how, upon seeing him, she had tried to make Mr. Thorpe stop the carriage so she could get out to be with him. Henry’s expression softens at this news.

Catherine asks Henry why his sister slighted her by not answering her visit that morning. Henry tells her it was his father’s fault. His father was about to leave the house and had no extra time to meet with her, so he ordered the butler to say Miss Tilney was out.

Catherine glances over to where Henry’s father is sitting and sees John Thorpe is talking to the older gentleman. When John comes to talk to Catherine, she questions him about his conversation with Henry’s father. John says he played billiards with the old man earlier in the day and had beaten him with a brilliant move. John continues by telling Catherine that Henry’s father has very favorable impressions of her.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 13 Summary

Catherine is walking with her brother, James, Isabella, and John Thorpe. Isabella tells Catherine about a plan they have concocted. They will once again attempt to go to Blaize Castle the following day. Catherine tells her she cannot go because she has scheduled a walk with Miss Tilney. Isabella does not allow this to bother her: all Catherine has to do is change that appointment to another day.

Catherine does not want to do this. She already missed the first time she was supposed to walk with Miss Tilney. John Thorpe tells Catherine she must go with them. She has only to tell Miss Tilney that she had forgotten about a previous engagement she had made with them. Catherine still resists.

Isabella becomes very disturbed. She says if Catherine does not go, then she cannot go. She cannot be the only woman with two men. Catherine suggests that they invite one of Isabella’s sisters to join them. At this, John is disgusted. He walks off as Isabella and James continue to berate Catherine for not giving in to their wishes. James calls his sister selfish and uncaring. He tells her that he used to think she was the nicest and most compassionate of all his sisters. Now he has changed his evaluation of her.

John returns to tell them the matter has been settled. He saw the Tilneys walking down the street and ran after them. He explained that although Catherine had been looking forward to walking with them, she had forgotten that she had already promised to go with him. He added that Catherine had sent him to deliver this message to them.

Catherine is terribly distressed. She tells John he had no right to tell them a lie. When she tries to leave, Isabella grabs her arm and will not let her go. Eventually Catherine gains her release and runs after the Tilneys.

She catches the Tilneys as they are entering their home. She explains everything. General Tilney accepts the story she tells them. He is impressed with Catherine; she can tell from the way he smiles at her. He asks if she can stay the rest of the day and dine with them. Although Catherine is grateful for the invitation, she has to refuse because the Allens are planning for her to be home for dinner.

When Catherine returns to the Allens’ home, she is rattled. She is glad she will be meeting with Miss Tilney the next day, but she is sorry that Isabella and her brother are so upset with her. She tells Mr. Allen what has happened. Mr. Allen assures Catherine that what she did was correct. Mrs. Allen adds that it is inappropriate for young girls to go out to the country with young men, eat at public dining places by themselves, and ride in open carriages. Catherine should refrain from all those activities. Mr. Allen suggests that Catherine should no longer have anything to do with John Thorpe.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 14 Summary

The following morning, Catherine waits for Henry and Eleanor Tilney to show up for their planned walk. All the while, Catherine is very nervous that her brother, Isabella, and John Thorpe will come around and insist that she go with them to Blaize Castle. She is relieved when she sees no sign of them.

Soon the Tilneys arrive. She leaves with them, happy to finally have time to get to better know the brother and sister. Some of the initial topics that they discuss include what the three of them enjoy reading. Catherine confesses her love of Radcliffe’s writing, especially *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. To her surprise, Henry Tilney says this novel is one of his favorites. He says that he could not put the book down and read it in two days. His sister, Eleanor, tells Catherine that Henry read it out loud to her. Catherine could not be more pleased that a man actually prays fiction writing. Henry tells her that there are probably more men who read novels than
Their conversation next includes a discussion of history books. Eleanor enjoys reading historical accounts. Catherine confides that she finds history boring. There is so little imagination used in writing the dull texts. History is filled with the conquests of men, with little mention of women’s accomplishments. She adds that forcing children to read such boring accounts is tantamount to torture. Henry laughs at her. He points out if she had not been forced to learn how to read, she would not now be enjoying novels. Some torture is actually good, Henry says.

As they go, Catherine comments that the river they are walking along reminds her of France. Henry is interested in her travel experiences. Catherine has to admit that she has never been outside of England, except through books. The scenes that are described, especially in Radcliffe’s novels, she tells him, have made her feel as if she has seen other places.

In the course of their discussions, Henry teases Catherine about some of the words she uses. For example, Catherine describes the book she is currently reading as being “nice.” Henry complains that the word nice is overused and can be employed to describe everything from clothes to food to a description of someone’s personality. Eleanor chides her brother. She then explains to Catherine that Henry is wont to tease. He is taunting Catherine as he often mocks his sister. This insinuates that Henry feels comfortable with Catherine.

The longer Catherine is with Henry and Eleanor, the more she realizes the gaping holes in her education. The Tinleys discuss art, for example, and explore nature in ways Catherine has never heard before. They talk about the foreground and the background, emphasizing dimension and how it is reproduced in paintings. By the end of the walk, Catherine looks at the world through new eyes.

Before they part, Henry and Eleanor invite Catherine to dinner the following evening. She is delighted to accept. After they are gone, Catherine runs into three of the younger Thorpe sisters. They tell her that Isabella and James are on their way to Blaize Castle. Partnering with John Thorpe is another of their sisters. Catherine is glad to hear that she has not caused them to delay their trip. She is also happy that she was not forced to go.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 15 Summary**

Isabella meets with Catherine and tells her how much she is in love with James Morland. During their outing to Blaize Castle, Isabella says, James confided in her that he feels the same about her. With great exclamation, Isabella adds that she and James are engaged. She and Catherine are finally to be sisters, as Isabella has always imagined. Isabella adds that she will be closer to Catherine than she is to her real sisters. The Morlands will be more of a family to her than her own.

Isabella provides very few details about the trip. She does not reprimand Catherine for not going with them to Blaize Castle. All sentiment is focused on Isabella and her emotions. Isabella is happy that James wants to marry her but feels concerned that the Morlands will not accept her. Catherine tells her this is nonsense. Her parents would never go against whomever James has chosen. If he wants to marry Isabella, her parents will only be happy for him. This does not calm Isabella. She can think of nothing else but being rejected. When James appears, she hurries him off on his journey home. She cannot be expected to wait any longer. James will send a letter to let her know of his parents’ reaction.

John Thorpe appears as James is about to leave. He reminds Catherine of an old adage that states where there is one wedding, there are often two, meaning that he hopes he too will be married. He then asks if Catherine plans to attend the marriage ceremony of her brother. Catherine says of course she will be there. John takes this to mean more than Catherine has intended, as he does with everything else Catherine says. He has a
specific agenda in his mind, and it seems that no matter how Catherine reacts to him, he takes her words and expressions to complement what he hopes to accomplish. Toward the purpose of ensuring that his sister’s wedding will encourage his own, he tells Catherine that he will soon be visiting her family. We wants to know if he will be welcome. Catherine tells him that she is sure her parents would enjoy seeing him. This makes John very hopeful, though Catherine has no hidden meaning to her response. John’s conversation continues. In reaction to everything he says, Catherine is cordial. This makes John feel encouraged. He tells Catherine that they think alike and insinuates that they are made for one another.

When Catherine leaves John and goes home, she is disappointed that Mr. and Mrs. Allen are not surprised by the news of James’ impending wedding. Mr. and Mrs. Allen had been observing how much attention James has bestowed on Isabella. They knew their relationship was becoming more serious. The only surprise for the Allens is that James left for home without consulting them. They had wished he had stopped by so they could send a greeting to Catherine’s parents.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 16 Summary**

Catherine reflects on her previous evening’s dinner with the Tilneys; she cannot help but be disappointed. When she analyzes why this is so, she finds the following reason: Miss Tilney was rather withdrawn. The dinner did little to increase any sense of intimacy between them. With Henry, Catherine was surprised at how little he talked, less than at other meetings. Although she cannot blame General Tilney for the change in the brother’s or the sister’s manners, Catherine determines that she was glad to be rid of the father. She will wait, however, before defining her relationship with Henry and Eleanor Tilney. They will be at the dance that night. Catherine will see if the previous evening’s encounter has permanently changed the way the Tilneys act toward her.

When Catherine confides in Isabella, telling her friend about the dinner at the Tilneys’, Isabella’s conclusion is that the Tilneys have too much pride. The entire family thinks they are better than everyone else, she says. Catherine is quick to disagree. She had not witnessed one moment of conceit, especially not with Miss Tilney. Isabella warns Catherine not to defend the Tilneys; they are not worthy of her praise. Henry, especially, is unworthy of Catherine. Mr. Tilney is so different from Isabella’s brother, John, she tells Catherine. Never would John have been so quiet around Catherine as Mr. Tilney was the night before.

After a long discourse on the topic of the Tilneys, Catherine asks Isabella if she is going to dance that night. Isabella is reluctant, or so she says. She finally gives in but states if she must go, she surely will not dance. She misses James.

Catherine refuses to be influenced by Isabella’s impressions of the Tilneys. At the dance, she is relieved to find Miss Tilney acting like her usual self, happy to see Catherine and talkative. Henry is attentive and does not waste time asking Catherine to dance. While dancing, a man whom Catherine learns is Henry’s older brother pulls Henry away from her. At first Catherine wonders if Captain Tilney has heard a rumor that Catherine is not good enough for his brother. The two men are gone for a long time. When they return, Catherine discovers that all Captain Tilney wanted was to know who Isabella was and would she dance with him. Catherine tells him she is sorry to say that Isabella is engaged and has insisted she will not dance that evening. Captain Tilney walks away. The next time Catherine sees Isabella, she is dancing with Captain Tilney.

Catherine does not talk to Isabella until much later. By then Isabella has received a second letter from James. He tells her that his father has decided on a much lower allowance for his son than James had expected. There is a condition also added that James must wait two to three years before he marries Isabella.
Isabella complains. It is not the meager allowance, she insists, but rather the long waiting period that has her so distressed. She also tells Catherine that the only reason she danced with Captain Tilney was that he would not leave her alone. Besides, she knows James would not have liked to see her sitting alone.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 17 Summary

Catherine is saddened by the fast-approaching date of her departure from Bath. Her concern is slightly alleviated when she hears that the Allens have extended their stay by one week. But this still gives Catherine only three weeks in which to enjoy the pleasures and excitements Bath has offered her. Her experience has far extended her hopes. She had come from a small village, where country routines had perpetuated a monotonous pattern. Bath, in contrast, has provided her with new friends, exciting excursions, and hints of romance. She does not want to leave. One extra week is a blessing, but she still longs for more.

While visiting Miss Tilney, Catherine learns that the Tilneys are leaving even sooner. They will be gone in seven days. Catherine is disappointed again. General Tilney is not pleased with Bath, Miss Tilney tells Catherine. Some of his closest friends will not be visiting Bath this year, and they were the main reason he had come. He also has received word from the steward of his estate that there are matters for which he is needed at home.

When General Tilney enters the room where Catherine and Eleanor Tilney are sitting, he asks his daughter if she has presented Catherine with their proposal. Miss Tilney has not, so General Tilney extends an invitation for Catherine to come with them to Northanger Abbey, where they live. Catherine is delighted. She can think of nothing better to have happened to her. She will not only be able to live inside a great manor, an ancient structure like those she has read about in her novels, but she will be in close company with both the man and the young woman whom she is learning to love. The other thing that thrills her is that the Tilney family desires to have her stay with them. She only has to ask for her parents’ and the Allens’ consent. She is sure they will grant it.

The Tilneys’ abbey once housed a cloister of nuns during the Reformation (in the sixteenth century). Catherine is enthusiastic about the Tilneys’ nonchalant attitude toward owning such a grand home. They were born to it, she surmises, thus imbuing them with the “power of early habit.” They have no sense of superiority over those who are not as fortunate at they are.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 18 Summary

Catherine has not seen Isabella for several days but meets her one morning in the Pump Room. Isabella steers Catherine away from Mrs. Allen and leads her to a bench near the front doors, telling Catherine this is her favorite place to sit down. It is obvious to Catherine that Isabella is distracted, as if she is waiting for someone to walk through the doors. Isabella denies this and proceeds to tell Catherine that she has received a letter from her brother John.

Isabella asks teasingly what Catherine thinks is in John’s letter. She thinks Catherine can probably guess what John has written. Catherine assures Isabella that she has no idea of the contents. At this, Isabella accuses Catherine of having false modesty and encourages Catherine to be a little more honest. She then proceeds to say John has conveyed his interest in marrying Catherine. He says he all but proposed to Catherine the last time they were together. Catherine is completely unaware of any such thing. Isabella tries to prompt Catherine’s memory of the event and says that John proposed and he said Catherine received his sentiments in a most kindly manner. John has written to ask his sister to further encourage Catherine to accept his offer.
Catherine tells Isabella that nothing of what John writes ever happened. She is interested only in one man, and that man is not Isabella’s brother. Catherine asks Isabella to write back to John so as to make clear that she has no inclination to marry him. Isabella only half hears Catherine’s words. In Isabella’s mind, Catherine must have at one time been interested in John or John would not be so affected by her. She tells Catherine that it is an ordinary thing for young people to change their minds, insinuating that this is what Catherine has done.

A couple of times in her conversation, Isabella refers to statements “Tilney” has made as a way of expressing her feelings. For example, at one point she says Tilney has said that most people are often deceived of their true affections. Catherine does not react to these allusions, but she more fully understands the mention of this name when Captain Tilney, Henry’s brother, walks through the door. Isabella reacts as if she has been expecting him. He comes directly to Isabella and begins flirting with her. Catherine is shocked to witness Isabella not only accepting his flirtations but encouraging them. How could Isabella be doing this while she is engaged to James? Embarrassed to have to endure Isabella’s obvious attraction to this man, Catherine stands to leave. Catherine expects Isabella will go with her, but Isabella claims she is tired and stays behind with Captain Tilney at her side.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 19 Summary

Catherine notices the changes in Isabella. When they are in a group of friends, the changes seem slight and noticeable. But when Catherine is alone with Captain Tilney and Isabella, she is shocked by the attention Isabella gives to the man. She pays almost as much attention to Captain Tilney as she does to James.

James looks sullen whenever Catherine sees him, and she feels sorry for him. Catherine believes Captain Tilney must not know that Isabella is engaged to James, otherwise he would not be as attentive to Isabella. Catherine wishes Captain Tilney were leaving with his family when they go to Northanger Abbey. Then Isabella would have no occasion to flirt with him and James would be happier. However, Catherine has heard that Captain Tilney is not leaving with his family.

Catherine implores Henry to talk to his brother, to make him aware that Isabella is engaged. Henry informs Catherine that he has already passed on this information to his brother. His brother knows what he is doing, Henry says, and must be allowed to be his own master. Henry continues by stating that his brother is not the only one to blame. Isabella could refuse his advances, but she does not. If Isabella truly loved James, would she not stop encouraging Henry’s brother? Catherine must admit that Isabella is also at fault, but she still asks if General Tilney might insist that Captain Tilney leave Bath. She wants to know if Henry’s father is aware of what is going on and if he is concerned.

Henry asks Catherine if she is not taking her worries too far. He asks her to consider whether James would thank her for trying to protect him. Would he be grateful for her concern that Isabella will be faithful to him only when Captain Tilney is absent? Is James to be confident of Isabella’s love only when they are at together in solitude? No one can know what is in another person’s heart, Henry says. Catherine should trust that James, Isabella, and Captain Tilney know what they are doing. They know what they are feeling; only they can determine what path they must take. Besides this, Henry says, his brother will be leaving in a few days even if he is not going to Northanger Abbey. He needs to report back to duty. He will forget about Isabella, and Isabella will soon not remember him.

Catherine gives in to Henry’s counsel. She releases her distress about Isabella and James. Henry is right.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 20 Summary

As the day arrives for Catherine’s departure to Northanger Abbey, Mr. and Mrs. Allen grow distressed. They have greatly enjoyed Catherine’s company. They note, however, that their own stay in Bath is coming to an end and they would have to give up Catherine one way or the other.

Mr. Allen walks Catherine to the Tilneys’ house to have breakfast with them before they begin their journey. After saying good-bye to Mr. Allen, Catherine suffers moments when she wishes she could go back with him. She is so agitated about fitting in with the Tilney family that she does not enjoy the first few moments. She wants to make sure she does everything right so the Tilneys will like her. However, Catherine is also anxious about the attention General Tilney lavishes on her. She feels unworthy of his praise.

As they eat breakfast, General Tilney turns his thoughts to his eldest son. Captain Frederick Tilney is late coming to the table. When he appears, General Tilney again makes Catherine feel self-conscious as he tells his son that his tardiness is an insult to their guest. Frederick barely speaks a word until General Tilney finishes eating and leaves the room.

Soon after breakfast, General Tilney hurries everyone into the carriages that will take them to Northanger Abbey. Halfway there, General Tilney leaves the carriage he has been sharing with Henry and tells Catherine to take his place. At first Catherine does not know whether she should accept his invitation because she recalls what Mr. Allen has told her about the impropriety of riding with a young man in an open carriage. Then Catherine decides to trust General Tilney’s judgment on this matter.

Throughout much of the remaining ride, Henry describes Northanger Abbey as if the manor were similar to one found in a Gothic novel. He speaks of secret doors, bloody footprints, discarded knives, and a bedroom separated from the family quarters in which Catherine will be forced to sleep. Catherine admits, at one point, that Henry is scaring her, but she does not hesitate to encourage him to continue with his story. She knows he is teasing her.

Upon arriving at Northanger Abbey, Catherine is surprised and even somewhat disappointed about how modern the abbey looks. There are no spider webs in the corners. The furniture is almost new. The windows are made with clear glass, and much light is let through them into the rooms.

Before dinner, Miss Tilney leads Catherine up several flights of stairs and leaves her in a large room that will be her bedroom while she is here. Before walking out the door, Miss Tilney tells her not to worry too much over dressing formally for dinner.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 21 Summary

Alone in her room, Catherine takes some time to look around her new quarters, although she knows she is expected for dinner shortly. The room is different from how Henry had described it. There are no tapestries hanging on the wall, behind which strangers might lurk. The large windows let in much sunlight. The room is not scary, as Henry had laughingly suggested.

There is an unusual wooden chest, though. It is large and pushed to one side as if in an attempt to partially conceal it. Catherine is drawn to it. Henry had mentioned a chest, and she is anxious to explore this one. She struggles with the lock and the heavy weight of the lid. Just as she is opening it, Eleanor enters the room. Eleanor calmly alludes to the chest, saying it is indeed an unusual piece of furniture. She had it pushed to the side to get it out of the way and had thought it a good place to store hats. Then Eleanor reminds Catherine it is time for dinner. They must hurry downstairs because General Tilney is waiting for them.
Catherine forgets about the trunk immediately upon coming into the presence of General Tilney. His tone is abrupt and loud and he emphasizes the need for timeliness. Catherine is uncomfortable with him even after he tries to temper his stern manner. He talks about the grand size of the dinning room, stating that the space is necessary for an eating room. He assumes Catherine has eaten in rooms even larger, but she insists she has not.

When Catherine returns to her room, she is relieved to be rid of General Tilney. He makes her feel very tense. She relaxes as she re-examines where she will be sleeping. As she settles in, however, she becomes acutely aware of the strangeness around her. There is a strong storm brewing outside, and the wind is making the curtains billow. She knows there is no one hiding behind the curtains, but she must check to assure herself. She laughs at the thought, then notices a tall black cabinet almost exactly like one Henry had described. Henry had been teasing her about the contents of her room and mimicked the narrative of the Gothic novels Catherine loved to read. Although she had dismissed his teasing, she now thinks what he had told her appears to be true.

She walks over to the locked cabinet and tries to open it. After a short struggle, she is successful. Inside is a series of drawers and another, smaller locked door. She pulls open every drawer and examines each one for secret storage spaces. She finds nothing. Then she struggles with the lock on the inner door until she manages to open it. Inside is a rolled scroll. She thinks she will find a secret message written on it.

In fear of reading it, though, she extinguishes the only candle she has and is left in complete darkness. She must fumble to her bed and will wait for daylight to read the manuscript. All through the night, she lies awake, listening to the moaning of the wind, the creeping of quiet footsteps in the hall, the twisting of the key in the lock on her door. In her imagination, she has become the heroine of her own Gothic novel.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 22 Summary

Upon awakening the next morning, Catherine waits only long enough for the morning maid to leave her bedroom before she gets out of bed and rushes toward the manuscript she had found in the tall cabinet the night before. What she had thought was a large scroll of rolled paper turns out to be several separate small pieces of paper rolled together. Some of the pieces are strewn on the floor, and she is surprised the maid did not pick them up.

Catherine hastens to read the writing on the papers. She is disappointed when she reads what turns out to be lists of clothing supplies, laundry lists, and bills. She wonders how she could have been so foolish, how she could have waited up most of the night in anticipation of some great mystery that was about to be revealed to her. How embarrassed she would be if Henry knew what she had imagined. But she decides that part of the blame belongs to him. Henry was the one who fed her imagination with his fanciful stories of what she would find in the room. However, she hopes he never finds out what she has done. Quickly she replaces the papers and locks the doors of the bureau.

After breakfast, Henry announces that he must leave to attend to business, so Catherine is left in the abbey with General Tilney and Eleanor. She wishes it were Eleanor alone, as she still cannot find comfort in the general’s company.

The general offers to join Eleanor in giving Catherine a tour of the abbey. This excites Catherine because she has been anxious to see the rest of the immense structure, but then the general steers them toward the gardens. The general says they can choose what to see first but pushes them to choose the spacious grounds around the abbey. Catherine is disappointed because she would much rather see the building first.
The general leads the way and shows off the extensive gardens; he asks Catherine to compare them with those of her father and Mr. Allen. There is no comparison, Catherine tells him. This pleases the general enough to stimulate a smile.

General Tilney leaves their company when they reach a path that wanders through a rather gloomy stretch of overgrown trees. Eleanor says this is her favorite. The general tells them he will meet them later. Upon his departure, Eleanor confesses that this particular part of the gardens was her mother’s favorite.

As they continue their walk, Catherine reflects on the general’s behavior and concludes that he does not have a favorable feeling for his former wife. Eleanor tells Catherine that there is a painting of her mother in her room. Catherine is surprised that the general has not hung the portrait in his room. Eleanor tells Catherine that her father never approved of the picture. This confirms Catherine’s thoughts that Eleanor’s parents were not happily married.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 23 Summary**

Catherine’s tour of the gardens is completed. She has been waiting inside the abbey for General Tilney to appear so that the tour of the interior can begin. After the girls wait an hour, the general comes inside. Catherine interprets the general’s long meditations alone in the gardens as a sign of depression or gloom. Despite Catherine’s presumed attitude for the man, the general smiles and leads Catherine and Eleanor on a tour of the largest, more public rooms.

The furnishings and size of the rooms do not affect Catherine. She is more interested in the history of the building and its reflection on the personal lives of the Tilneys. However, the general guides them away from the personal rooms. Catherine sees some of the more intimate rooms down long halls, but the general prohibits her advancement. At one point, when the general closes a great door, stopping Catherine’s progress forward, Eleanor explains that down that particular room they would find her mother’s rooms.

Walking far enough behind the general so he cannot hear her, Catherine asks Eleanor if she had been at home when her mother died. Eleanor confides that she had not. She had been away. When news reached her that her mother was ailing, she had come home too late. Her mother’s illness had come on quickly and took her within a very short period of time. Catherine asks how long it has been since Eleanor’s mother died. Eleanor answers that it has been nine years.

Catherine’s imagination is stimulated once again. She grows more intensely suspicious of the general and his relationship with his former wife. She wonders, had the general mistreated Mrs. Tilney? Could he be guilty of somehow been involved in her untimely death? Why, after nine years, is no one allowed in Mrs. Tilney’s rooms?

The tour of the house continues. Catherine is disappointed to see a section of the abbey that has been completely torn down and replaced with a series of very modern-looking rooms. The architecture does not match that of the original abbey; there has been no apparent interest in retaining the historical feeling of the place. A long hall with several doors opening onto single, small rooms that had once been used by nuns reminds Catherine of the abbey’s original inhabitants. She marvels at how hard the nuns must have labored to keep the abbey functional. From stories she has read, she knows the nuns had no maids or servants to aid them.

As Catherine lies in bed later that day, her active imagination recreates possible scenes in which Mrs. Tilney is kept locked in her room, a prisoner at her husband’s hands. Catherine is determined to find more clues that will either clear the general of any wrongdoing or confirm the thoughts she has concerning his guilt.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 24 Summary

Catherine awakens the next day with hopes that she will see the rest of the abbey. She waits until the general has gone for a walk and then asks Eleanor if she will show her the rooms they did not see the previous day. Eleanor agrees and first takes Catherine to see her mother’s portrait. In the picture Catherine searches for resemblances to Eleanor and Henry in the mother’s face. They then proceed through the gallery and reach the door that leads to Catherine’s mother’s rooms. Just as Eleanor is about to turn the doorknob, a loud voice booms out from behind them, calling out the name “Eleanor.”

At the sound of the general’s voice, Catherine is filled with terror. Eleanor follows her father out of view, leaving Catherine alone. Catherine waits for the sound of her name next, but when she does not hear it, she quickly slips away to her room. There she waits until she sees a carriage arrive at the front door. Visitors have come. With this distraction, Catherine goes downstairs and mingles with the people who are milling around the general. When he sees her, he invites her to him and introduces her to the strangers. His mood is gentle and his tone is polite.

Later, Catherine decides that the safest way to make her next attempt to see Mrs. Tilney’s bedroom is to do it alone. Eleanor should know nothing about this arrangement, Catherine determines. In this way, if the general should catch her, he would only become angry with her, not with his daughter.

Catherine goes to her room early to dress for dinner. When she senses that no one is in the hallway, she sneaks out and climbs the stairs to Mrs. Tilney’s room. She advances without meeting anyone and slips into the room. This room is nothing like she had imagined. It is bright and comfortable. As Catherine looks around at the elegance provided, she realizes she has once again made a mistake. This is not a room that suggests danger or torture.

Catherine quickly exits the room, but as she does so, she hears someone coming up the stairs. She is fearful that it is the general and is very surprised when she sees Henry, who was not supposed to be home until the next day. Catherine asks him what he is doing there. Henry responds that this is a shortcut to the stables. He then asks what she is doing there. Catherine is honest and tells Henry she had come to investigate his mother’s room.

Catherine tries to explain, but the more she does, the more suspicious Henry becomes. Catherine mentions his mother’s swift death and that no one was at home except his father. Henry assures her that he and his brother had been there as well as the family doctor. His mother was well looked after and was not alone when she died. He then realizes, through Catherine’s further comments, that she had suspected something dreadful concerning his mother’s death. He wants to know what evidence she had that anything terrible had happened. Catherine cannot answer Henry’s questions and runs to her room.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 25 Summary

Catherine is filled with shame for having been found out by Henry, and she laments that Henry might have lost all affection for her. She is sure that whatever he might have felt for her before has been spoiled by her fantasy that Henry’s father had tortured his mother. She should have known better than to think so poorly of General Tilney and his relationship with his wife. How horribly wrong she had been to assume so many detrimental things. She had jumped to conclusions through a combination of events that she had misinterpreted and her proclivity for drama. She allowed her enjoyment of Gothic romance and mystery books to color her thoughts, to influence her to poorly judge the general’s character. Catherine realizes that human nature, especially in England, is more complex than that of the characters in her favorite novels. However, she fears she might have learned her lesson too late. Surely Henry will have little to do with her now.
Catherine goes down to dinner to find, to her surprise, that Henry is more attentive to her than he had been before. Throughout the meal, he is very gentle in his conversations with her. He smiles at her as if nothing has happened. By the end of dinner, Catherine is once again at ease. Henry has given her hope that his affection for her is still alive. She vows to be more careful in coming to conclusions in the future.

As time passes, Catherine becomes less concerned about the mistakes she has made and is more involved in present matters. She begins to worry that she has not received any letters from Isabella. Her friend promised to write, but still no news arrives from Bath. Just when she is about to give up all hope of receiving a letter, Henry hands her one in the morning as she goes down to breakfast. When she looks at the envelope, though, she discovers it is not from Isabella as she had expected but is from her brother James. Catherine reads the letter before sitting down at the table.

James writes that he is back at Oxford and that his engagement with Isabella is off. His heart is broken. He cannot understand how he had been so blind. Even though he had felt his relationship with Isabella had suddenly changed, Isabella continued ensuring him that he was wrong and she still loved him. Then when he least expected it, she told him that she was engaged to another man. Without naming the other man directly, James writes that Catherine might want to find out when Captain Tilney will be arriving at Northanger, for she might want to be gone before he appears to announce his engagement.

Catherine sits at the breakfast table with the letter in her lap and tears flowing down her cheeks. Afterward, Henry and Eleanor ask Catherine what has bothered her. When Catherine tells them, neither Eleanor nor Henry can believe that their brother would so lower himself to marry Isabella. They are sure Isabella’s intentions are not honorable; she must be marrying for money.

James’s letter is sad for Catherine in two ways. She is sorry that her brother must go through so much pain and disappointment, and she is sad that she has lost what she thought was a good friend.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 26 Summary**

Catherine considers the discussions she has heard between Eleanor and Henry about the unlikelihood that General Tilney will accept Isabella as Captain Tilney’s wife, and she wonders if she will have to endure a similar fate. If the general turns down Isabella because of a lack of family status and wealth, surely he will also not approve of Catherine, who is even poorer. She also believes that Henry should tell his father about his opinions of Isabella so the general will have time to ponder the situation before Captain Tilney arrives. This will give the general time to objectively reflect on the topic and possibly prepare his case for or against Isabella on more suitable grounds—not based on status and money. Henry disagrees. He believes his brother must submit his own explanation for his engagement as well as the merits of his chosen bride. Henry thinks it very curious that his brother has not yet come home to announce his plans. Neither Eleanor nor Henry understand the meaning behind Frederick’s delay.

The general, not knowing any of the news about Frederick’s engagement, is in a generous mood. He mentions that he would have liked to have given a ball for Catherine or a dinner party. However, most of his neighbors are away, so he dismisses those ideas. Instead, he offers a ride over to Woodston, where the Tilneys own a parsonage, which has already been given to Henry.

Catherine is excited about going some place different. Although Catherine had never imagined it would, the abbey has become rather familiar and ordinary by now. Henry leaves to make sure the parsonage is running smoothly and to buy all the provisions necessary for a family dinner. Catherine is surprised when Henry says he must leave. The general had told Henry not to fuss over dinner, that anything ordinary would do. Henry has a better understanding of his father and insinuates that the general did not mean what he said. General Tilney
is a very picky eater.

Finally Eleanor, Catherine, and the general begin the twenty-mile journey to the parsonage, which is in a small village called Woodston. Catherine is impressed and tells Eleanor and the general that Woodston is one of the nicest small towns she has ever seen. She is likewise pleased with the parsonage. Henry greets them at the front of the house with two of his dogs and gives them a tour. Both the inside and outside of the house are notable in Catherine’s mind. When they end up in one of the nicest rooms, one with long windows that extend to the floor, Catherine asks why this room is empty. The general answers that the furnishings are waiting for a woman’s touch.

After dinner, as they are driving back to the abbey, Catherine goes over the events of the day. The general has been so nice to her, so reassuring, that if she could feel as confident about Henry’s affection for her as she does the general’s, she would have left the cottage at Woodston with little anxiety about whether she would return.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 27 Summary

A strange letter arrives for Catherine from Isabella. Isabella begins by apologizing for having taken so long to write. She claims she has put a pen in her hand every morning with the intention of writing, but something always interfered. Then she asks Catherine to write to James, who has gone to Oxford in a terrible mood. Isabella claims she cannot make sense of James’s sudden departure and misses him very much. Although she looks hideous in purple, it is the only color she wears now because purple is James’s favorite. She adds that James is the only man she could love and wants Catherine to relay her message.

Isabella then continues her letter by remarking on Captain Tilney, who followed her around like a shadow after Catherine left Bath. She says she does not want to talk about him because it might influence Catherine’s opinion about the Tilney family, yet she hates Captain Tilney. Young men nowadays are very difficult to trust, she writes. She is glad that she was not affected by Captain Tilney. Other young women might have been flattered by all his attention, but not her. She is too experienced in how fickle men can be.

Captain Tilney has returned to his regiment. Isabella is glad about that. She had been avoiding him during his last days in town. Captain Tilney, Isabella assures Catherine, is very different from James, not worthy to even be compared. James’s bad mood, Isabella thinks, might have been due to a cold he had. Before ending her letter, Isabella again asks Catherine to explain everything to James for her.

After reading the letter, Catherine decides she will never mention Isabella’s name to James again. Catherine finally sees how insincere Isabella is and how much she has used both Catherine and James for her own benefit. She is ashamed about how shallow her friend has turned out to be.

When Henry arrives from Woodston, Catherine tells him about Isabella’s letter. She says that Isabella must have taken her to be a fool. Catherine decides that Isabella must never have had any affections for either her or James. She is glad they are all rid of her. Then Catherine asks Henry what he thinks his brother was doing with Isabella. She wonders why he would have pursued her when he did not really want her. Henry answers that he does not know what his brother’s motives were. Catherine says she thinks Frederick really did not love Isabella. Henry agrees. He says that Isabella and Frederick are a lot alike. Catherine decides to not even respond to Isabella.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 28 Summary

General Tilney is obliged to go to London for a week. This allows Eleanor, Catherine, and Henry to have the abbey to themselves. Before he leaves, the general apologizes for having to leave Catherine and orders his children to ensure her comfort. The three of them are not saddened by the departure of General Tilney; on the contrary, they rejoice. They laugh more, relax more, and walk when and where they want to without having the general to order them about. Each person feels a sense of release in his absence.

The only slight unhappiness for Catherine is the realization that she has been at Northanger for almost four weeks. Staying any longer will seem an imposition, she thinks, so she raises the issue with Eleanor. Without any hesitation, Eleanor wants to know if Catherine is needed at home. Catherine assures her that she is not. Eleanor confesses that she would miss Catherine if she went away and implores her to stay longer. Feeling she has had her invitation officially extended, Catherine agrees. Through this gesture of welcome, Catherine believes Eleanor loves her. She also allows herself to think that Henry loves her too. In addition, the general has given every sign that he approves of her.

Henry announces that he must return to Woodston on business. Although Catherine is saddened by his departure, with the general out of the house, she knows that she and Eleanor will enjoy themselves. This proves to be true. Hours slip away without the general constantly reminding them to be prompt to one meal or another or to go for an excursion outside at an arranged time.

Without a prior announcement of his arrival, Frederick shows up at the abbey. Eleanor goes to greet him while Catherine, not anxious to see him, goes upstairs to her room. She waits to be called, but no one comes to get her. Time passes and finally she hears footsteps in the hall and sees that someone is hesitantly turning the door handle. She goes to the door and opens it. Eleanor is outside and looks as if she is in a state of shock. Her face is pale and she has trouble speaking. Finally she is able to convey some terrible news. Her father has announced that he is taking the family away in a couple of days. Not only is Catherine excluded from his plans, he has ordered that she must be gone by early the next morning. A carriage has been ordered for her, Eleanor tells her, but she must travel without a chaperone.

Eleanor does not explain her father’s orders. Catherine is not certain if she does not know why he is making Catherine leave or if she has been told not to share the reason. Catherine is confused by the change in the general’s attitude about her. Before he left, he was concerned about her welfare, but with the appearance of Frederick, the general is suddenly sending Catherine away without money and without anyone to protect her through the long journey.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 29 Summary

Catherine is unwilling to look out on the scenery around the abbey; she sits low in the carriage and averts her eyes. She cannot endure the thought of leaving this place and all the memories she has made here. Just ten days previously, she had been traveling along the same road on her way to Woodston. She had been so joyful, had thought Henry loved her, and had believed that Henry’s father approved. So much has changed and she does not understand why. She longs to know why the general has sent her away, what Henry will think when he finds out, and how Henry and Eleanor will talk of her.

Catherine’s journey ends without incident. She arrives home to the embraces of her family and to their questions. She does not know how to answer them without humbling herself and hurting them. The narrator intrudes to compare the heroine of typical Gothic novels of the day to the heroine in this story. Here is Catherine returning home at the end of the story, but rather than coming home in triumph, Catherine ends her journey in solitude and disgrace.
With her family at the door as she descends from the carriage, Catherine’s best emotions are awakened. The hugs she receives revive her heart more than she had imagined they could. It takes a while, however, before she is strong enough to attempt to figure out a reason for her unexpected arrival. Even though she wants to offer an explanation, she is unable to do so. The most she can conjure up, with the help of her parents, is that an insult has been committed against her. Not only had General Tilney insisted that she leave the abbey on short notice, he had placed her in peril by having her travel such a great distance alone. He has not acted honorably at all, Mr. and Mrs. Morland decide. Mrs. Morland would have worried, she says, had she heard of Catherine’s pending trip home. But now that Catherine is safe, nothing else matters. In fact, the experience might have actually helped Catherine’s confidence because she was forced to figure things out on her own.

After breakfast the next day, Catherine tries to write a letter to Eleanor. She is conscious that Henry or even General Tilney might read it. So she is very careful with the words she uses. In the end, she decides to keep the letter short and include a repayment of the money Eleanor gave her for her journey.

Afterward, Catherine and her mother visit the Allens, who are both shocked by the news of how Catherine left Northanger. Mrs. Allen repeatedly exclaims that she has no patience for the general, though she had thought him a very agreeable man when she had met him in Bath. As they walk back home, Mrs. Morland continues to try to cheer her daughter, but Catherine’s mind is elsewhere. She realizes that Henry must now be home and must now have heard of the circumstances of her departure.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 30 Summary**

Mrs. Morland worries about her daughter as she observes Catherine’s inability to sit still and her lack of interest in any chores about the house. After a few days, she warns Catherine not to lose herself in memories of what has happened or in comparing the circumstances of where she has been with the situation in which she presently lives. One must always appreciate home, she tells her daughter.

Catherine’s mood persists until a young man comes to visit—it is Henry Tilney. He is, at first, embarrassed for showing his face at the Morland home after what his father has done to Catherine. However, Mrs. Morland insists that he is welcomed. She is pleased not only by his gentle looks but also by the rising spirits she notices in her daughter. After talking for several minutes, Henry asks about the Allens, wondering if they have returned from Bath. He then suggests that Catherine show him the way to the Allens’ house so he can pay his respects. Mrs. Morland, who perceives immediately the need for Catherine and Henry to have some privacy, allows her daughter to walk with him.

As they walk, Henry declares his love for Catherine. After quarreling with his father, he had immediately left Northanger Abbey and rode straight to Catherine to make sure she was safe.

The narrator describes what happened and provided the reasons behind General Tilney’s poor behavior. The narrator states that it is unknown whether Catherine hears this information from Henry or from letters from other people. Then the details are given.

During his stay in Bath, General Tilney had approached John Thorpe to ask about Catherine’s background and family. John, at the time, had been pursuing Catherine and hoped to eventually marry her. John wanted to promote himself through her, so he inflated Catherine’s story so as to make Catherine appear very rich and from a very noble family. The general had been searching for a proper wife for his son, so he invited Catherine to the abbey. He wanted to study her and, as Catherine had supposed, the general had approved of her manners and intelligence. In his mind, Catherine would make the perfect bride for Henry.
While the general was away, however, he had again met with John Thorpe. This time, though, John knew he had no chance to win Catherine’s hand and Isabella had broken her engagement with James. There was no longer any need for John to exaggerate the wealth and status of the Morlands. Indeed, because his vanity had been hurt by Catherine’s refusal of his proposal, John went out of his way to describe the Morlands as a despicable family. They had no money and no respect. After the general hastened home, he wasted no time in sending Catherine away.

When Henry found out what his father had done, he defied him. He would not listen to his father’s request that he never see Catherine again. Instead, he announced that he planned to marry her.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 31 Summary

Henry approaches Mr. and Mrs. Morland to ask for Catherine’s hand. They are surprised by the announcement because they had never had a thought about the young people’s attraction. They approve of Henry and want nothing more than Catherine’s happiness. She will not prove to be a good housewife, Mrs. Morland tells Henry, but she is young enough to still learn.

There is only one impediment to Henry and Catherine’s engagement: the Morlands insist that Henry obtain his father’s consent. They make no demands for money for their daughter, as she has a small sum that is due her, and Henry earns enough to keep them well.

Henry leaves to procure his father’s approval. Although they are certain the general will eventually give in to their request, Catherine is saddened that Henry must leave her. The narrator suggests that they stayed in touch through letter writing, though the narrator has no proof of this. Mrs. Morland notices that Catherine receives correspondence each day, but she does not read the envelope to discover the sender.

The narrator also states that though readers might assume that the story will end happily, it might be difficult to figure out how Henry was going to soften his father’s temper. Fortunately, Eleanor becomes engaged to a young man of great wealth and title. The general is so overcome with pride at the marriage of his only daughter that when she asks him to forgive Henry and allow him to marry Catherine, the general is in such a good mood that he agrees to both.

The man who has asked Eleanor to marry him has long admired her, but he was, at the time, too far beneath Eleanor’s status and means to request her hand. As soon as circumstances changed in his favor, he hastened to her side and announced his intentions. No one is more entitled to happiness, the narrator states, than Eleanor, who has suffered under her father’s stern rule. With marriage comes the release from her controlling father and the reward of companionship with the “most charming young man in the world.”

As to the general’s opinion of the Morlands, he becomes better informed and concedes that Catherine is worth enough to marry his son. So soon after Eleanor’s wedding, the general asks Henry to return to Northanger. While there, General Tilney writes a long letter to Mr. Morland, announcing that he has sanctioned the marriage of Henry and Catherine. Henry and Catherine are married. In the end, the narrator assumes, the general’s previous hindrance to the union of his son and Catherine probably did more to strengthen their commitment to one another than it did to harm it.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Catherine Morland
Catherine Morland, a young girl whose head is filled with Gothic romances. At Bath, she meets the Thorpe and Tilney families. Her brother James is attracted to Isabella Thorpe, and John Thorpe becomes attentive to Catherine. She, however, is more interested in Henry Tilney, a younger son, whose father invites her to his home, Northanger Abbey, under the mistaken impression that she is rich and will make a good match for Henry. Overcome by the thrill of being in a real abbey, Catherine makes several foolish blunders, even thinking that her host must have murdered his wife. The visit ends when General Tilney, learning that Catherine is not rich, asks her to leave and forbids Henry to see her. Yet Henry’s love proves strong enough for him to defy his father, and the lovers are finally married.

**General Tilney**

General Tilney, the owner of Northanger Abbey. Eager for money, he is polite to Catherine only because he believes her to be rich.

**Captain Frederick Tilney**

Captain Frederick Tilney, his older son, for whom Isabella Thorpe jilts James Morland.

**Henry Tilney**

Henry Tilney, the younger son, a clergyman, who marries Catherine Morland.

**Eleanor Tilney**

Eleanor Tilney, their sister. Her marriage to a viscount puts her father into a good enough humor to permit the marriage of Henry and Catherine.

**James Morland**

James Morland, Catherine’s brother. He falls in love with Isabella Thorpe but is jilted by her.

**Isabella Thorpe**

Isabella Thorpe, a scheming young woman whom Catherine meets at Bath. She becomes engaged to James Morland but jilts him for Captain Tilney, though without much hope of marrying the latter.

**John Thorpe**

John Thorpe, Isabella’s stupid brother, who tries to marry Catherine and who boasts to General Tilney of her wealth. When she refuses him, he takes revenge by telling the general that she is poorer than she really is.

**Critical Essays: Analysis**

One of Jane Austen’s basic aesthetic principles is probability. In *Northanger Abbey*, she satirizes the contemporary novels, the gothic in particular, for their improbability. Instead of perilous adventures and heightened emotions, Austen focuses on rather ordinary people in ordinary situations, emphasizing social interaction and conversation. Catherine is an antiheroine, according to the typical gothic style—hers are the anxieties and the triumphs of ordinary life. As antiheroine, Catherine highlights (and critiques) those qualities of the idealized heroine: beauty, passivity, and domestic virtue. On the other hand, Isabella appears to be the typical heroine of sensibility—she is beautiful and openly emotional—but her attractive outward
characteristics mask her ugly insincerity and hypocrisy. She flouts social propriety, using conventional behavior and expectations to behave how she wishes. Ultimately, she is motivated by her vanity and her desire for money. True propriety is a respect for social conventions as a means of social intercourse, and a flaw in manners means a moral flaw at some level. In short, the “evil” characters in the novel, such as Isabella, John Thorpe, and General Tilney, are those who transgress the bounds of good manners and polite behavior.

While one focuses mainly on Catherine’s perceptions, *Northanger Abbey* is told by a detached third-person narrator, who posits herself as the writer of the novel. This distanced, ironic narrator passes judgment on larger social matters, such as the education of women and the value of novels, novel writing, and novel reading. She assesses Catherine’s actions and judgments and offers commentary on other characters that is beyond Catherine’s perception. The irony, and comedy, of the novel comes from the disparity between Catherine’s reading and imagination and her “reality.” there is also irony in the disparity between what Catherine knows and what readers know. Austen’s unrelentingly rational narrator controls the reader’s response to events and characters, so that while Catherine may be deluded, the reader is not. One views more judiciously the other characters through their actions and statements than Catherine does. The novel’s irony, however, is slippery. For example, Henry disciplines Catherine for her thoughts about General Tilney, but his more realistic description of English society is not a positive one either. Also, the general’s actual behavior is almost as violent as Catherine had imagined it to be.

All in all, *Northanger Abbey* is a novel of education: The two basic settings in the novel, Bath and Northanger Abbey, are classrooms where the inexperienced, imaginative, and easily misled Catherine is put through a series of tests as she works through a process of self-realization and self-definition. She discovers that Bath is a harsh, vulgar, and acquisitive place, as exemplified by the Thorpes and General Tilney. The Abbey provides a place of release for Catherine’s imagination, as she transgresses common sense and good manners with her investigations and her gothic allegations. Her missteps cause her painful self-reproach which generates self-examination which leads finally to self-forgiveness and growth. Austen combines scenes of action with scenes of reflection as Catherine becomes increasingly conscious of the moral and social repercussions of her actions. This combination allows Catherine to grow, and it allows readers to watch this growth in process. Her various interactions with others allow Catherine to learn the true character of people and things. She gradually gains a more mature view of herself and the people around her. She also matures into her marriage with Henry.

Henry Tilney is a classic example of one category of Austen hero: the lover/teacher. Holding opinions that are, on the whole, the narrator’s, he demonstrates for Catherine the affected manners of Bath, critiques her inexact use of language, and guides her perceptions of others. He also severely disciplines Catherine’s overactive imagination when he reminds her that she is in England, not a gothic novel. Yet while he is morally superior, he is not two-dimensional, nor is he merely the narrator’s spokesman. He has a satirical sense of humor which is often rather too barbed for comfort, and he is often too clever for his own and Catherine’s good. For example, it is Henry who creates gothic fears in Catherine’s mind as they drive to the Abbey. Also, he upbraids Catherine for an opinion of General Tilney which is partly based on experience—the general has shown himself to be a domestic tyrant in his regulation of his household and in his behavior toward his children. Henry and Catherine grow toward each other: She reins in an unchecked, inexperienced imagination and learns some prudence; he relinquishes his detached, satirical observer status for a more sympathetic understanding.

Austen’s novel is ultimately conservative—it validates traditional class and gender expectations. Catherine’s and Henry’s marriage at the end creates a world of order and harmony. Marriage is the prize that the heroine wins if she successfully maneuvers her social obstacle course and learns that she must define herself according to the standards set by society.
Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

In all the history of the novel, perhaps no genre can claim more popularity than the gothic novel of the late eighteenth century. The gothic fad, however, was all but over when *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen’s parody of the gothic novel, was published in 1818, a year after her death. Her delightful mockery had actually been written when such works were at their height of popularity, about 1797-1798. The novel had been sold to a publisher in 1803 but was published posthumously.

In her early twenties at the time of the composition, the young author lived in the quiet rectory where she was born in the Hampshire village of Steventon; her circumstances resembled those of the young heroine of her novel—even to including such amusements as poring over gothic novels. Those persons who have not read Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which occupies so much of Catherine Morland’s time and thoughts, will find other reasons to enjoy *Northanger Abbey*, but a knowledge of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or any other gothic novel will bring special rewards.

At one level, *Northanger Abbey* is an amusing parody of gothic novels, with their mysterious castles and abbeys, gloomy villains, incredibly accomplished heroines, sublime landscapes, and supernatural claptrap. Austen’s satire is not, however, pointed only at such novels; the romantic sensibility of the gothic enthusiast is also a target. *Northanger Abbey* is a comic study of the ironic discrepancies between the prosaic world in which Catherine lives and the fantastic shapes that her imagination, fed by gothic novels, gives to that world. The author holds up the contrast between the heroine’s real situation and the gothic world she fantasizes.

The prevailing irony begins with the first sentence: “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine.” As she grows up, she develops neither the prodigious artistic and intellectual accomplishments nor the requisite beauty necessary for the role. She herself is merely pretty, but once her adventures get underway, she begins to assign stereotyped gothic roles to her new acquaintances. Detecting villainy in General Tilney’s haughty demeanor merely because in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* the evil Montoni is haughty, she overlooks the general’s real defects of snobbery and materialism, traits that eventually prove far more threatening to her than his hauteur.

Since the central feature of the gothic novel is the sinister, dilapidated castle or abbey, Catherine’s most cherished daydreams center on Northanger Abbey and its long, damp passages. In reality, nothing is damp except an ordinary drizzling rain, nor is anything narrow or ruined, the abbey having been thoroughly renovated for modern living. Try as she will, she cannot manufacture genuine gothic horrors. Instead of dark revelations of murder and madness in the Tilney family, she faces self-revelation, her recognition that she has suffered from a delusion in her desire to be frightened.

If the ridicule of gothicism and the exposure of false sensibility compose major themes, another more inclusive theme, common to all Austen’s novels, is the problem of limitation. Catherine at age seventeen is “launched into all the difficulties and dangers of six weeks residence at Bath,” the fashionable resort, leaving a sheltered life in her village of Fullerton. She immediately discerns, however, a state of artificial confinement as a way of life in Bath. Catherine began to feel something of disappointment—she was tired of being continually pressed against by people, the generality of whose faces possessed nothing to interest, and with all of whom she was so wholly unacquainted, that she could not relieve the irksomeness of imprisonment by the exchange of a syllable with any of her fellow captives . . . she felt yet more awkwardness of having no party to join, no acquaintance to claim, no gentleman to assist them.

Throughout the novel, Austen continues to develop this initial image of an empty, fashionable routine in which each day brought its regular duties. Catherine romanticizes this reality, her delusions culminating with the delightful invitation to visit the Tilneys at Northanger Abbey. Thus the gothic parody functions also as a
study of a common response—escapism—to a society circumscribed by empty rituals and relationships. This theme is resolved when Catherine’s visions of romance are shattered by the mundane discoveries at Northanger Abbey, which compel her to abandon her romantic notions and choose the alternative of acting in the future with common sense.

Nevertheless, in her dismissal of fantasy, she has not yet come to terms with the limitations in reality, the pressures of society that can impose imprisonment. Such experience is melodramatically represented by her expulsion from the abbey. The order is delivered without explanation, the time and manner of departure are determined by General Tilney, and Catherine is denied either friendship or common courtesy. With no alternatives, Catherine is in a situation that resists good sense, and she is reduced to a passive awareness of the reality and substance of life. When she is shut off in her room at the abbey, her mind is so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil that she is numb to the loneliness of her situation. Confined in a hired carriage for the long, unfamiliar journey to Fullerton, she is conscious only of the pressing anxieties of thought. At home, her thought processes are lost in the reflection of her own change of feelings and spirit. She is the opposite of what she had been, an innocent young woman.

Catherine survives the transition from innocence to experience, proving to her mother, at least, that she can shift very well for herself. Catherine’s maturity, however, is tested no further. The restoration of her happiness depends less on herself and Henry than it does on General Tilney, and she is finally received by the general on the basis not of personal merit but of money. Only when the Morlands prove to be a family of good financial standing is Catherine free to marry the man of her choice.

Concerning the rapid turn of events in her denouement, Austen wryly observed, “To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen, is to do pretty well.” Despite the happy ending that concludes the novel, Austen leaves Catherine on the threshold only of the reality of life that her experiences have revealed. The area of her testing has already been defined, for example, in the discrepancy between her image of Henry’s parsonage and that of General Tilney. To Catherine, it is “something like Fullerton, but better: Fullerton had its faults, but Woodston probably had none.”

Thus, Northanger Abbey is a novel of initiation; its heroine ironically discovers in the world not a new freedom, but a new set of restrictions. Once undeceived of her romantic illusions of escape, she is returned with a vengeance to the world as it is, small but decent. As an early novel, Northanger Abbey points the way to Austen’s mature novels, in which the focus is on heroines who are constrained to deal with life within defined limitations.

**Critical Essays: Northanger Abbey**

Catherine Morland, the protagonist, is an enthusiastic reader of Gothic novels. She expects her life to be like those she reads about, despite the fact that she is no storybook creature—neither beautiful nor clever nor rich, just a country parson’s daughter in a large, happy family.

Like the maidens in romances, though, Catherine ventures away from home. Instead of some exotic locale, she visits Bath, where she enjoys ordinary resort pleasures with amiably normal English folk. Of her new acquaintances, the most agreeable are a witty young clergyman, Henry Tilney, and his sister. Catherine is delighted when their proud father, General Tilney, invites her to stay at their country house, which is, she is thrilled to learn, an abbey.

In spite of its antiquity and monastic origins, Northanger Abbey turns out to be both comfortable and convenient. Catherine’s education in the difference between life and literature continues when she discovers a mysterious document in an old chest, broods all night over what dire tale it may relate, and at daybreak finds
that she has lost sleep over a laundry list.

Catherine’s new experiences may not be what the Gothic novelists describe, but they are not simple, direct, or dull either. General Tilney, though not the wife-slayer Catherine had idly fancied him, is a brutal and calculating man. On learning that she is not the heiress he had supposed, he packs her off to her parents. But Catherine does not have long to mull over the harsh lessons of real life. Henry Tilney, outraged by his father’s behavior, rushes to her and proposes. The Morlands approve, and the general comes to decide that his clerical son could do worse than marry a clergyman’s daughter.

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Jones, Vivien. *How to Study a Jane Austen Novel.* London: Macmillan, 1987. Designed to help students develop their own critical skills, this text offers practical advice about how to read, understand, and analyze literature. Jones uses selected passages from *Northanger Abbey* in her discussion of the power of the authorial voice.


Pinion, F. B. *A Jane Austen Companion: A Critical Survey and Reference Book.* New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973. The first part of the book includes chapters on biography, historical background, each of Austen’s novels, her letters, and her literary reputation. The second part includes a list of people and places in Austen’s fiction, as well as a glossary of unusual or outmoded words. Also contains a variety of maps and other
illustrations, a bibliography, and an index.


**Northanger Abbey, Jane Austen: Introduction**

*Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen

The following entry presents criticism of Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* (1818). See also, Jane Austen Criticism, *Pride and Prejudice* Criticism, and *Mansfield Park* Criticism.

Originally written between 1798 and 1799, but not published until 1818, *Northanger Abbey* is considered Jane Austen's first significant work of fiction. The novel is in part a burlesque of the Gothic and sentimental fiction that was popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly of Ann Radcliffe's novels, such as *The Mysteries of Udolfo*. In addition to its parodic elements, *Northanger Abbey* also follows the maturation of Catherine Morland, a naive eighteen-year-old, ignorant of the workings of English society and prone to self-deception. Influenced by her reading of novels rife with the overblown qualities of horror fiction, Catherine concocts a skewed version of reality by infusing real people, things, and events with terrible significance. However, Catherine's mistaken impressions, though clouded by Gothic sentiment, often hint at an insightful, if unconscious, judgment of character that cuts through the social pretensions of those around her. In this respect Austen's novel carries on an ironic discourse which makes it not only a satire, but also a sophisticated novel of social education.

**Plot and Major Characters**

Catherine's introduction into society begins when Mr. and Mrs. Allen, her neighbors in Fullerton, invite her to spend some time with them while vacationing in the English town of Bath. There she meets the somewhat pedantic clergyman Henry Tilney and the histrionic Isabella Thorpe, who encourages Catherine in her reading of Gothic fiction. Her circle of acquaintances widens with the arrival of James Morland, Catherine's brother and a love interest for Isabella, and John Thorpe, Isabella's rude, conniving brother. The setting shifts from Bath to Northanger Abbey, the ancestral home of the Tilneys, when John deceives General Tilney, Henry's father, into believing that Catherine is an heiress. Austen's satire of Gothic horror novel conventions begins as Henry and Catherine drive up to the Abbey and the former plays on the heroine's romantic expectations of the place. When Catherine reaches her destination she is disappointed to find a thoroughly modern building, completely lacking in hidden passageways, concealed dungeons, and the like. Later, Austen allows Catherine's imagination to run amok, only to reveal the objects of her fears as ordinary and mundane. At the climax of the novel, General Tilney—whom Catherine suspects of having murdered or shut up his wife somewhere in the abbey—turns the heroine out after learning that she does not come from a wealthy family.
At the close of the novel, the outraged Henry proposes marriage to Catherine, now divested of her delusions by Henry and his sister Eleanor. General Tilney, who proves to be not a murderer, but rather an individual of questionable moral and social character, eventually gives his consent to the marriage after learning that his daughter Eleanor is also engaged—to a wealthy Viscount.

Major Themes

While ostensibly a burlesque of the conventional modes of Gothic horror fiction, *Northanger Abbey* is also a novel of education that focuses on the theme of self-deception. Austen portrays Catherine as an inversion of the typical Gothic heroine, making her neither beautiful, talented, nor particularly intelligent, but rather ordinary in most respects. In contrast, several other characters in the novel are presented as pastiches of stock Gothic characters—Isabella and General Tilney, for example, are parodies of the damsel and the domestic tyrant. These individuals seem to fit into Catherine's deluded perspective of the world which, in the tradition of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, leaves her unable to distinguish between reality and the romanticized version of life she finds in popular novels. Other characters in the novel serve to balance the work. Henry Tilney is often regarded by critics as Austen's mouthpiece—though he, too, is occasionally an object of irony and ridicule. For example, he fails to realize that Catherine's delusions, though excessive, hint at the true nature of people and events. Thus, Catherine is the first to understand that General Tilney, although not a murderer, is cruel and mercenary. This ironic aspect of the novel alludes to a larger theme in the work, that of the moral significance of social conventions and conduct—a subject that Austen explored in greater detail in later novels.

Critical Reception

Critics have generally regarded *Northanger Abbey* to be of lesser literary quality than the remainder of Austen's mature works. Some scholars have observed occasional lapses in her narrative technique of a sort that do not appear in later novels. By far the greatest debate surrounding *Northanger Abbey*, however, is the question of its aesthetic unity. Critics have traditionally seen the work as part novel of society, part satire of popular Gothic fiction, and therefore not a coherent whole. Detractors, focusing on the work as a parody, have found its plot weak, its characters unimaginative and superficial, and its comedy anticlimactic due to its reliance on an outmoded style of fiction. Others, while conceding the lack of an easily discernable organizing principle, argue that the work is unified on the thematic level as not merely a satire of popular fiction, but also an ironic presentation of a self-deceived imagination that is quixotically wrong about reality but right about human morality. In addition, critics have considered Northanger Abbey a transitional work, one that moves away from the burlesque mode of the *Juvenilia* and toward the stylistic control of such masterpieces as *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*.

Criticism: Dorothy Scarborough (essay date 1917)


[In the following excerpt, Scarborough describes *Northanger Abbey* as a clever burlesque of the Gothic novel.]

Perhaps the most valuable contribution that the Gothic school made to English literature is Jane Austen's inimitable satire of it, *Northanger Abbey*. Though written as her first novel and sold in 1797, it did not appear till after her death, in 1818. Its purpose is to ridicule the Romanticists and the book in itself would justify the terroristic school, but she was ahead of her times, so the editor feared to publish it. In the meantime she wrote her other satires on society and won immortality for her work which might never have been begun save for
her satiety of medieval romances. The title of the story itself is imitative, and the well-known materials are all present, yet how differently employed! The setting is a Gothic abbey tempered to modern comfort; the interfering father is not vicious, merely ill-natured; the pursuing, repulsive lover is not a villain, only a silly bore. The heroine has no beauty, nor does she topple into sonnets nor snatch a pencil to sketch the scene, for we are told that she has no accomplishments. Yet she goes through palpitating adventures mostly modelled on Mrs. Radcliffe's incidents. She is hampered in not being supplied with a lover who is the unrecognized heir to vast estates, since all the young men in the county are properly provided with parents.

The delicious persiflage in which Jane Austen hits off the fiction of the day may be illustrated by a bit of conversation between two young girls.

"My dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself all the morning? Have you gone on with Udolpho?"

"Yes; I have been reading it ever since I woke, and I have got to the black veil."

"Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh, I would not tell you what is behind that black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?"

"Oh, yes, quite! What can it be? But do not tell me—I would not be told on any account. I know it must be a skeleton; I am sure it is Laurentina's skeleton. Oh, I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life reading it, I assure you. If it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for the world."

"Dear creature! How much obliged I am to you; and when you have finished Udolpho, we will read The Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you."

"Have you, indeed? How glad I am! What are they all?"

"I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocket-book: Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries. These will last us some time."

"Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid? Are you sure they are all horrid?"

"Yes, quite sure; for a particular friend of mine, a Miss Andrews—a sweet girl, one of the sweetest creatures in the world—has read every one of them!"

Jane Austen's stupid bore, John Thorpe, and Mr. Tilney, the impeccable, pedantic hero, add their comment to Gothic fiction, one saying with a yawn that there hasn't been a decent novel since Tom Jones, except The Monk, and the other that he read Udolpho in two days with his hair standing on end all the time.

But the real cleverness of the work consists in the burlesque of Gothic experiences that Catherine, because of the excited condition of her mind induced by excess of romantic fiction, goes through with on her visit to Northanger Abbey. She explores secret wings in a search for horrors, only to find sunny rooms, with no imprisoned wife, not a single maniac, and never skeleton of tortured nun. Mr. Tilney's ironic jests satirize all the elements of Gothic romance. Opening a black chest at midnight, she finds a yellowed manuscript, but just as she is about to read it her candle flickers out. In the morning sunshine she finds that it is an old laundry list. The only result of her suspicious explorings is that she is caught in such prowlings by the young man whose esteem she wishes to win. He sarcastically assures her that his father is not a wife-murderer, that his mother is
not immured in a dungeon, but died of a bilious attack. These delicately tipped shafts of ridicule riddle the armor of medievalism and give it at the same time a permanency of interest because of Jane Austen's treatment of it. The Gothic novel will be remembered, if for nothing else, for her parody of it.

**Criticism: Andrew H. Wright (essay date 1953)**


[Below, Wright investigates Catherine Morland's character, especially as it is highlighted by the words and actions of Henry Tilney and John Thorpe.]

**Catherine Morland**

As a satire of the Gothic horror tale, *Northanger Abbey* contains all the ingredients of this *genre* except the hero and heroine, who are deliberately normalized, partly for the purpose of heightening the ridicule. Like all parodies the book exhibits two sets of values: one is satirized, the other (by implication) is shown to be 'truer'. Here, the illusions of Gothic sentimentality are contrasted to the less flashy but more durable values of good sense; the Gothic world is one of fancy, the world as apprehended by good sense is 'real'. But the book goes somewhat beyond these limits—it goes beyond to explore the limitations of good sense itself. And Jane Austen shows us that though we must reject the Gothic world as inadequate and false, we cannot altogether apprehend the real world by good sense alone. Good sense, ironically, is limited too.

In sketching Catherine Morland's background, appearance, and disposition, her author manages to suggest both the typical Gothic heroine and, in Catherine herself, the inverse:

[Catherine] had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features;—so much for her person;—and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind. She was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rosebush. . . . Such were her propensities—her abilities were quite as extraordinary. She never could learn or understand any thing before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid. . . . What a strange, unaccountable character!

So she was at the age of ten, but when we find her, on the brink of a six weeks' visit to Bath, she has grown:

. . . her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind—her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl; her person pleasing, and, when in good looks, pretty—and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually.

Her experiences, on first arriving at Bath, are a combination of what might be expected from the Gothic heroine, and the very reverse. The Aliens, whose guest she is, are an ordinary, unexciting Wiltshire couple; her first visit to the Upper Rooms produces ennui rather than rapture; the young man she meets is no silent, olive-faced seducer from Southern Europe, but a talkative, sardonic clergyman from Gloucestershire named Henry Tilney, whose father is a general, and who lectures Catherine on the inadequacies of young ladies as letter-writers and other things. On the other hand, she meets Isabella Thorpe, who begins as a regular Gothic confidante (though she ends as an Austenian villain), who induces Catherine to read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and will give her a list of 'horrid' books to read; she encounters the flashy and dishonest John Thorpe.
who endeavours to take her to Blaize Castle.

But far more important than her Gothic indoctrination at Bath is her own emergence as a human being—though she is not to be cured of the Gothic infection until her experience at Northanger Abbey, in the second volume. At once she is drawn to Isabella Thorpe, whose conversation is expert on such subjects as:

... dress, balls, flirtations, and quizzes. ... These powers received due admiration from Catherine, to whom they were entirely new; and the respect which they naturally inspired might have been too great for familiarity, had not the easy gaiety of Miss Thorpe's manners, and her frequent expressions of delight on this acquaintance with her, softened down every feeling of awe, and left nothing but tender affection.

Youth and a natural credulousness have led her to make this unquestioning friendship with Isabella; but John Thorpe affects her differently even at the beginning of their acquaintance. He is stout, loud, impudent, boastful, insensitive, and dishonest—and:

Little as Catherine was in the habit of judging for herself, and unfixed as were her general notions of what men ought to be, she could not entirely repress a doubt, while she bore with the effusions of his endless conceit, of his being altogether agreeable.

Indeed she is soon forced to make a conscious and quite firm judgment against him, when he lies to her in order to persuade her to ride to Blaize Castle with him. Made to think for herself on this occasion, and increasingly allied with the sensible Tilney family, she is gradually able to see Isabella with greater objectivity. When the latter claims that Miss Tilney has supplanted her in Catherine's heart:

Catherine thought this reproach equally strange and unkind. Was it the part of a friend thus to expose her feelings to the notice of others? Isabella appeared to her ungenerous and selfish, regardless of every thing but her own gratification.

But Catherine is forced to suspend, or soften, her judgment of Isabella when the latter becomes engaged to Catherine's brother James. Meanwhile, Catherine's increased intimacy with the Tilneys (and a mistaken impression on the general's part as to her wealth) evokes an invitation to Northanger Abbey, the setting of the major part of the second volume.

Here, with beautifully comic anti-climax, Jane Austen traces Catherine's Gothic adventures. Having expected 'long damp passages ... narrow cells and [a] ruined chapel ... some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun', she finds 'lodges of a modern appearance ... a smooth, level road of fine gravel, without obstacle, alarm or solemnity of any kind. ...'. In her bedroom, which is far from horrifying in most respects, she finds a mysterious chest—it contains a cotton counterpane; she later spies another chest which frightens her out of a full night's sleep—this contains an inventory of linen. She steals to the room where Mrs. Tilney died, expecting to see evidence that the lady is still alive and cruelly imprisoned—but finds instead a neat, well-lighted, empty bedroom. Henry Tilney finally convinces her that his mother died quite normally, of a "bilious fever". And so at last Catherine is purged of her Gothic illusions.

Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for. Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation. ... But in the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land, and the manners of the age. Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist.
But, side by side with her awakening from the Gothic dream, is her much more important emergence as a human being of good sense—and the gradual realization of the limitations of even that quality. It is chiefly through her relationship with Isabella and with John Thorpe that she is thus educated.

We have already seen that at first Catherine is disposed to like Isabella, to accept her unquestioningly as a friend, largely because of the older girl's high spirits. This acceptance is questioned briefly when Isabella expresses some jealousy about the relationship of Catherine to Miss Tilney—but modified when James Morland and Isabella become engaged. Catherine is shocked when Captain Tilney (Henry's older brother) and Isabella commence a flirtation; but she is too good-heartedly naïve to be suspicious:

> It seemed to her that Captain Tilney was falling in love with Isabella, and Isabella unconsciously encouraging him; unconsciously it must be, for Isabella's attachment to James was as certain and well acknowledged as her engagement. To doubt her truth or good intentions was impossible; and yet, during the whole of their conversation her manner had been odd.

Catherine grows resentful, however, of Isabella's insensitivity, but is rather surprised, when she hears that Captain Tilney and Isabella have become engaged (James having been thrown off), that she does not much regret the loss of Isabella's friendship.

> To say the truth, though I am hurt and grieved, that I cannot still love her, that I am never to hear from her, perhaps never to see her again, I do not feel so very, very much afflicted as one would have thought.

But this is not the end of her relationship to Isabella, who coolly writes that she loves James after all, and urges Catherine to intervene with her brother on their behalf.

> Such a strain of shallow artifice could not impose even upon Catherine. Its inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood, struck her from the very first. She was ashamed of Isabella, and ashamed of having ever loved her. Her professions of attachment were now as disgusting as her excuses were empty, and her demands impudent. Write to James on her behalf!—No, James should never hear Isabella's name mentioned by her again.

If the relationship to the Thorpes shows Catherine the value of common sense in evaluating life's difficulties, the relationship to the Tilneys (except the Gothic trimmings) discloses the limits of this virtue. She meets and is attracted to, though she is rather baffled by, Henry Tilney; she becomes the friend of Eleanor; she is treated with affectionate kindness by the rather terrifying General Tilney—and then suddenly she is dismissed without explanation, on the general's return from a short journey to London. She is stunned, almost overcome with grief, and returns home to Wiltshire in deep humiliation; there she meets with the unfailing kindness and sympathy of her family, and is induced to walk to the Aliens', who live near by.

> As they walked home again, Mrs. Morland endeavoured to impress on her daughter's mind the happiness of having such steady well-wishers as Mr. and Mrs. Allen, and the very little consideration which the neglect or unkindness of slight acquaintance like the Tilneys ought to have with her, while she could preserve the good opinion and affection of her earliest friends. There was a great deal of good sense in all this; but there are some situations of the human mind in which good sense has very little power; and Catherine's feelings contradicted almost every position her mother advanced.

And so, momentarily, Catherine sees the unresolvable irony between the strong heart and the clear mind: she has been educated by her experiences at Bath and at the Tilney's to the superior value of common sense. Now,
almost before she has been able to absorb the lesson, she learns that good sense cannot deal with the crisis that has forced her sudden expulsion. But the happy dénouement is less than ten pages away, the heroine in the arms of her beloved Henry; and Jane Austen writes, sardonically: ve 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.

Compared to Jane Austen's later heroines Catherine Moreland is somewhat thin. Professor Mudrick remarks: [in Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery, 1952]: 'She is too simple and too slight, too narrowly a symbol of the author's rejection of romantic nonsense, to assert the claim of personal feeling and value beyond mere function.' Howells writes of her [in Heroines of Fiction, 1901]:

Catherine Morland is a goose, but a very engaging goose, and a goose you must respect for her sincerity, her high principles, her generous trust of others, and her patience under trials that would be too great for much stronger heads . . . and in spite of her romantic folly she has so much good heart that it serves her in place of good sense.

It seems to me that both these critics rather miss the point about Catherine: her inadequacies as a heroine, such as they are, exist because Jane Austen tries to do too much with her—to establish her both as a gooselike parody of the sentimental-Gothic heroine, and to advance claims for her as a human being who would learn good sense, and learn even to go beyond it. To be sure, irony is not central to the story; Northanger Abbey's delight lies principally in the amusing parody which it presents. But the indication that there is more on earth than mere common sense gives the book an ironic dimension of enduring value.

**Henry Tilney and John Thorpe**

Henry Tilney is the only one of Jane Austen's heroes who shares her ironic viewpoint, the only one who ever threatens the primacy of a heroine. But this must be, for in Northanger Abbey Jane Austen chooses a heroine who is marvellously credulous and naïve—but who, miraculously, wins our affection and even admiration, as Harriet Smith (for instance) does not. John Thorpe contrasts sharply with Henry Tilney in being gross where the latter is refined, stupid rather than brilliant, boorish rather than elegant; Thorpe appears very little, is dismissed early, and is, altogether, the least interesting of his author's villains—partly, perhaps, because the real villain of the piece (though a rather nice one) consists of Catherine's Gothic illusions.

Henry Tilney first appears—as is appropriate to a burlesque of the novel of terror—on a decrescendo. Instead of encountering the heroine mysteriously or in a situation of great danger, he is introduced to her by the Master of Ceremonies of the Lower Rooms at Bath. After playfully inquiring as to her activities in Bath, he engages her on the subject of female letter-writing. He observes:

'As far as I have had the opportunity of judging, it appears to me that the usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars.'

'And what are they?'

'A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar.'

His function throughout the novel is not only to provide by his cleverness, his wit, and his savoir-vivre, a sharp contrast to the 'goosish' heroine, but to take over as leading proponent of Jane Austen's viewpoint, whenever circumstances require.
Naturally, the relationship between Henry and Catherine deepens, the latter usually bewildered by his bursts of cleverness. When, finally, she is invited to visit Northanger Abbey, he engagingly readies her for the terrors of the place. "... are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that a building such as 'what one reads about' may produce?—Have you a stout heart?—Nerves fit for sliding pannels and tapestry?" But of course it does not live up to her Gothic expectations. All in all, he adds up to a thoroughly attractive young man, quite exceeding his functional responsibilities. R. W. Chapman, discussing the heroes of Jane Austen's novels [in *Jane Austen Facts and Problems*], says: '... I retain a sneaking preference for Henry Tilney: for no better reason, perhaps, than that I find in him a resemblance to my youthful priggishness. But he has more wit than any of her young men except Henry Crawford.'

John Thorpe is not much worse than rude, vain, selfish, stupid, boastful and dishonest. He does not seduce anyone, like John Willoughby; defame anyone, like George Wickham; coolly run off with a married woman, like Henry Crawford; deceive anyone (except General Tilney), like Frank Churchill; or insolently ignore the claims of an indigent widow, like Mr. Elliot. John Thorpe is simply:

.. a stout young man of middling height, who, with a plain face and ungraceful form, seemed fearful of being too handsome unless he wore the dress of a groom, and too much like a gentleman unless he were easy where he ought to be civil, and impudent where he might be allowed to be easy.

He does not even deceive Catherine Morland very long; before he lies to her about the Tilneys, she is put off by his endless chatter of the famous parties in his Oxford rooms, races, shooting-parties, fox-hunting—in all of which he claims to have played a leading and heroic role.

But his worst defection lies in his behaviour when he desires that Catherine accompany him to Bristol, where (with Isabella Thorpe and James Morland) they will visit Blaize Castle. She tells him that she is already engaged to go walking with the Tilneys; he replies that the latter have already set out in a carriage and therefore will not go walking that day. So Catherine acquiesces; but, *en route*, catches sight of the Tilneys on foot. Thorpe has lied—but will not stop, despite Catherine's strong entreaties. Catherine is furious; her eyes are now thoroughly opened to his character—and henceforth he fades out of the picture very fast, leaving the heroine to battle only her own illusions. The reader is left with the feeling that John Thorpe is the least necessary of Jane Austen's villains, and is perhaps the least interesting both to his author and to his audience.

As in Jane Austen's other novels, hero and villain in *Northanger Abbey* function principally to sharpen and define the position, the personality, and the development of the heroine. John Thorpe is a crude Lovelace, whose defects Catherine sees almost at once—despite the overlay of Gothic fantasy in her mind; Henry Tilney is the agent of Catherine's gradual disillusionment, but as an attractive young man to whom she responds ardently, he unknowingly leads her to the edge of common sense—and beyond.

**Criticism: Frank J. Kearful (essay date 1965)**


*[In the following essay, Kearful argues that Northanger Abbey achieves a complex unity of fiction, satire, parody, burlesque, comedy, and tragedy.]*
The most important—and most interesting—critical problem concerning *Northanger Abbey* is the question of its aesthetic unity. Generally critics are forced to conclude that while brilliant in many of its parts, the book as a whole lacks a sufficiently consistent technique or unified form to make it a coherent work of art. Some would point to Henry Tilney's ambivalent position as surrogate ironic commentator for the author and object of her irony; some to the structural "detachability" of the "Gothic" chapters; some to the shallowness of Catherine's characterization as measured against her ostensibly central role; some to an uneasy coexistence within the same narrative of several narrative modes, ranging from apparently outright literary burlesque and parody to assumedly straightforward naturalistic reportage. Furthermore, a few characters, notably John Thorpe, never really participate in the Gothic world of *Northanger Abbey*, while others, notably General Tilney, in straddling its Gothic and its daylight worlds, may fail to inhabit either. Indeed, Catherine's own role as ironic Gothic-sentimental heroine is at best intermittently sustained.

Occasionally efforts have been made to reduce the book's apparent disunity to at least a partial order. While few if any recent critics would have us read *Northanger Abbey* as a consistent burlesque of specific literary works, some would impose upon it more general but hardly more convincing parodic patterns. So, for example, [in *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, 1952] Marvin Mudrick would make of John Thorpe an anti-type of the Gothic unwelcome suitor and Mrs. Allen, presumably because "she is neither wicked nor vigilant," an anti-type of the Gothic chaperone. Indeed Mudrick is able to convince himself that with the partial and artistically unfortunate exception of Henry Tilney "the most interesting novelistic fact about all these characters is that—whatever else they may be—they are consistently, even rigidly functional" as anti-types of figures recurring in Gothic novels. Undoubtedly we can make ourselves see the characters of *Northanger Abbey* primarily as ironic avatars of Gothic archetypes, but to do so as systematically as Mudrick does is to rob them of much of their vitality and to distort perversely the genuine complexity of Jane Austen's creative achievement.

A somewhat more convincing method of creating if not quite finding unity within the book is to view it in terms of a single organizing theme. So, for example, [in *Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue*, 1962] Howard Babb by concentrating on one fictional component—dialogue—so as to demonstrate its function as a dramatization of the process of Catherine's education, would have us be content that Catherine's "making a morally secure discovery of herself at the Abbey, arriving at a fuller understanding of her enemies, whether the Thorpes or General Tilney, and finally winning Henry, the champion of reason," are all aspects of a single main action expressed through the means of a consistent technique. Babb's individual critical observations are often illuminating, but his special concern with dialogue and what it reveals about Jane Austen's art should not—any more than Mudrick's special pleading for his conception of Jane Austen's "defensive" irony—force us to reduce the aesthetic complexity of the book itself to the simplicity of the critic's *a priori* framework.

Critics like Mudrick and Babb have not sufficiently taken into account that the way one attempts to resolve the vexing problem of the unity of *Northanger Abbey* depends directly on one's theoretical assumptions about the relationships of prose fiction and satire. The novel as a literary type is, in fact, significantly different from satire as a literary type, both in intrinsic structure and in the illusion its fiction creates. Whereas a novel typically creates an imaginatively self-contained world, the imagined world of satire exists only through its implied or indirect reference to a world outside its own. The novel is a mimetic representation wherein there should be no apparent discrepancy between the action represented and the representation itself; satire, conversely, is based on our recognition of the exaggerated, distorted nature of its representation. The illusion *it* creates is, therefore, fundamentally different from that of the novel: no one complains that it is not "true-to-life" in the same way we expect a novel generally to be.

Satire, of course, is perotean. It may be incidental, momentary, merely a linguistic device within a larger structure. But some works are structurally satiric, all their materials being so organized and expressed as to support a consistently satiric action. So in reading *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, we are always aware that what we are reading is a satire, not simply a novel with satiric moments or overtones, like *Tom Jones*. Of
course some prose fictional works which we call satiric are neither structurally integral satires nor novels but more or less ambivalent compounds. Waugh's *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* are modern instances of such hybridization; by contrast, such later Waugh prose fictions as *Brideshead Revisited* and the Crouchback trilogy are consistently novelistic in structure although they incorporate incidental satire. Indeed the special genius of Waugh, now apparently lost, was in his earlier books to seem to be writing something like a novel which was wildly unlike a novel.

In *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen was in her own way experimenting with an artistic form compounded of radically different elements. But whereas a Waugh succeeds in fusing two disparate modes into one tonality, Austen allows them to exist side by side in seeming contradiction. Accordingly, at times the fiction presented seems purely (i.e., structurally) satiric and at other times purely novelistic, with the result that our expectations are made to work at cross-purposes. That, however, is the key point of the book as a whole and its organizing principle.

II

The first two chapters of *Northanger Abbey* are usually regarded as literary burlesque or parody and as essentially satiric in design. They are, however, neither burlesque nor parody in any usual simple sense of those terms, for in them we are always keenly aware of a critical narrator who, far from exaggeratedly or incongruously imitating literary conventions or formulae, cynically denies their relevance to her story. She is aware of popular literary-sentimentalist conventions, but repeatedly points out how miserably her characters fail to live up to them. In the first chapter, for example, we are informed that Catherine had "a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features;—so much for her person;—and not less unpromising for heroism seemed her mind." Thus Catherine in her chrysalis at age ten. The chapter then traces her maturation from tomboy to young lady: she becomes no longer the gawky child she was but still reaches "the age of seventeen, without having inspired one real passion, and without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and transient." Furthermore, the books Catherine is reading (however superficially or naively) by this time are not sentimental, romantic, or Gothic novels, but rather Pope, Gray, Thompson (*sic*), and Shakespeare.

Not only the felt presence of a critical narrator but also the fact that the characters themselves are not living out a delusion prevents the first two chapters from becoming an orthodox burlesque or parody. This is well illustrated by the two paragraphs in which we are told of the Morlands' preparations for Catherine's trip to Bath. The narrator begins by inviting the reader to speculate on the "thousand alarming presentiments of evil" which "will be naturally supposed" to afflict Mrs. Morland at this "terrific separation." Certainly she will have to "relieve the fulness of her heart" by offering "advice of the most important and applicable nature," such as "cautions against the violence of such nobleman and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farm-house." After concluding her suppositions with a "Who would not think so?" the narrator then reveals not what any novel-reader might suppose would be going on inside Mrs. Morland's mind but what in fact was: "But Mrs. Morland knew so little of lords and baronets, that she entertained no notion of their general mischievousness, and was wholly unsuspicous of danger to her daughter from their machinations. Her cautions were confined to the following points. Catherine, you will always wrap yourself up very warm about the throat, when you come from the Rooms at night; and I wish you would try to keep some account of the money you spend;—I will give you this little book on purpose."

The paragraph following dispels whatever sentimental notions we might have had about Catherine's own emotions or those of her sister and father. "Every thing relative to this important journey was done, on the part of the Morlands, with a degree of moderation and composure, which seemed rather consistent with the common feelings of common life, than with the refined susceptibilities, the tender emotions which the first separation of a heroine from her family ought always to excite."
What Jane Austen accomplishes through this strategy is altogether different from what she did in *Love and Friendship*, wherein the characters were freely allowed to pursue exaggerated versions of sentimental-romantic literary conventions. There the satiric device employed was to expose absurdity by seeming naively to embrace it in magnified form, the reader through his laughter at the resultant caricature of human life being relied on to assert his own common sense. The fiction presented was, accordingly, entirely satiric: it did not create a self-contained imaginative world of its own but instead a point of critical reference to a literary reality outside itself, the world of late eighteenth-century novelistic fiction. However, in Chapters I and II of *Northanger Abbey* the delusions being satirically examined are not those of the ostensible narrator nor of the characters themselves. Furthermore, the fiction presented has, we are warned, nothing to do with any conventional novelistic world with which we might be tempted to associate it, satirically or otherwise. In point of fact, Austen's satiric victim is the reader's own stock expectations, whose responses she disallows, as they are shown to be preposterous when superimposed on the fiction actually presented.

But while we are still in Chapter II we can detect a significant alteration in fictional technique, which coincides with Catherine's arrival in Bath. No longer does the narrator teasingly play off the fictional "facts" against the reader's expectations (a strategy which after all delivers progressively diminishing returns), to establish the reality of the illusion presented simply by showing the absence of unreality. Early in the chapter the narrator had seemingly offhandedly let fall the information that Catherine's "heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind—her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl; her person pleasing, and, when in good looks, pretty—and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is." In the latter part of Chapter II, wherein occur her first encounters with Bath life, this "real" Catherine is allowed to act out that character sketched briefly before. The quality of the narration changes correspondingly, for as the "real" illusion of the novel is initiated, Austin's prose style becomes more smoothly modulated, her eye for minute but suggestive sociological detail sharpens, and dialogue becomes more plentiful. This change in tone and technique really begins with the initial description of Mrs. Allen: here we have speaking the voice of "the novelist" rather than "the satirist," although this novelist obviously has a penchant for making incidental incisive satirical remarks.

In Chapter III, when Catherine meets Henry Tilney, *Northanger Abbey* begins to be transformed into a novel of education, as for the next several chapters Catherine will be encountering new people, new situations, and new problems, each providing a different opportunity for her to become a mature person. She will follow, then, a general pattern repeated in all Austen's later novels with the possible exception of *Mansfield Park*: a young girl in some important respects immature undergoes a series of experiences leading to major self-discoveries and discoveries about others, which, cumulatively, bring about a new orientation of the heroine toward herself and her environment. Catherine's "progress" differs from the typical pattern, however, in that she must acquire illusions she was wholly free of at the beginning of the book before she can begin the process of self-discovery and adjustment.

Initially the fiction embodying this process of education is presented novelistically. The narrator does make incidental satiric observations on the action, but the action itself is realized as structurally independent of the narrator's view of it. This makes *Northanger Abbey* again quite different from a throughgoing satire like *Gulliver's Travels*, wherein there is no fiction with an existence independent of the narrator's conception of it. In *Gulliver's Travels* everything that "happens" we are told of only through Gulliver's account, and nothing related within the narrative has a definable objective existence outside that account. Swift's fiction is, in effect, a series of variously distorting mirrors erected by the central character-narrator, whom Swift regulates by remote control. We are not provided with a self-contained world in which the main character exists, but an imaginative construct which is a projection of his own (unbalanced) mind. We never take it, therefore, with the same variety of seriousness we do a novelistic fiction, of which we demand an objectified consistency and coherence independent of any one character's view of it. Even a first-person narrated novel (insofar as it is not structurally satiric nor a psychological study of pure hallucination, like perhaps Beckett's *Malone Dies*) gives us a sense of a fictional world about which the narrator is reporting. Our understanding and/or evaluation of it
may differ sharply from his, but we are aware of a world of which he is a part, not simply the maker. Even Faulkner's Benjy conveys a real sense of a fictional world outside himself. By contrast, Gulliver's world has no illusionary substance independent of Gulliver. We are not imaginatively drawn into his world as if it were subsisting in any fashion outside his report, for we remain critical observers of an action functional as satire, wherein the fictional world exists as a means of vision rather than an object of contemplation. This is no less true of satiric fictions narrated in the third person, such as those narrated in *MacFlecknoe* and the *Dunciad*. They are satiric distortions of the nonfictional world; but they are not fictional worlds of their own apart from their function as satiric distortions. We are not meant to feel that the "events" of the *Dunciad* happened in a "real" fictional world and that the narrator is merely making satiric comments about them.

Apart from the specific stylistic traits and fictional tactics already noted as coming into play by the end of Chapter II of *Northanger Abbey*, in the Bath chapters two general strategies support the essentially novelistic illusion being presented. First, the narrator's satiric statements are for the most part momentary observations on the action rather than the action itself. Henry Tilney, of course, is himself something of a satiric commentator: but he remains a character within the action, whom we see mainly through his relationship with Catherine, and, furthermore, as Austen keeps him offstage much of the time, he never has the opportunity of becoming a fully controlling commentator. His is but one point of view among many, even if the most nearly "right" one.

The fact that Austen while primarily interested in Catherine's progress and closely akin intellectually to Henry is able to introduce a diversity of characters with a variety of viewpoints further assists her in producing a novelistic illusion. Satire, typically, selects only one angle of vision. It is Gulliver's viewpoint in *Gulliver's Travels* just as it is the narrator's viewpoint in *MacFlecknoe* and in the *Dunciad* that constitute the satiric prism. Willingness to present the same "facts" as they appear to several different characters usually implies that those facts have an objective existence outside any one character. That is to say, an illusion becomes more autonomously real the more subjective viewpoints we have of it, even if only because we see that no one character's experience can entirely account for it. Accordingly, in *Northanger Abbey* the diversity of characters, each with his own outlook on the fictional "facts," serves to create not so much a satiric exposé of the sentimental and/or Gothic novel, as a positive, novelistic alternative to both.

We may conclude that Austen's strategy as it has thus far revealed itself is much more like Fielding's in *Joseph Andrews* than Swift's or Dryden's or Pope's in their satires. Both Fielding and Austen, having earlier written parodies of books they were impelled to expose through unmitigated satire, sought in their first attempts to produce an independently real prose fiction to provide a substitute for rather than merely an attack upon their favorite victims. So, while *Joseph Andrews* and *Northanger Abbey* begin as satiric parasites on the literature they are "answering," after their introductory quasi-parodic chapters they abruptly drop any strong suggestion of specific literary burlesque. Thus they criticize the falsity of the conventions they are reacting against not by exaggerating those conventions to the point of ridiculous absurdity, but by placing them in a more ample context. This essentially novelistic method is the reverse of that of satire: the former dissolves absurdity, the latter magnifies it. But, interestingly enough, both *Joseph Andrews* and *Northanger Abbey* after having apparently dropped the structurally satiric strategy of the early chapters reactivate that strategy at later points in the narrative—in *Joseph Andrews* in the late chapters wherein Pamela and her Squire are brought on stage, and in *Northanger Abbey* both in the Abbey section and at the very end of the novel. In both books, the writer attempts to incorporate within the world of the novel the world of satire as well. And, most interestingly, both Fielding and Austen in the way they manage the endings of their novels imply that even a "novel" which dissolves delusion is, after all, itself only an illusion.

III

All readers of *Northanger Abbey* sense in the chapters set at the Abbey a radical shift in fictional strategy. By critics they are usually taken with the first two chapters as relatively autonomous interludes of satiric
burlesque or parody. So Austen's latest book-length critic, A. Walton Litz, regards them [in Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development, 1965] as "detachable units" which are "mainly devoted to literary burlesque and parody." He suspects that they "may not have been a part of Jane Austen's original plan," but suggests that as a "subplot" they nevertheless do illuminate "Catherine's general action and behavior." In short, they are non-essential and at best tangential to the "real" action but not wholly useless as an indirect comment upon it.

Without denying their manifest differences in technique, one can still make a case for the structural coherence of the Abbey chapters (in the standard Chapman edition, V to X of Volume II). It is not too much to say that they along with the first two chapters and the final chapter form an integral part of the complex design which is the entire book. Indeed it would be strange (and probably disastrous) if the structural beginning, virtual middle, and ending of a narrative were irrelevant to the main action or merely a subplot.

*Northanger Abbey* is an illusion about illusion and delusion, a book about life not being a book about life. Its alternation of fictional strategies is an appropriate manner of presenting its action, for that action is itself a paradox. Chapters I and II are primarily a satiric attack upon the expectations of many late-eighteenth-century novel-readers—the sort who might be expected eagerly to pick up a book titled *Northanger Abbey*. They serve to disillusion the reader about the "real" nature of the characters introduced, especially Catherine. They do not so much, therefore, create an independent (or novelistic) illusion as destroy a delusion. In the Bath chapters which follow, an independent (i.e., novelistic or "real") illusion is initiated—which is concerned with Catherine's "real" but false illusions (i.e., delusions). After the disillusioning satire of the first chapters, the reader can easily recognize many of Catherine's controlling illusions as delusions: as Catherine becomes deluded (by becoming an avid Gothic novel reader and a victim of Isabella's meretricious sentimentalism), the reader himself becomes more confirmed in his powers of understanding and classifying illusion and delusion. The Abbey section is functionally important because it turns the tables on the too-secure reader. Thus it is not so much a satiric attack on the sentimentalist or the Gothic novel or even on Catherine's acuity (which have already been discredited), as a means of challenging the reader's overly facile distinctions between illusions and delusions.

Catherine departs from Bath, with the Tilney family, in Chapter V of Volume II. During the trip to Northanger Abbey, Henry takes the opportunity to tease Catherine about what terrifying experiences her reading must lead her to expect. His lengthy parodic account of all that Catherine can only too easily imagine ("Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful!—This is just like a book!"), analogous to his ironic quizzing of Catherine's sentiments during their first conversation at Bath, allows the reader to laugh with Henry at Catherine's credulity. Although Henry's conversation with Catherine takes up most of Chapter V, we are also kept aware of General Tilney, who Henry himself never talks of. Significantly, early in the chapter we are told that "General Tilney, though so charming a man, seemed always a check upon his children's spirits, and scarcely any thing was said but by himself; the observation of which, with his discontent at whatever the inn afforded, and his angry impatience at the waiters, made Catherine grow every moment more in awe of him. . . . " For some unexplained reason, he never does come within range of Henry's parodic predictions.

While Catherine is at the Abbey her two main adventures are discovering a laundry list and finding out the facts of Mrs. Tilney's death. The first is pure comedy, again operating at the expense of Catherine's credulity. Prepared by the two opening satiric chapters of Volume I and by Henry's patently ironic forecast, we are not ourselves drawn closely into Catherine's subjective emotions but rather await the comic explanation which we sense must somehow follow. And it does. What Austen effects in her handling of Catherine's first adventure, then, is not so much a satiric attack upon Gothic novels as much as a good-natured comic *exposé* of the overly sympathetic imagination which makes such novels a substitute for actual life.

For several reasons Catherine's second adventure is considerably different. To begin with, its main stimulant, General Tilney, has been throughout the book thus far an enigmatic and rather foreboding figure. The fact that
in following Catherine's first adventure we could depend on Henry's ironic anticipatory account to put everything in a comic light now works against us, for Henry has never made his father either the subject or object of his irony. The General's peremptory manner and genuinely unpleasant behavior remain quite outside the range of burlesque diminution. Also, the main concern of this adventure, Mrs. Tilney's death, is unquestionably real: here our starting-point is not merely the projection of an obviously overactive imagination. A real death from unexplained causes is naturally more a subject for our concern than imaginary trap-doors. Furthermore, Austen never quite dissolves this second adventure in a comic or satiric solution. The suspense is maintained over several chapters, the reader waiting less assuredly than in the preceding adventure for some development to remove what is less certainly subjective delusion. Finally when an explanation is forthcoming, from Henry, it is not entirely satisfying to us although it seems to be to Catherine. Since our reaction to Henry's revelation of the "facts" is subtly controlled by the tone Austen employs, we must read very carefully the last paragraphs of Chapter IX.

After being told the medical causes of his mother's death, Catherine asks: "But your father . . . was he afflicted?" Henry, who had spoken at length of his own and his sister's reactions but had neglected any reference to his father's, responds:

"For a time, greatly so. You have erred in supposing him not attached to her. He loved her, I am persuaded, as well as it was possible for him to—We have not all, you know, the same tenderness of disposition—and I will not pretend to say that while she lived, she might not often have had much to bear, but though his temper injured her, his judgment never did. His value of her was sincere; and, if not permanently, he was truly afflicted by her death." (Italics added.)

While apparently endeavoring to vindicate his father, Henry through his careful qualifications and deviously negative and double negative circumlocutions actually raises more questions than he answers. The net result of Henry's ambivalent protestations is to make the General perhaps even more sinister than before.

After Catherine interjects "I am very glad of it . . . it would have been very shocking!", Henry replies:

"If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetuated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?"

They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room.

There is in this speech by Henry a disquieting ironic note. The initial artificially, open-mouthed histrionic sentence; the uncomfortably emphatic and complacent assertion "Remember that we are English, that we are Christians"; the somehow too bland to be innocent phrasing of the rhetorical questions; the sudden intrusion of "where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies" at the end of an implied general accolade of English society, which of course would never countenance the least unpleasant deed; the fact that Henry himself does not directly answer all our questions about General Tilney but instead falls back on a calculated rhetorical performance to shame "Dear Miss Morland" (who was already probably blushing at the possible attribution of "voluntary spies" to herself)—all these things leave us uncertain in our response.
Catherine has been satisfied, but are we not impelled to respond to each of Henry's unanswered questions, "Yes, it can happen here."

Our unsettled reaction at the end of Chapter IX is reinforced by the fact that the first and second Abbey adventures seem to have operated at cross-purposes. The first was essentially comic, and for its duration we remained amused spectators. The second has taken advantage of our false psychological security, as Henry's irony as it were turns against us, making us feel that the "delusion" he makes Catherine reject may not have been so clearly and completely explained away after all. Whereas the first adventure confirmed our presuppositions, the second has unexpectedly subverted them.

IV

Chapter X begins: "The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened." Now, presumably, we will leave the twilight Gothic world of the last several chapters to resume existence in the daylight of a more familiar novelistic world. As for Catherine, "her thoughts being still chiefly fixed on what she had with such causeless terror felt and done, nothing could be clearer, than that it had all been a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling circumstance receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and every thing forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before he entered the Abbey, had been craving to be frightened." With respect to General Tilney she did not now "fear to acknowledge some actual specks" in his character, and, indeed, was forced to conclude him "to be not perfectly amiable." However, all the "grossly injurious suspicions" she once entertained were now revealed as completely preposterous. Catherine's sense of enlightenment is ironically undercut by the amused detachment of the narrator: "Her mind made up on these several points, and her resolution formed, of always judging and acting in the future with the greatest good sense, she had nothing to do but to forgive herself and be happier than ever. . . ."

Unbeknownst to Catherine, her real disillusionment has not yet begun, for there is to occur shortly the discovery of Isabella's true nature, the expulsion from the Tilney family circle, and the apparently senseless persecution by the motivelessly malignant General Tilney. In short, Catherine must learn that there is more to life than being able to tell the difference between it and books. Consequently, during Catherine's last night at the Abbey "her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion; and though the wind was high, and often produced strange and sudden noises throughout the house, she heard it all as she lay awake, hour after hour, without curiosity or terror."

With the narrative on the verge of becoming now a psychological novel, the narrator, in Chapter XIV, once again surprises us with a radical alteration in technique. Entering the narration quite self-consciously in the first-person as "the author," she manages to strike a delicate balance between empathy with and humorous detachment from her heroine. So, in a manner which must remind us of Fielding, she describes Catherine's return home:

A heroine returning, at the close of her career, to her native village, in all the triumph of recovered reputation, and all the dignity of a countess, with a long train of noble relations in their several phaetons, and three waiting-maids in a travelling chaise-and-four, behind her, is an event on which the pen of the contriver may well delight to dwell; it gives credit to every conclusion, and the author must share in the glory she so liberally bestows.—But my affair is widely different; I bring my heroine to her home in solitude and disgrace; and no sweet elation of spirits can lead me into minuteness. A heroine in a hack post-chaise, is such a blow upon sentiment, as no attempt at grandeur or pathos can withstand. Swiftly therefore shall her postboy drive through the village, amid the gaze of Sunday groups, and speedy shall be her descent from it.
But, whatever might be the distress of Catherine's mind, as thus she advanced towards the Parsonage, and whatever the humiliation of her biographer in relating it, she was preparing enjoyment of no every-day nature for those to whom she went; first, in the appearance of her carriage—and secondly, in herself. . . .

By this combination of pathos and comedy the reader is prevented, on the one hand, from entering too closely into the experience as it might have been felt internally by Catherine, and, on the other hand, from regarding Catherine merely as a comic victim. We are placed, then, neither in the usual world of the novel nor in the usual world of satire, but rather in an ambivalent world compounded of both.

In the last chapter, XV, the narrator as first-person author ever more and more openly asserts not only her presence in but her absolute control of the action. The book becomes her creation, its entire illusion dependent on her will. General Tilney as if by magic (the "novelistic" explanation offered is hardly convincing) reverses himself, and with all obstacles blocking their happiness providentially removed (the narrator acknowledges matters must be handled with dispatch, for she is running out of pages), the lovers can look forward to interminable bliss. But the narrator herself is not so uncritically empathetic:

To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen, is to do pretty well; and professing myself moreover convinced, that the General's unjust interference, so far from being injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience.

The book thus ends by denying the autonomy of the illusion it has presented, as in a Prospero-like closing gesture the narrator disperses the creatures of her imagination and the world they inhabit.

Those who object to the inconsistency of technique and structure in Northanger Abbey as well as those who reduce it to a univocal form have missed the main point of what they have read. Austen is writing what is not simply a novel or a satire, a burlesque or a parody, a comedy or a tragedy, a romance or an anti-romance. She is, rather, combining elements of all these in such a fashion as to make us aware of the paradoxical nature of all illusion—even those illusions by which we master illusion.

**Criticism: A. Walton Litz (essay date 1965)**


*In the following excerpt, Litz examines complexity of theme and uneveness of narrative technique in Northanger Abbey.*

Viewed as a whole, Northanger Abbey is certainly the earliest of Jane Austen's major works. Although it was begun in 1798 after the first drafts of Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice had been written, both of these novels underwent radical revision shortly before their publication in 1811 and 1813, while Jane Austen's Advertisement to Northanger Abbey states that it was "finished in the year 1803." There is some possibility that the novel was touched up after 1803, but these revisions could not have been extensive; and we are justified in taking Northanger Abbey as the only major work that was completely a product of the first half of Jane Austen's career. Certainly all the evidence of style and narrative method points toward an early date: many of the characters are two-dimensional, and Jane Austen never seems quite sure of her relationship to Henry Tilney. She frequently allows him to usurp her authority, to voice her judgments and wield her irony,
and the result is considerable ambiguity concerning her attitude toward the novel's "hero." But if Northanger Abbey lacks the narrative sophistication of the later works it does not lack their complexity of theme, and it would be a mistake to think that Jane Austen is manipulating a straightforward contrast between Gothic nonsense and "the common feelings of common life." If she started out to expose the absurdities of Gothic fiction she ended by exposing much more, and any analysis of Northanger Abbey must begin with an examination of the relation between the subplot (Catherine's reading of Gothic novels and its impact on her behavior) and the work's main action. For in learning to handle the fictions of the Gothic world Catherine comes to recognize the other fictions which haunt her life.

A close reading of the subplot in Northanger Abbey suggests that it may not have been a part of Jane Austen's original plan. The chapters devoted mainly to literary burlesque and parody (I-II, XX-XXV) form detachable units, and the other references to Gothic fiction and Catherine's role as a "heroine" could easily have been inserted into the original story of Catherine's entrance into the world. But whether the subplot developed as part of the author's original intention, or whether it was added later to reinforce the main action, the artistic impact is the same; and the Gothic elements are a brilliant commentary on Catherine's general character and behavior.

The era of the Gothic novel's greatest popularity was amazingly brief: it began in the early 1790's, reached its peak with the publication of The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) and The Monk (1796), and started to decline shortly after the publication of Mrs. Radcliffe's The Italian in 1797. One of the first signs of this decline in popularity was the appearance of a series of burlesques and satires, ranging from The Rovers (a four-act burlesque in the Anti-Jacobin for 1798) through Maria Edgeworth's Angelina (1801) to E. S. Barrett's The Heroine (1813). Although Northanger Abbey was not published until six months after its author's death in 1817, and Jane Austen had felt compelled in 1816 to apologize for "those parts of the work which thirteen years have made comparatively obsolete," at the time of the first draft Northanger Abbey was a pioneer criticism of the Gothic form, once more demonstrating Jane Austen's extraordinary grasp of current literary trends and opinions. She was always among the first to recognize the decay of a literary form, and to see in the lifeless conventions a field for irony. In Northanger Abbey she could write a recipe for the conventional "heroine," and then invert this formula to produce her Catherine, simply because the average Gothic fiction had become a standard mixture of familiar ingredients. The Magasin encyclopédique for 1797 printed the following "Recipe " for "a good mixture of shudders and fright, in three volumes":

An old castle, half of it crumbling down,
A long corridor, with numerous doors many of which must be hidden,
Three corpses still weltering in their blood,
Three skeletons carefully wrapped up,
An old woman hanged, stabbed several times in her throat,
Robbers and ruffians galore,
A sufficient dose of whispers, stifled moans and frightful din.

All those ingredients well mixed and divided into three parts or volumes give an excellent mixture which all those who have no black blood may take just before going to bed while having their baths. They will feel all the better for it. Probatum est.

The impossibility of locating a single "source" for the Gothic elements in Northanger Abbey testifies to this standardization of the form: Mary Lascelles finds in Catherine's behavior a point-by-point inversion of the career of Charlotte Smith's Emmeline, while C. L. Thomson believes that Jane Austen's model was the heroine of Udolpho. Actually Catherine Morland is a mirror-image of the "standard" heroine, and the burlesque of Northanger Abbey depends in large measure on the virtual identity of all the Gothic heroines. Jane Austen's target was the form in general, not any particular thriller. We should remember that the Gothic novel was not a completely separate genre but rather an extension of the novel of sensibility, and that in the
midst of the Black Forest or on the mountains of Sicily the stale conventions of sensibility still held true. In fact the terrors of the Gothic world were evoked in response to a need for situations that would work on the heroine's sensibility with greater violence than any to be met in the life of the Home Counties. German horror, anti-clericalism, and the native English graveyard tradition were all welded upon the novel of sensibility to produce the Gothic fiction of the 1790's. In his fine essay on "The Northanger Novels," Michael Sadleir has shown [in The Northanger Novels, 1927] that Jane Austen was well read in this fiction, and keenly aware of the two divergent "schools": that of Monk Lewis, violent, revolutionary, shocking; and that of Mrs. Radcliffe, where the titillation of the audience depends not so much on the quality of the horrors as on the contrast between the secure world of the reader and the perilous world of the fiction. As we shall see later, Jane Austen is primarily interested in the Gothicism of Mrs. Radcliffe, although she fairly divides Isabella's list of horrid fiction between the two schools.

It is important to place Northanger Abbey as part of a general reaction against Gothic conventions, but it is more important to note the differences between Jane Austen's method and that of the other anti-Gothic satires. Typical of these is Barrett's The Heroine, which Jane Austen thought "a delightful burlesque, particularly on the Radcliffe style." In The Heroine the formula of the "Quixotic" novel is applied to the Gothic world; Barrett's heroine, her head stuffed with fictions, tries to impose her imaginary world on reality, and is continually rebuffed. But Jane Austen was too subtle to use this formula, which usually produced passages of broad burlesque alternating with obvious moralizing. Instead of creating a deluded young woman who considers herself a Gothic heroine forced to live in an alien environment, Jane Austen fashioned in Catherine Morland an "anti-heroine," whose early life is at every point the reverse of the classic heroine's; when Catherine is exposed to the influence of Gothic fiction she is not deluded into thinking herself a heroine, but rather into imagining that the world around her is inhabited by Gothic horrors. Thus she is never exposed to the charge of vanity or selfishness, and Jane Austen is able to use the Gothic subplot as a means of commenting on Catherine's education into reality. Of course there is a good deal of broad burlesque in Northanger Abbey, and some purely literary satire (especially in the Conclusion, where the gratuitous explanation for the origin of the laundry bills is a spoof on Mrs. Radcliffe's habit of relating every improbable event to "actuality"). But the "literary" interest in Northanger Abbey is much less than in the Juvenilia, and the Gothic motif is merely one movement—although an important one—in a complex drama of illusion and recognition.

I have said that although Jane Austen demonstrates a familiarity with both "schools" of Gothic fiction, her main concern is with that of Mrs. Radcliffe. This is because she plainly saw the complacency which underlay the form. Whereas Monk Lewis was dealing, however sensationally, with Byronic materials, and using Gothic devices to figure forth certain psychological truths, Mrs. Radcliffe deliberately fostered a sense of remoteness in her Gothic fictions. "She has uniformly selected the south of Europe for her place of action," said Scott, a locale where "passions, like the weeds of the climate, are supposed to attain portentous growth." When Catherine Morland compares Bath's Beechen Cliff with the "south of France"—much to the surprise of Henry Tilney—she is speaking from broad fictional knowledge. The appeal of the Radcliffean novel was founded on the contrast between the dangers of the heroine's life and the security of the reader's, between the violence of Sicily and the tranquillity of Twickenham. Jane Austen understood this appeal to vicarious emotion, and was determined to expose both its basic sentimentality and fundamental unreality. Not only does the reader of Radcliffean fiction get her emotions at second hand, she indulges in the comforting illusion that violent passions are confined to alien landscapes. As Lionel Trilling has suggested [in The Opposing Self, 1955], Catherine's belief in a violent and uncertain life lurking beneath the surface of English society is nearer the truth than the complacent conviction, shared by the readers of Mrs. Radcliffe, that life in the Home Counties is always sane and orderly. General Tilney's actual abuse of Catherine is as bad in its way as anything she had imagined, and her flight from Northanger Abbey, alone and outcast, is an event straight from the Gothic repertory. Jane Austen's irony is not directed at Catherine's sympathetic imagination, but at her misuse of it; and the novel's deepest criticism is reserved for the average reader's complacent reaction to the exposure of Catherine's "folly." Those who read Northanger Abbey as a straightforward drama in which Sense conquers
Sensibility, and the disordered Imagination is put to flight by Reason, are neglecting the novel's ultimate irony.

A good example of Jane Austen's subtle handling of illusion and reality may be found in the scene where Henry Tilney exploits Catherine's innocent remark that "something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London." Eleanor Tilney has misunderstood Catherine's reference to the publication of a new "horrid" novel, and fears that some social "riot" is threatened. At this point Henry adjudicates:

"My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. The confusion there is scandalous. Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern—do you understand?—And you, Miss Morland—my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London—and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields: the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons, (the hopes of the nation,) called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the gallant Capt. Frederick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window. Forgive her stupidity. The fears of the sister have added to the weakness of the woman; but she is by no means a simpleton in general."

On the surface this appears to be a lively and reasonable rebuke of Eleanor's borrowed terrors; the riot which Henry describes so graphically seems absurd and unreal against the quiet background of Bath society. But in fact Henry is constructing his imaginary disaster out of the actual details of the 1780 Gordon Riots, and the burden of the passage is not the comforting assurance that "it can't happen here." The ironies of this misunderstanding are directed at complacent sense as well as exaggerated sensibility, and the entire scene prefigures the time when Catherine's imaginary horrors at Northanger Abbey will yield to the real terrors of life.

When Henry Tilney discovers Catherine outside his mother's room, and learns of her suspicion that General Tilney murdered her, his first words are those of triumphant common-sense:

"Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?"

So far Henry's rebuke reflects the assumptions of the average reader, an easy assurance that Gothic horror is alien to eighteenth-century England. But, as D. W. Harding has shrewdly observed [in Scrutiny VIII (March, 1940)], Henry's remarks gradually take on a more intricate meaning.

"Could they [such atrocities] be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?"

Gothic violence is not impossible in English society, only repressed and rigidly controlled, and "a neighborhood of spies" is hardly the description of an idyllic society. Jane Austen might have said, with
Henry James, "I have the imagination of disaster—and see life as ferocious and sinister." Her criticism of Catherine's imagination is not that it is ridiculous or dangerous per se, but that it is uncontrolled by judgment. When the "alarms of romance" give way to the "anxieties of common life" at Northanger, these anxieties are not less intense because of their foundation in probability; indeed, they are "mournfully superior in reality and substance." And when Catherine learns the true motives for General Tilney's outrageous behavior, she feels "that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty." Jane Austen records this emotion with an irony which does not entirely invalidate it.

In the "Recipe " for a Gothic novel quoted earlier in this chapter the *Magasin encyclopédique* describes the formula as an excellent tonic for readers to take "just before going to bed while having their baths," and this is a perceptive observation on the sentimental bracketing of remote horrors and immediate comforts which characterized the Gothic craze. Like Byron and Monk Lewis, Jane Austen knew that the reader's feeling of cozy security was an illusion, and that the ridiculousness of the average Gothic fiction lay in its sentimentality and improbability, not in the emotions which it presented in debased form. Kenneth Clark has said [in *The Gothic Revival*, 1950] that "every Romantic style reflects the daydream of its creators," a daydream which is, "in some measure, complementary to the real world."

"With you, it is not. How is such a one likely to be influenced? What is the inducement most likely to act upon such a person's feelings, age, situation, and probable habits of life considered?—but, how should I be influenced, what would be my inducement in acting so and so?"

Now it seems clear that Jane Austen, in her life and in her art, was an admirer of the sympathetic imagination. It is the faculty which sweetens Catherine's character, the main source of Henry's affection. But Jane Austen also knew how easily such sympathy can be duped or deluded, and in *Northanger Abbey* she dramatized the dangers of uncontrolled sympathy. When untempered by judgment and reason the sympathetic imagination leads Catherine to her naïve mistakes in assessing both situation and character. Her projection of Gothic motives into the life at Northanger, and her misunderstanding of Isabella's nature, result from uncritical acceptance of fictions: in the one case the fictions of art are taken as reality, in the other the fictions of outward appearance are mistaken for the substance of character. The sympathetic imagination must be regulated; this is the sum of Catherine's education. She is cured of her illusions by being initiated into the real world, which is neither more nor less fierce than the fictional world, only different. In *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen explored a problem to which she would return again and again, the problem of accommodating reason and feeling, of regulating sympathy without destroying it.
Stated in the abstract, the leading themes of Northanger Abbey sound as rich and subtle as those of Jane Austen's later works; but when we encounter them in the novel we find that their expression is hampered by lapses in tone and curious shifts in narrative method. We can isolate in Northanger Abbey most of the techniques that mark Jane Austen's greatest fiction, but they never coalesce into a satisfactory whole. What we miss is that sense of a controlling attitude which is part of the "atmosphere" in Pride and Prejudice or Emma. It is not that Jane Austen has difficulty in keeping herself out of the novel in Northanger Abbey—to say that would be to judge the work by the standards of a different kind of fiction. The real problem is inconsistency: some passages point forward to the dramatic ironies of the mature works, while others revert to the cruder methods of the Juvenilia. Typical of the latter is the famous "defence" of novel-reading in Chapter V:

.. . I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. . . . "And what are you reading, Miss ?" "Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.—"It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;" or, in short, 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. Now, had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the Spectator, instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name; though the chances must be against her being occupied by any part of that voluminous publication, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste: the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation, which no longer concern any one living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it.

This is not a simple passage; although Jane Austen is obviously serious in attacking the craven attitudes of contemporary novelists and their readers, she cannot resist the protective irony of overstatement. What is jarring about the passage is the intrusion of the author after we have come to accept Henry Tilney as her spokesman. Henry's attitudes merge with those of his creator on so many occasions that we are disturbed when she speaks to us directly, or when Henry is suddenly subjected to her irony. All this is but to say that Jane Austen was experimenting in Northanger Abbey with several narrative methods she had not fully mastered, and the result is a lack of consistency in viewpoint. From time to time she confines our knowledge to Catherine's horizons, using her heroine as a "center of consciousness," but Catherine's lack of introspection prevents any consistent use of this technique. The most sophisticated sections of the novel, and those that remind us most strongly of the later novels, are the dramatic exchanges where Jane Austen allows a character to expose his own nature through word and gesture.

Chapter XVIII provides a superb example of Jane Austen's command of dramatic action. Here she confines herself to dialogue between Catherine and Isabella, to simple description, and to recording Catherine's naïve reactions; the author scarcely intrudes upon the scene, and our awareness of Isabella's changing opinions is derived entirely from her conversation. The opening sequence of action and dialogue—Isabella's choice of an "out of the way" bench which commands the whole room, her anxious glances, her indifference to James's possible appearance—is a clear indication to the reader of her changing attitudes. Her familiar reference to "Tilney" (in contrast with Catherine's "Mr. Tilney") confirms her new interest in him. And when Catherine, after disclaiming any special affection for John Thorpe, comforts Isabella with the reminder: "And, you know, we shall still be sisters," Isabella replies in a manner which makes her ambition obvious to the reader, if not to
Catherine: "Yes, yes," (with a blush) "there are more ways than one of our being sisters.—But where am I wandering to?" Isabella's conversation then dwells on the fickleness of young opinion, culminating in a quotation from Captain Tilney on the subject: "Tilney says, there is nothing people are so often deceived in, as the state of their own affections . . . " At this point Captain Tilney enters the room, and his whispered exchange with Isabella makes the situation clear to all but Catherine, who evolves the naïve theory that Isabella is "unconsciously" encouraging Captain Tilney. The chapter ends with a fine passage in which Jane Austen records Catherine's troubled reactions to the scene she has just witnessed.

It seemed to her that Captain Tilney was falling in love with Isabella, and Isabella unconsciously encouraging him; unconsciously it must be, for Isabella's attachment to James was as certain and well acknowledged as her engagement. To doubt her truth or good intentions was impossible; and yet, during the whole of their conversation her manner had been odd. She wished Isabella had talked more like her usual self, and not so much about money; and had not looked so well pleased at the sight of Captain Tilney. How strange that she should not perceive his admiration! Catherine longed to give her a hint of it, to put her on her guard, and prevent all the pain which her too lively behaviour might otherwise create both for him and her brother.

The compliment of John Thorpe's affection did not make amends for this thoughtlessness in his sister. . . . Isabella talked of his attentions; she had never been sensible of any; but Isabella had said many things which she hoped had been spoken in haste, and would never be said again; and upon this she was glad to rest altogether for present ease and comfort.

In this chapter we see Jane Austen moving toward that easy balance of dramatic action and psychological exposition—Henry James's "scene" and "picture"—which was to become the hallmark of her greatest fiction. Long before the reader comes to the sotto voce exchange between Isabella and Captain Tilney he is aware of the relationship which has developed between the two since their meeting at the dance, but Jane Austen has been careful to communicate this knowledge only through action and dialogue. Her own voice has been reserved for the recording of Catherine's naïve opinions, leaving the reader free to interpret the scene's dramatic irony. We are hardly conscious of Jane Austen's presence, yet she has retained control over our developing awareness. Such a complex method combines the effects of dramatic irony with the privilege of psychological interpretation, and allows us to regard the action both from Catherine's limited point-of-view and the author's omniscient perspective. But before this method could be confidently pursued on a large scale Jane Austen had to solve the structural problems that confronted her in Northanger Abbey and, more acutely, in Sense and Sensibility. . . .

Criticism: Sheridan Baker (essay date 1965)


[In the following essay, Baker describes Austen's ironic use of self-delusion in Northanger Abbey.]

Northanger Abbey, the third written but least revised and hence most pristine of Jane Austen's early novels, has not lacked admirers. Indeed, Andrew Wright, John K. Mathison, Alan D. McKillop, and Henrietta Ten Harmsel have led us progressively to see the dimensions of realism and validity within the novel's burlesque of Gothic romance. But there is still room, I believe, to emphasize the extent to which Jane Austen uses romance itself not merely as a comic delusion from which a young girl grows awake, but as a central symbol of one of the most persistent realities of life: the inescapable comic and ironic propensity of the human mind to delude itself.
All of us have tended to think of Jane Austen's Gothic burlesque as having a certain youthful exuberance that would have evaporated into the broader comic landscape had Miss Austen revised *Northanger Abbey* as thoroughly as she did *Sense and Sensibility*. [In *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad*, edited by Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr., 1958] McKillop considers the Gothic business a "breach [in] imaginative continuity," and even Miss Ten Harmsel, who [in her dissertation, *Jane Austen's Use of Literary Conventions*, 1962] sees the Gothic burlesque as "chiefly redeemed from its apparent extraneousness" by its central educating of Catherine, finds the final Gothic step of education "perhaps an indefensibly emphatic one," and feels that the burlesque "at times endangers the artistic unity," although Miss Austen demonstrates her mastery by achieving a real novel after all. Jane Austen's own brief prefatory paragraph, of course, apologizes for "Those parts of the work which thirteen years have made comparatively obsolete." But my enthusiasm for *Northanger Abbey* urges me to believe that the mature Jane Austen, even ill and depressed, valued the Gothic portions for their power to burlesque not only superficial fiction but man himself, because of those continual fictions that are part of his mental reality. Mary Lascelles points out [in *Jane Austen and Her Art*, 1939] that Jane Austen's interest in burlesque had revived in her last years with her satirical "plan of a novel," her niece's impromptu oral burlesquing of novels for her amusement, and her enjoyment of E. S. Barrett's burlesque novel, *The Heroine* (read in 1814). I believe that she kept the Gothic portions, for the modification of which she had had ample opportunity both on the manuscript retrieved from her unpublishing publisher and on the copy she had kept in her possession, precisely because of their centrality to her whole comedy of illusion, the comedy she saw within the very process of fiction, in man as an essentially romancing and fiction-making creature.

The line I wish to strengthen is that indicated by Wright (though he sees the parody as something slightly apart, and oddly believes that "irony is not central to the story") when he says [in *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure*, 1953] that *Northanger Abbey* moves beyond "good sense" to the deeper illustration of its inadequacies. This line is extended by Miss Ten Harmsel when she sees Austen's "ironic reversal of the apparent burlesque" that "touches upon essential relationships between life and literature and provides a lasting insight into life itself; and by Lionel Trilling and Mathison, whom Miss Ten Harmsel quotes. Trilling makes the essential point:

Catherine Moreland, having become addicted to novels of terror, has accepted their inadmissible premise, she believes that life is violent and unpredictable. And that is exactly what life is shown to be by the events of the story: it is we who must be disabused of our belief that life is sane and orderly.

Mathison underlines it; the Gothic novels are precisely what have educated Catherine to the possibilities of evil in the world beyond her country village and innocent years: "The forms of cruelty and violence in the Gothic novels were unreal, but cruelty and violence do exist in the well-ordered society of the English midlands." The Gothic burlesque, then, is the very means whereby the reader is drawn into the comedy of human illusions that runs throughout the book.

In having Catherine read a romance and then misjudge life from her reading, Jane Austen is following a line of 18th-century comedy, both in the novel and in the theater, that goes directly back to Cervantes and *Don Quixote*. Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* had popularized the idea in England—the idea of having a person comically misjudge reality from the reading of too many books. Jane Austen, too, is writing what Fielding called a "comic romance." But even before Fielding, the girl who reads romances and misjudges life from her romantic ideas had appeared on the English stage and was to become a stock comic figure. Catherine Morland comes from a long line of romance-reading girls with their comic mistakes about reality, and perhaps the most important point here is that Jane Austen's readers would recognize the type, and that Jane Austen was working with a general expectation, almost a general literary convention: introduce a young girl who reads romances, in other words, and everyone is alert for comic mistakes about the way life really is.
But what Jane Austen does with Catherine's comic mistakes about reality is a new, surprising, and refreshing step beyond the convention, beyond the usual expectation. The conventional romance-reading heroine is simply comically wrong about reality. Catherine Morland is also comically right about romance. Jane Austen, by whatever instinct or genius, reaches the same comic depth that Cervantes had reached in his own burlesque of romance, showing that reality and romance are both wrong, because each is only part of the whole truth, and, similarly, that reality and romance are both right.

*Northanger Abbey* becomes a comedy of human illusions, demonstrating in effect that not only Catherine, but most people, misjudge the world by their own illusions. It is the comedy of general human imperception, and the final joke is on the reader's own imperceptions themselves, since we and Jane Austen's audience of the time expect that Catherine's romantic illusions will simply prove wrong. The final joke is in their proving essentially right: her reading of romances has led her to think that General Tilney is a villain; and he indeed proves to be one, not in the way in which she had imagined, of course, but his character is just about as violent and selfish as her romantic imaginings have led her to believe.

Jane Austen has been playing with the reader, in other words, first fulfilling our expectations that Catherine's romancing will prove comically wrong and then tricking us at last, and humbling our pride in thinking that we can outguess the story and that we know what is *really* going on, by showing that we too have our illusions. This is an example of Jane Austen's constant irony, what Miss Ten Harmsel has also called her central irony—this comic teasing and outmaneuvering of our expectations. It is a feminine refinement of Cervantes, really; it shows us that our ideas of reality and practicality are partly right and partly wrong, and that our romantic illusions have a certain validity, even within their practical falseness. We all have our illusions and our myopias, she seems to say, and perhaps the youthful daydreams of romance are the least harmful after all.

Perhaps the most delicious illustration of the persistence of romance within the knowledge of reality is Catherine's awakening from her romantic fears that General Tilney had either murdered his wife or kept her immured somewhere in the Abbey, sustained only by "a nightly supply of coarse food." She does learn from romances her most important lesson, as Mathison [in *English Literary History* XXIV, 1957] and Miss Ten Harmsel point out—that good and evil are mixed in human beings. But Miss Austen has outmaneuvered even these two astute scholars—and even Mary Lascelles, who also quotes some of the crucial passage below as evidence of Catherine's cure—for even this truth is sustained in comic irony. Catherine cannot give up all of her illusions. And Jane Austen is partly ironic as she opens her chapter with "The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened." These are indeed Catherine's opinions of herself, as summarized by the author, for we see immediately that Catherine's awakening is by no means complete. The irony, indeed, is threefold, first in having Catherine persist in some of her illusions about romantic places, then in having the truth about good and bad seem amusingly youthful and pat, hence still slightly comic in its confident imperception, and finally in tinging even her accurate and romantically induced estimate of General Tilney with defensive rationalization. In the following paragraph, I underline some of Catherine's rationalized concessions and affirmations, which show her thoughts still comically surrounded with romance as she faces reality—the more amusing for her little English chauvinisms, and for the fact that she is repeating the substance of Henry's scolding as if it were her own original thinking.

Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for. Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation; and Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France, might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented. Catherine dared not doubt beyond her own country, and of even that, if hard pressed, would have yielded the northern and western extremities. But in the central part of England. . . . Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not as spotless as an angel, might have the dispositions of a fiend. But in England it was not so; among the
English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad. Upon this conviction, she would not be surprised if even in Henry and Eleanor Tilney, some slight imperfection might hereafter appear; and upon this conviction she need not fear to acknowledge some actual specks in the character of their father, who, though cleared from the grossly injurious suspicions which she must ever blush to have entertained, she did believe, upon serious consideration, to be not perfectly amiable.

Here is Jane Austen's central comedy of the mind's subtle self-deceptions. It is central to Elizabeth Bennet's partly true and partly false "first impressions," and to Emma's romance-induced fantasy about Harriet's noble parentage. The center of Jane Austen's ironic art is precisely this subtle exhibit of the play between illusion and reality as she paraphrases her heroines' thoughts in such a way as to set even their true perceptions comically within a context of partial illusion. The paraphrase of thought is the secret of Jane Austen's best irony—no one, not even Wayne Booth in his superb Rhetoric of Fiction, seems yet to have seen that her secret is in her paraphrasing, although Wright is considering the phenomenon in what he calls "interior disclosures"—for she can insert a guiding irony of her own, as with "fruitful in horrors," as she tells us in her own voice what her heroine is saying to herself, now giving us her heroine's inner words directly, now rising to a swift, ironic summary, which deftly illuminates the imperceptions and the dramatic ironies. She can thus turn even true knowledge comic (Catherine's discovery that good and bad are mixed in people), making it another comic illustration of what perpetual and endearing fools these mortals be, by having it remain too youthful and simple, and having the discoverer's pride in her new knowledge blind her to its over-simplicity. The mind itself is an essentially amusing irony, Jane Austen shows, because even its truest perceptions are limited within the broader context of all knowledge, while the perceiver takes them for infinite wisdom itself. This broad context of some implied totality of wisdom is what gives Jane Austen's irony its power, as each particular truth becomes a gently comic part of the perpetual romance each ego plays to its own illusionary audience.

Thus the cohesion of romance and reality in Northanger Abbey and hence the unity of the book itself comes not only through Catherine's comic mental synthesis of the two. It comes from all of the characters, so realistically portrayed, as they exhibit this favorite of Jane Austen's ironies: that illusions, what we might call "romancing," are one of the realities of life. First, there is Mrs. Allen, who lives in a constant daydream of clothes, who cannot see the reality of Catherine's unhappiness in their first days at Bath, who merely wishes that some friends will turn up, who cannot advise her about the Thorpes, because of her constant illusion of silks and cambrics and gloves and hats. Then her friend Mrs. Thorpe, apparently a slightly more devious personality, but doing no more than any parent in her circumstances, that is, trying to marry off her children well. Her illusion is the excellence and goodness of her children. Between Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Thorpe, Jane Austen develops a glimpse of the comedy of illusion worthy of Laurence Sterne (whom Jane Austen mentions early in the book): Mrs. Allen is " . . . never satisfied with the day unless she spent the chief of it by the side of Mrs. Thorpe, in what they called conversation, but in which there was scarcely ever any exchange of opinion, and not often any resemblance of subject, for Mrs. Thorpe talked chiefly of her children, and Mrs. Allen of her gowns." Or again, Mr. Allen is objecting to the idea of young men and women driving around the country in open carriages, objecting on the grounds of custom and propriety, and thinking about his responsibility to Catherine's parents to guard her conduct. He ends by saying this: "Mrs. Allen, are not you of my way of thinking? Do not you think these kind of projects objectionable?"

"Yes, very much so indeed [Mrs. Allen replies]. Open carriages are nasty things. A clean gown is not five minutes wear in them. You are splashed getting in and out; and the wind takes your hair and your bonnet in every direction. I hate an open carriage myself." Mrs. Allen is trapped within her illusion—her daydream, her romance of clothing, in which all existence is reduced to seeing herself moving before admiring eyes in perpetually new frocks.
Isabella Thorpe is a more complex example of the private romance that each of us plays, with himself or herself as perpetual hero or heroine. Clothing, again, is one of the indications of superficiality. She is telling Catherine of how much she loves James Morland, Catherine's brother: "The very first day that Morland came to us last Christmas—the very first moment I beheld him—my heart was irrecoverably gone. I remember I wore my yellow gown, with my hair done up in braids. . . . " But Jane Austen also pins Isabella's superficiality and her self-deception in the very cliché's of romance, of which she, too, is a reader: "Had I command of millions, were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice"—"A cottage in some retired village would be ecstasy." Isabella constantly trims herself, in her mind's eye, to the romantic pattern, deluding not only Catherine but herself: "There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature. My attachments are always excessively strong." The evidence, of course, is all to the contrary. And although the evidence is before us, and indeed before Catherine, we do not see very soon that Isabella's motive in cultivating Catherine's friendship is to win marriage with Catherine's brother, whom Isabella, on her own brother's inflated estimate, thinks is very rich. Catherine never sees the full extent of the reality, and Isabella, in her final letter, cannot, herself, see herself or understand Catherine's personality, since Isabella assumes that she can still patch up her engagement with James in her old fluttery way. Isabella remains deluded and limited by her own interests, her own romance of herself, in which she plays all-conquering heroine in her daydreams. Jane Austen gives us only the outer evidence; but Isabella's remarks are constant reports from the continuous inner daydream.

John Thorpe is perhaps the book's best inner romancer. Again Jane Austen gives us only the outer evidence, in what he says and does. We get no transcription of his inner thoughts. But there can be no doubt that Thorpe plays for himself a constant little drama, with himself as the dashing young hero, the superb horseman, the superb man-about-town, the superb drinker, the superb ladykiller. Yet we see the reality with wonderfully comic clarity. He is stout, of middle height, ungraceful, with a plain face. And his horsemanship is well displayed when, after much warning of a wild and spirited horse, he tells the groom, with great importance, to let the horse's head go—and the horse starts off with the "quietest manner imaginable." Perhaps the most skillful and pleasantest touch of Jane Austen's plotting in this book is to use John Thorpe's unbookish romancing as the mover of the innocent Catherine's fortunes. Thorpe, playing his own private drama in his head for himself, boasts to General Tilney of how rich Catherine is because her supposed richness fits his private daydream. Furthermore, his picture of himself as a dashing young man, irresistible to women, prohibits him from seeing that he has not the remotest chance of winning Catherine's hand. His private romance makes her rich and him the conquering hero all at a stroke.

This, in turn, feeds General Tilney's own private daydream. He wants to marry his second son to a rich young woman. His son seems interested—so immediately, without further inquiry or thought, General Tilney cultivates Catherine's friendship and whisks the prize out of Thorpe's reach by inviting her to Northanger Abbey. And then when both Isabella's and John Thorpe's daydreams prove false, Thorpe, the habitual exaggerator and romancer, now disappointed and angry, tells General Tilney that Catherine's family is very poor and mere fortune hunters, denouncing them now in terms that, with fine comic irony, exactly describe himself and his own family: the Morlands, he says, are a family not respected in their own neighborhood, "aiming at a style of life which their fortune could not warrant; seeking to better themselves by wealthy connexions; a forward, bragging, scheming race." So the General in a fury sends Catherine away, and so also, when the reality of Catherine's wealth becomes known as not so bad as Thorpe had pictured it, the General can easily adjust his very limited and selfish views of life to accepting Catherine after all.

James Morland, Catherine's brother, has his own delusions—that Thorpe is a great fellow, and that Isabella is a wonderful woman. "Poor Thorpe," he says in his letter to Catherine, thinking that Thorpe will be disappointed in his sister's frivolity: "his honest heart would feel so much," he writes. And he ends with a pleasant despair in his being the tragically wounded lover, in the full innocence of dramatic irony, saying of Isabella, who has demonstrated her worthlessness for all to see: "I can never expect to know such another woman!" Similarly, Mrs. Morland, Catherine's mother, at the end of the book, cannot see that Catherine is
sick at heart from her disappointed love of Henry Tilney; so she recommends to Catherine a good moral essay from a magazine on how young girls should not acquire frivolous tastes.

The whole comedy of reality versus romance centers, of course, on Catherine; and the literary romances of Ann Radcliffe serve as the means of demonstration. Reality, of course, is essentially "seeing things as they really are" and romance is "seeing things as we wish them to be." Catherine's romancing is most healthily unselfish. She hardly thinks about herself at all. Consequently, though very naïve, she can learn to see things as they are. She is wrapped in fictitious adventures in haunted castles and abbeys; for a few moments at Northanger Abbey she imagines herself the adventurous heroine of a Gothic romance. But her character is absolutely honest and open and selfless and naïve. She has a saving common sense, and she swears in humility that she will never again pry into other people's affairs on the promptings of making some romantic discovery. Catherine, who seems to be the most romantically deluded person in the book, is really the most honest and undeluded. She has no illusions about herself; she hardly has thoughts about herself at all. Her open interest and pleasure in Henry Tilney's company is what attracts him to her. Her pleasure makes her eyes sparkle. She is really the soul of pleasant unillusioned young womanhood. She is far less "romantic" than Isabella and John Thorpe, whom we had taken as realists.

But Henry Tilney is the most realistic and the most unromantic person in the book. He has an amused penetration into human blindness and illusion that very nearly equals Jane Austen's own. As Wright says, he is "the only one of Jane Austen's heroes who shares her ironic viewpoint, the only one who ever threatens the primacy of a heroine," although Frank Churchill eventually reveals a very similar Austen-like propensity to play along ironically with the more limited assumptions of other people. Henry enters puckishly into Mrs. Allen's daydream of clothing, seeing it exactly for what it is, amusing himself amiably and harmlessly at her expense: Mrs. Allen has mentioned the price she paid for the cloth of her dress. "That is exactly what I should have guessed it, madam," says Tilney, and then proceeds to play along in a conversation with Mrs. Allen about different cloths and prices until Catherine "feared .. . that he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others."

Tilney does enjoy human foibles, just as Jane Austen does, and one of the delights of the book is in the little romance he makes up for Catherine as they drive to Northanger. This is pieced together from the commonplaces of romances, and demonstrates that he had certainly read romances, as both he and his sister have said he has. It also shows that he can enjoy imaginative daydreams without being taken in by them, that romance is fine and pleasant so long as we do not succumb to its illusions. And one of Jane Austen's finest touches here is in having Henry tell us a romance that we almost begin to believe, that we actually want to go on, so that we can find out what happens, and then playfully break it off to show that it was only play, as it should have been. Henry teases Catherine, and Jane Austen teases us.

The whole teasing uncertainty of human perceptions in the face of reality and romance is nicely demonstrated as Henry puts into his story the ebony-and-yellow lacquered cabinet. He knows that it is in the room Catherine is to inhabit at Northanger. He uses the improbable commonplace of romance that the heroine should somehow not have seen such a huge piece of furniture when she first examined the room. We smile. And then Jane Austen turns the tables on us. For Catherine later does really, in fact, see the cabinet that she had really somehow missed when she first looked around the room. Real life does sometimes imitate romances in its strangeness; human perceptions are just as fallible in fact as they are in fiction.

The whole novel, indeed, is a teasing of the reader's perceptions and expectations as it comically displays the limitations of human perceptions, because we start with an emphatically unromantic heroine. She does not start life tragically as an orphan. No boy in the neighborhood had been found on a doorstep; there is not one young man in the neighborhood whose origin is unknown. She is a simple naïve but normal young girl. But then, after her unromantic experiences at Northanger Abbey, we have the pleasant and playful surprise of learning that she will fill out our romantic hopes after all. She will marry a young man considerably higher up
the social ladder than she is, and we discover after all that the story has been a pleasant fictive excursion.

Jane Austen's final irony is exactly here. This has not been reality, real as it has seemed. This has been only a story, an illusion, a romance. Life may be very like this; but this is not life itself, nor is it like all of life. As Henry Tilney has suggested through his little interrupted romance: romance is fine and pleasant so long as we do not succumb completely and forever to its illusions. Jane Austen, through her final irony, implies that she knows and we know that perfect felicity is unobtainable in this life, that love will change and youth grow old—but that we all enjoy the illusion of romance; we like to think of "living happily ever after." And yet she ends playfully, with an acknowledgment that in the fictions of romance one can also learn some good lessons about life: she adds a playful moral to her tale, and she means the moral almost seriously. Romance is useful. We can laugh at its illusions; we can even learn something valid about life, if we do not take it too seriously. And this is why Jane Austen is great: beyond the illusion and the lesson and the comedy, ironically, we can sense something in Jane Austen of the full, sweet, sad impermanence of life, even of life's own slightly illusory quality.

**Criticism: Everett Zimmerman (essay date 1969)**


*Here, Zimmerman maintains that Northanger Abbey both parodies and employs conventional elements of sentimental fiction.*

Most studies of *Northanger Abbey* have noted that the central problem it poses for the critic is one of unity. In addition to dealing with Catherine Morland's adventures, the book parodies other novels and thus raises the question of the relationship of the parody to the total structure. The attempted solutions of this critical problem, many of them quite cogently argued, are almost exclusively attempts to show thematic relationships between the two elements—Catherine's adventures and the references to novels. But there is another dimension to the problem. Although thematic coherence is an element in unity, the parts of an individual work, or indeed of several quite different works, may cohere thematically without necessarily convincing the reader of their aesthetic unity. Despite the inevitable danger that discussion will lapse into the mere cataloguing of subjective reactions, the reader's response is relevant and must be examined.

Wayne Booth's concept of the implied reader [in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1960] is a most useful attempt to direct the discussion toward the text, rather than exclusively toward the reader's psyche: "The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement." A reader, who may be far different from the person who is reading, is defined by the work. To comprehend the work, the person reading must, at least tentatively, accept the role offered him. To apprehend the work as an aesthetic unity, the person reading must be able and willing to become the reader implied by the work. If this created reader is muddled or inappropriate, the work, no matter how demonstrable its thematic coherence, will not have a unified effect.

In a discussion of the parody in *Northanger Abbey*, we are then obliged to ask the following questions: (1) Does the parody within the novel create a response consonant with the nonparodic elements and integral to a unified effect? (2) Is the reader implied by the parody consistent with the reader implied elsewhere? The mere fact that so much of the criticism recognizes a problem suggests that in the realm of response, outside the arguments of formal criticism, *Northanger Abbey* has not achieved a unified effect. In one of the more interesting discussions, Frank J. Kearful contends that the disunity is deliberate, that the book is a layering of satire and novel designed to discomfit the reader and reveal the unreality of all novels—including its own
unreality. But this solution finds the unity in a critical argument, rather than in the book. If the work is part satire and part novel, and one is not subsumed in the other, then it must be conceded that the work will appear incoherent to the reader.

Failure to sense unity may, however, be the result of something extraneous to the work—some irrelevant attitude that prevents one from becoming the "implied reader" defined in the work. This problem arises most frequently with literature that requires one to recover historical information or attitudes before one can become an appropriate reader. In *Northanger Abbey* the parody implies an interest in the sentimental novel, which, though natural enough in a late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century reader, the modern reader rarely has. Consequently, there is a tendency to interpret the parody as a sharper attack on sentimental fiction than is consonant with the entire structure of the book. Too often the modern assumption is that all parody, like burlesque, must ridicule its object. But Samuel Johnson's definition of parody in his *Dictionary*—"a kind of writing, in which the words of an author or his thoughts are taken, and by a slight change adapted to some new purpose"—does not imply that the effect must be derogatory to the work parodied. Although parody is usually assumed to be literary satire, it does not always function as satire. Sometimes it is a tribute, e.g., Fielding's parody of Cervantes in *Joseph Andrews*. And when parody criticizes aspects of literature, its thrust is not necessarily toward denying or destroying the appeal of the parodied literature. *Don Quixote*, for example, unmercifully exposes the excesses of some romances, but the narrative reworks romance patterns and, especially in the subplots, appeals to the same tastes as do the romances.

Although the central character is a buffoon, in the course of his ludicrous adventures he exemplifies the genuine values of chivalry. In short, the reader who responds most fully to *Don Quixote* is likely to be the lover of romances. The parody in Cervantes' novel allows the reader to enjoy what his critical faculties tell him to reject.

The parody in *Northanger Abbey* functions in a similar manner. It sometimes mocks conventional elements of sentimental fiction, but at the same time it creates and satisfies an interest in those conventions. The reader who consistently interprets the function of the parody as satiric will find the parody conflicting with, rather than elucidating, Catherine's adventures. For example, when Catherine and Mrs. Allen travel to Bath, "Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero." After they arrive at Bath, Catherine has no acquaintance even in the midst of crowds (as Mrs. Allen repeatedly notes), and no young man "started with rapturous wonder on beholding her . . ." The references to the hackneyed devices of the sentimental novel are amusing, to be sure, but this is not to say that the reader of *Northanger Abbey* is to gain satisfaction from the heroine's not meeting the hero. Quietly and unobtrusively the narrator explains that shortly after the ball, Henry Tilney was introduced to Catherine by the master of ceremonies in the Lower Rooms. The parody arouses a conventional interest that is then satisfied in an unexpected way.

The early chapters of *Northanger Abbey* make clear that we are being given the etiology of a sentimental heroine. Although most of the information given about Catherine obscures her heroic qualities, the rhetorical function of this material is to make more prominent those few hints of her grander capabilities. In general, these chapters are a catalogue of how Catherine differs from the heroine, but buried in the opening chapter is the understated comment: "with all these symptoms of profligacy at ten years old, she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper. . . ." The good heart is, of course, the essential and central quality of the true sentimental heroine, and, in case the reader misses the clue, the narrator addresses him directly at the beginning of Chapter II:

In addition to what has been already said of Catherine Morland's personal and mental endowments, when about to be launched into all the difficulties and dangers of a six weeks' residence in Bath, it may be stated, for the reader's more certain information, lest the following pages should otherwise fail of giving any idea of what her character is meant to be; that her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or
affectation of any kind—her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a
girl; her person pleasing, and, when in good looks, pretty—and her mind about as ignorant
and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is.

Apart from the limitations of Catherine's beauty, this would be an accurate description of a heroine like Fanny
Burney's Evelina. The narrator has made it difficult for Catherine not to be recognized as a potential heroine,
but because the language is understated and Catherine's ignorance is emphasized, the reader may continue to
feel that he himself has ferreted out Catherine's heroic potentialities.

At the very beginning of the book, the reader is involved in the narrative. That Catherine is to be a heroine is
asserted obliquely, but nevertheless clearly, in the first sentence: "No one who had ever seen Catherine
Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine." "No one . . . would have supposed"
challenges the reader to sort out the hidden heroic qualities, and at the same time implies that Catherine's
heroic stature will be confirmed later. The rhetorical function of the following list of conventions that she does
not fulfill is to engage the reader in the attempt to comprehend those qualities that will eventually fit her to be
a heroine. Thus the comedy lies in the juxtaposition of the mundane Catherine of childhood with the
sentimental heroine, not in a catalogue of sentimental absurdities.

The reader's engagement in the narrative reaches such proportions that he becomes, in effect, the author's
accomplice. After a one-paragraph description of the Thorpe family, the narrator comments:

This brief account of the family is intended to supersede the necessity of a long and minute
detail from Mrs. Thorpe herself, of her past adventures and sufferings, which might otherwise
be expected to occupy the three or four following chapters; in which the worthlessness of
lords and attorneys might be set forth, and conversations, which had passed twenty years
before, be minutely repeated.

It is assumed that the reader realizes the folly of pretending that conversations of twenty years ago can be
repeated verbatim, recognizes that a long account from Mrs. Thorpe would be tedious, and participates in the
author's decision to let the short account stand without amplification.

The involving aspects of the parody prepare the reader to deal with Catherine's later adventures. He is alerted
to those conventions that will appear in revised form. Consider the introduction of Mrs. Allen:

It is now expedient to give some description of Mrs. Allen, that the reader may be able to
judge, in what manner her actions will hereafter tend to promote the general distress of the
work, and how she will, probably, contribute to reduce poor Catherine to all the desperate
wretchedness of which a last volume is capable—whether by her imprudence, vulgarity, or
jealousy—whether by intercepting her letters, ruining her character, or turning her out of
doors.

This description is "expedient" only if the reader understands the probabilities of a chaperon's behavior in a
novel, but, if he does not, the information necessary to enable him to assume the role of an experienced reader
is given. When applied to the dull Mrs. Allen, the conventional characteristics of the chaperon are comic; yet
variations of the events alluded to reduce Catherine to wretchedness in the last volume. General Tilney, for a
salient example, turns Catherine out of Northanger Abbey while she is under his protection.

The reader created in the early chapters will see Catherine as an ambiguous heroine—in some ways similar, in
some ways superior, and in some ways inferior to the conventional heroine. She is frequently contrasted with
the sentimental heroine so that the rationality of her responses may be set against the excesses of the heroine's
behavior. When Henry Tilney returns to Bath, and Catherine first sees him with a young woman on his arm,
the narrator suggests the possibilities of extravagant assumption and conduct open to the heroine of the sentimental novel—possibilities that do not even occur to Catherine. But the parody also suggests that Catherine is a drastically scaled down version of the heroine. When Henry Tilney visits Catherine's box at the theater, "it was agreed that the projected walk should be taken as soon as possible; and, setting aside the misery of his quitting their box, she was, upon the whole, left one of the happiest creatures in the world." Catherine's feelings are here described in the extravagant terms appropriate to a heroine like Evelina, who, when deserted in the theater by Lord Orville, is left to face the contempt of her relatives and the schemes of her would-be seducers. In the context of Northanger Abbey, however, the narrator's use of these extreme terms to describe Catherine's commonplace feelings emphasizes her ordinariness.

This later parody is less extensive than that at the opening of the book, but in its varying patterns it performs a similar function. Because Catherine and her adventures must be judged within the heroic context, it becomes increasingly apparent that the entire book is to be seen as a variation on sentimental patterns, different from, but also similar to, them. Everything must be evaluated in the context of the parody. But if the reader makes the simple assumption that the parody is a rejection of sentimental novels, he will be led to notice in Catherine's adventures only the contrasts with other fiction and will miss the significant similarities. To control the reader's responses to novels, to make him discriminate finely, Jane Austen includes direct comment on novels by both narrator and characters.

The defense of novels at the end of Chapter V and the conversation in Chapter VI are an excellent example of how comment by the narrator meshes with succeeding event to aid the reader in evaluating both character and novels. The defense of novels is an attack on the convention of attacking novels. Selected for praise are Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, who wrote novels "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." Both women wrote novels of character in the Richardsonian tradition, but not novels primarily emphasizing external event in the manner of some of the "horrid" Gothic novelists. The opening paragraph of Chapter VI links it to the preceding commentary on novels:

The following conversation, which took place between the two friends in the Pump-room one morning, after an acquaintance of eight or nine days, is given as a specimen of their very warm attachment, and of the delicacy, discretion, originality of thought, and literary taste which marked the reasonableness of that attachment.

Isabella's use of novelistic clichés immediately betrays her shallowness. The novels she recommends to Catherine—beginning with The Castle of Wolfenbach and ending with Horrid Mysteries—show that her interest is primarily in the Gothic novel of event having little relation to a "thorough knowledge of human nature." Some of these novels combine the sentimental with the Gothic and deal extensively with the heroine's inner world as she undergoes her horrid experiences. Catherine and Isabella share an interest in The Mysteries of Udolpho, one of these sentimental-Gothic novels, but the fact that Catherine also enjoys Sir Charles Grandison shows that, unlike Isabella, she is interested in the kinds of novels recommended by the narrator. The values that the narrator shares with Catherine but not with Isabella are underlined when Isabella assumes, in her convention-bound manner, that Catherine's mother must object to novels. Catherine points out, however, that Mrs. Morland "very often reads Sir Charles Grandison herself."

What the reader is led to value in novels is a preparation for his evaluation of the events of Northanger Abbey. He must learn to look for significance not just in external event but in human nature, in the feelings underlying the event rather than in the event itself. Although the Northanger segment of the novel is often regarded as ineffective, it exemplifies these necessary discriminations between event and feeling.
To begin, one must concede a deficiency in the episode. Catherine's delusions about General Tilney are an inconsistency in characterization. The earlier Catherine is never seriously misled by her reading of fiction, and there is no adequate preparation for her believing, in sunlight as well as in storm, that General Tilney murdered his wife. But much of the episode is consistent and relevant in characterization, theme, and rhetoric.

Earlier, the convention of the quixotic heroine is parodied:

The time of the two parties uniting in the Octagon Room being correctly adjusted, Catherine was then left to the luxury of a raised, restless, and frightened imagination over the pages of Udolpho, lost from all worldly concerns of dressing and dinner, incapable of soothing Mrs. Allen's fears on the delay of an expected dressmaker, and having only one minute in sixty to bestow even on the reflection of her own felicity, in being already engaged for the evening.

Mrs. Allen's interest in dress has already been ridiculed, and John Thorpe, Catherine's partner for the evening, has already been shown to be a boor. It is consistent with the structure of the book that after this parody Catherine should go through a version of the quixotic experience. And on her first night at the Abbey, she sees some of the stock Gothic props in her room, is frightened by a storm, and imagines Gothic horrors.

But also consistent with the structure of the book is the Gothic reality of her Northanger experience. Eleanor's coming to announce to Catherine that General Tilney has ordered her out of the house is described in full-blown Gothic:

At that moment Catherine thought she heard her step in the gallery, and listened for its continuance; but all was silent. Scarcely, however, had she convicted her fancy of error, when the noise of something moving close to her door made her start; it seemed as if some one was touching the very doorway—and in another moment a slight motion of the lock proved that some hand must be on it. She trembled a little at the idea of any one's approaching so cautiously; but resolving not to be again overcome by trivial appearances of alarm, or misled by a raised imagination, she stepped quietly forward, and opened the door. Eleanor, and only Eleanor, stood there. Catherine's spirits however were tranquillized but for an instant, for Eleanor's cheeks were pale, and her manner greatly agitated.

The early part of the Northanger episode is a trivial, although amusing, reworking of the quixotic pattern because it touches Catherine's emotions in only a superficial way. But the subsequent reworking of the Gothic pattern is "mournfully superior in reality and substance." The wind, creaking floors, and moving locks are conventions taking on significance from the human emotions they touch. The reader is trained by Jane Austen's rhetoric to penetrate to what is important in Gothic and sentimental patterns—the human nature that is represented in them.

Like Catherine, the reader must learn to discriminate between surface and feeling. He must recognize that Catherine differs from a heroine only in superficial matters. Because she does assume the inappropriate conduct derived from romances, because she does not disguise her motivations in conventional language, she affirms the strength and validity of her own feelings. In this respect she contrasts with Isabella Thorpe, who, by foolishly adapting the language and conventions of the sentimental novel to inappropriate situations, rejects the personal feelings that provide the basic guide for the conduct of heroines of sensibility. By not assuming the heroic alternatives to her behavior, Catherine more nearly approximates the heroine than Isabella does by seizing these alternatives. The reader is not thwarted in his desire for a heroine; he is merely compelled to make careful discriminations in order to find her.

The novel does not attack Catherine's imagination; rather it attacks the selfishly circumscribed imagination represented by the Thorpes and General Tilney. Catherine's problem is not that of limiting her imagination,
but rather of using it to discern what aspects of human nature lie beyond convention. The characters who are most understanding of human nature and who teach Catherine most—Henry and Eleanor Tilney—are associated with an imaginative world that the Thorpes do not comprehend. John Thorpe is early identified as entirely ignorant of novels, but Henry reads them avidly. Isabella likes Gothic novels, but, without attempting to read *Sir Charles Grandison*, decides that it is unreadable; Eleanor's tastes, far from being limited to Gothic novels, are so broad that they include even history. And in compensation for Catherine's aborted trip to Blaize Castle with the Thorpes, Henry initiates her into one of the pleasures of the sentimental heroine—the picturesque.

The parodic context for the narrative in *Northanger Abbey* determines the manner in which we can interpret the novel. Far from being extraneous, the parody interlocks with the narrative and creates the precise involvement that leads to an understanding of the characters and of the relevant novelistic traditions. The reader implied is appropriate and consistent. He will recognize Catherine as the heroine in an unheroic society, the heroine of sensibility in the midland counties of England. She is both a static heroine who steadfastly maintains the integrity of her own feelings and a developing character who is enlightened about the ways in which others use conventional outward expressions of feeling for unfeeling purposes. If we see the parody as part of Jane Austen's rhetoric and if we try to understand the reader implied by that rhetoric, we are likely to read the book from a perspective less distorted by twentieth-century assumptions.

When Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey*, the sentimental novel had both proliferated and degenerated. Situations, characters, and language had hardened into stereotypes, and to escape the banal, novelists overinflated what was already inflated. In her *juvenilia* Jane Austen burlesqued these failings of popular fiction; in *Northanger Abbey* she attempts to resuscitate the fiction and certain values on which it is based. Sentimental ethics, as developed through Shaftesbury and others, were based on the assumption that impulses in the individual led not only to self-gratification, but also to the preservation of society: the "private affections" and "public affections" of which Shaftesbury wrote. But as the language of sentiment became widespread, it provided a convenient screen for even the most unfeeling and egocentric behavior. In *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen disentangles true from false sensibility, and in doing so she both appeals to the interest in sentimental fiction and expresses contempt for the perversions of sentimental values in life and literature. The heroines of her later novels are also versions of the heroine of sensibility, but they have survived the age of sensibility. They struggle to exemplify values that their societies no longer wholeheartedly endorse, and they must fight a rearguard action to preserve these values. Jane Austen undertakes just such an action in *Northanger Abbey*.

**Criticism: A. N. Kaul (essay date 1970)**


*[In the following excerpt, Kaul characterizes Northanger Abbey as a novel of education with a somewhat formulaic comic quality.]*

*Northanger Abbey* is the story of a young girl's education, or rather her double education: first through a selective and highly self-conscious course of literary readings, and then through various experiences that teach her to differentiate the real from the bookish world and thus cause her to readjust the attitudes and expectations derived from literature. In the first chapter, which offers the early history of the heroine and which seems in many ways a simple piece of burlesque writing, Jane Austen is already working toward this double comic purpose. On the one hand we are given in Catherine Morland an ordinary girl, rather plain and tomboyish in childhood, with a commonplace family background which as little as her personal appearance can be said to mark her out as a future heroine of romance. Showing above all no aptitude for drawing or
music or any of the other required accomplishments, her mind seems definitely "unpropitious for heroism"—up to the age of fifteen. But at fifteen appearances suddenly start mending, and Catherine, despite her disqualifications, considers herself from this point on as avowedly "in training for a heroine." She undertakes a preliminary study of the appropriate literature and is soon determined, not unlike the heroine of *Love and Freindship*, to have the world live up to the romance she has developed out of her reading. She knows that the neighborhood contains neither lords nor baronets and that not even young men of mysterious origin or ordinary foundlings are to be found anywhere within reach. "But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way."

The emphasis here, as elsewhere in the novel, falls on the mind—on its vulnerability to illusion even in the most unlikely external circumstances. Catherine Morland's mind is a tabula rasa, a fact Jane Austen underlines before embarking on the story proper in the following chapter. Summing up her heroine's "personal and mental endowments, when about to be launched into all the difficulties and dangers of a six weeks' residence in Bath," she observes that although Catherine's "heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind," her mind was "about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is." What the generalized comment about the female mind at seventeen makes clear is that Catherine Morland is to be regarded not as a subject for burlesque or satire, but essentially as a representative comic heroine—someone who is neither freakish nor abnormal, but rather typical. She is, however, also typical in a less universal and more important sense: she embodies the dangers of a cultural situation in which the youthful mind is apt to be seduced by a peculiarly perverse variety of romantic delusion. This is in fact what happens to Catherine as soon as she steps into the fashionable world of Bath. But if a basically good-natured and unaffected girl like Catherine can so easily fall prey to well-cultivated illusions, her sound temperament also contains the promise of eventual awakening and the possibility of a second and more sound education. This is why Jane Austen gives us a stage-by-stage history of her heroine's early years in the preparatory first chapter. And herein we see, too, the advantage of an omniscient point of view for a comic novel, a point of view that can surround the consciousness of a character with a larger consciousness, aware from the beginning of more than is the character himself. Thus unlike *Love and Freindship*, which is told in letters by the heroine throughout, *Northanger Abbey* is not locked within the mind of a deluded character. We are rather shown Catherine Morland in the process of deluding herself, being made witness at the same time to her normalcy in other ways, so that for us her self-deception carries at each stage its own seeds of final undeception.

Thus we are not surprised when, much later in the novel—at the height of the Bath adventure—the author assures us that Catherine, for all her submission to romance, still possessed feelings "rather natural than heroic." By this time, however, there is little need to direct our attention through authorial comment. For with Catherine's arrival at Bath and her entering into relationships with the novel's two other principal characters, the conflict between nature and heroism becomes a dramatic issue. Mrs. Allen, under whose protection the girl has come to Bath, is herself characterized by total "vacancy of mind, and incapacity for thinking." The charge of educating Catherine's mind falls accordingly to her two new acquaintances: Isabella Thorpe, the "friend," who becomes the abettor of romantic illusion; and Henry Tilney, the potential lover, who assumes early the office of mildly but constantly ridiculing the visions of romance. The friend and the lover thus pull their weight in opposed directions.

To a large extent the plot turns on romance of the Gothic variety. Under Isabella's tutorship Catherine comes readily to believe that she could happily spend her whole life reading *Udolpho*, and very soon she learns to look upon the world as a scene expressly arranged for the purpose of corroborating the truth of Mrs. Radcliffe's imagination. She welcomes an excursion to Blaize Castle as an opportunity for "exploring an edifice like Udolpho," but this is only a preparatory touch for her later visit to Northanger Abbey, the family-seat of the Tilneys—a visit during which she develops around the old house a complete history of Gothic deeds involving her host, General Tilney, as the villain and his dead wife as the victim. This leads her
to a series of blunders followed by humiliating discoveries, such as the well-known midnight perusal of a manuscript which Catherine takes for a record of secret crimes committed and suffered in the Abbey but which on examination turns out to be an inventory of linen: if "the evidence of sight might be trusted," actually a "washing-bill." And, of course, there is Henry Tilney's equally well-known final admonition of Catherine which brings this line of adventure to an end:

Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing? . . . Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?

Among the many ironies of this passage, the one that has escaped attention is the most obvious and telling one: namely, Catherine's "education" and "social and literary intercourse" are precisely the factors that have paved the way to the trap into which she has fallen. Her disillusionment, however, is now complete: "The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened."

Yet the Gothic self-deceptions are not nearly so important as the deceptions of another variety—the deceptions of sensibility—with which they are connected in the novel. This aspect of romance cuts more vitally into Catherine's story, and while Isabella Thorpe and Henry Tilney remain the two other principal actors, this part of the story involves in one way or another the entire cast of characters. In it, furthermore, the roles of Isabella and Henry are not only opposed to each other but also doubled and at the same time reversed. As a sentimental tutor, Isabella is the Laura of Love and Freindship transferred from the world of burlesque to that of comedy. Her overt function is the same: to educate Catherine "in the finesse of love" and "the duties of friendship." Of course, in this respect Catherine is never quite as taken in as she is in the matter of Udolpho. The very fact that she can enter into a relationship with Henry Tilney assures us of her natural resistance to the attitudes of a sentimental heroine. The remark already cited about her being "rather natural than heroic" is made in relation to her feelings for Henry. Considering that, as Jane Austen tells us a little later, even her "passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney," it is not surprising that given his presence on the scene, the passion for sensibility never takes firm root. As a matter of fact, Henry precedes Isabella in Catherine's acquaintance and has already burlesqued the fashionable sentimental attitudes in his first meeting with her, a short time before Isabella can start advocating them. Nevertheless in the end it is Isabella who first opens Catherine's eyes to that which "the finesse of love" and "the duties of friendship" are really meant to conceal: money and the matrimonial maneuver. For, profuse as have been her professions of friendship for Catherine and love for Catherine's brother, Isabella calmly throws both overboard the moment she fancies herself within reach of a better prospect—Captain Tilney. Although earlier she had held up the ideal of love with as little cash to interfere as possible—the "ecstasy" of living in a "cottage in some retired village"—she now concedes with a facility that astonishes poor Catherine that "after all that romancers may say, there is no doing without money."

This is Catherine's first lesson in the realities of bourgeois life, and it is offered to her by the "romantic" Isabella Thorpe. Of course she learns how timely and plausible a lesson it has been when General Tilney—hitherto a model of courtly grace and hospitality—unceremoniously throws her out of the Abbey. This is the climax of the story—the true surprise of its surprise ending. Catherine's fate now seems identical with that of her brother, and for the same reason. The General, it turns out, had sought and entertained her as a suitable match for his son; but happening to discover his mistake in her, finding out that in fact she was "guilty . . . of being less rich than he had supposed," he now sends her packing with brutal abruptness. Her brother's situation had already caused the "anxieties of common life" to supersede "the alarms of romance" in Catherine's mind; her own present case drives the point home—"Yet how different now the source of her inquietude . . . how mournfully superior in reality and substance! Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability."
By thus translating Gothic terror into real-life terms, Jane Austen removes its comforting quality of vicarious indulgence. "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful! This is just like a book! But it cannot really happen to me," Catherine exclaims to Henry's playful description of Northanger Abbey and "the horrors that a building such as 'what one reads about' may produce." But in a surprising and to her unexpected—and therefore more terrifying—way, it does happen to her. She had always wondered about General Tilney, knowing that something "was certainly to be concealed," only to dissipate in Gothic fantasy rather than try to understand this persistent feeling caused by the General. The monster of avarice, when she finally recognizes him, turns out to be as cruel and ruthless as any monster she had imagined, and not half so remote. In the end she realizes that there was nothing absurd about her early conjunction of "Tilneys and trap-doors" except the notion she then had of traps. Otherwise, "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character or magnified his cruelty."

Yet this is not the last word of Catherine's story. While the sentimental Isabella and the chivalric General educate her liberally in the realities of life, it remains for the antiheroic Henry to offer himself as a figure of romance—true-life romance as opposed to the make-believe finesse of love. For though money and prudence rule the world, they do not rule it to the total exclusion of more disinterested feelings. A Henry Tilney may prove himself a hero after all by standing up to his father, by refusing to accompany him to Herefordshire in pursuit of prudential matrimony, and by quietly presenting himself instead at the Morland parsonage. Certainly in the novel Henry's reality is as indubitable as that of the General, and on the whole so is the reality of the relationship that Jane Austen develops between him and Catherine. In this respect "the tell-tale compression" (according to Jane Austen herself) of the last pages, the "hastening together to perfect felicity," can create a false impression. The final chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, like the final chapter of *Mansfield Park*, is a quick winding-up. Its jauntiness is directed not so much at what is being wound up as at the custom and necessity of literary windings-up in general. It certainly should not be allowed to wipe out at one stroke all that has been shown as happening between Henry and Catherine. What has developed between them is not a great love—suspect as all great loves would be in the context—but a quiet and convincing affection appropriate to the general purpose of the novel.

The real weakness of the novel lies in this very general purpose. It is not an absolute but only a relative weakness. The novel would have sufficed to make the literary fortune of a lesser comic writer, if a lesser comic writer could possibly have written it. It is weak only as a Jane Austen comedy, being too directly and heavily involved with books, too closely and cruelly dependent upon the presence of the source of its inspiration—sent into the world powerless, as it were, to dispense with its umbilical cord. Ór, to change the metaphor, it may be regarded as the chrysalis of Jane Austen's comedy: an enormous step forward from burlesque-parody, but still a work whose full effect demands a visible correspondence to a literary formula and whose comic quality is therefore itself a little too formulaic. . . .

**Criticism: Robert Kiely (essay date 1972)**


*[In the excerpt below, Kiely focuses on the thematic importance of language in Northanger Abbey.]*

Jane Austen thought the capabilities of language, correctly used, considerable, and early in *Northanger Abbey* she opens her gentle assault on romantic fiction with a defense of the novel:

I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets
on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she
accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. [A novel at its
best can be a] 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 humor are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

That is what a novel might be. But it is clear from the start that Catherine Morland, the heroine of Northanger
Abbey, while an enthusiastic reader of novels, admires that class of fiction in which human nature, wit, and
choice language are secondary considerations. Catherine Morland is an admirer of Ann Radcliffe. She reads,
not to be instructed or entertained, but to be frightened.

Northanger Abbey embraces two worlds—the world of Catherine's subjective fancy and that of social
convention as it is interpreted primarily by Henry Tilney. As nearly all critics of the novel have recognized,
the book is, because of this juxtaposition of worlds, part parody romance and part realistic novel. But what
may appear as a division of purpose—an early and therefore forgiveable lapse on Austen's part—is really a
precise comic analogue to a genre which was itself divided. By contrasting Bath to the Abbey, Austen is not
doing anything that Radcliffe, Godwin, and Lewis had not done before her in placing rational, social, daylight
worlds against dark, subjective prisons. If Catherine's "prison" is of her own making, so, to a large extent,
were those of Emily St. Aubert, Caleb Williams, and Ambrosio.

There is parody in Northanger Abbey, and though it is broader in the romance sections, it pervades both
worlds, romantic and realistic, without totally rejecting either. The book is entertaining, and it was obviously
Austen's purpose to ridicule the excesses of an untutored imagination. But though she shows us that
Catherine's Gothic dreams are derived from false suspicions and inadequate information, Austen does not
pretend that the collision of a susceptible mind with the world of hard reality is a false situation or even a
wholly ludicrous one. Northanger Abbey is split in a way familiar to a close reader of romantic novels and it
shows, despite its surface frivolity, that Austen understood the source and nature of that division very well.

Young, impressionable, good-hearted and a little simpleminded, Catherine imagines herself a romantic
heroine in a world fraught with Gothic possibilities. Unlike Ann Radcliffe, however, Jane Austen does not
allow her heroine's emotions to dominate the vision of reality presented to the reader. On the contrary, through
the speeches of other characters and through the steady narrative voice of the author, the reader is constantly
shown a world which corresponds in almost no way to the apprehensions of the heroine. Having set down her
 copy of The Mysteries of Udolpho to attend a ball during her visit to Bath, Catherine finds sufficient cause for
romantic musings when momentarily "abandoned" by her dancing partner:

To be disgraced in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of infamy while her heart is
all purity, her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of her
debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine's life.

That the language is far in excess of what the situation justifies is obvious, but Jane Austen also shows that it
is not even an apt indication of the girl's own feelings. For within ten minutes she is roused out of her
"humiliation" by the approach of another and preferable partner. The episode is trivial and amusing, but
through it Jane Austen demonstrates how language can exceed as well as fall short of human experience.
There are words to describe balls at Bath and the disappointment of young ladies who have not been asked to
dance, but Catherine's reading habits have not helped her to find them.

But if Catherine's misuse of language is the innocent result of inexperience and undiscriminating
susceptibility to romantic fiction, there are other examples of exaggerated language which are of less innocent
origin. The first acquaintance Catherine makes at Bath is Isabella Thorpe, an attractive and comparatively
sophisticated girl, who overwhelms her new friend with repeated professions of undying devotion and sisterly
affection. It soon becomes clear to the reader, if not to Catherine, that Isabella overestimates the Morlands' wealth and hopes to marry Catherine's brother James. The more convinced she becomes of the family's wealth, the more extravagant become her praises of the beauty and brilliance of the relatively plain and intellectually unexceptional Catherine. At first, Catherine takes her friend's exaggerations as signs of her romantic nature and high spirits. For Isabella, the most ordinary things, when associated in any way with the Morland family, become "inconceivable, incredible, impossible" to be separated from her friend for an afternoon seems "ages" to wish to question her about her brother is to have "thousands of things to say to her" to take leave of her until the next morning is to part in "utter despondency."

Even Catherine eventually becomes aware that Isabella's language, far from being the spontaneous overflow of a brimming heart, is a consciously manipulated instrument with which she attempts to satisfy herself while seeming to think of others. One day when Isabella has her mind set on taking a ride with Catherine and her brother, she is irritated to learn that Catherine has already promised to spend the day with other friends. She urges her to do what "would be so easy," that is, tell them that she had "just been reminded of a prior engagement." "No, it would not be easy," answers Catherine. "I could not do it. There has been no prior engagement." Carelessness about the correspondence between words and events can be, as Catherine realizes, a form of dishonesty. Truth, as understood by Jane Austen, is not determined merely by the urges of the ego, but by the discernible events of a world outside the self. If some of those events are beyond mortal powers of articulation, others are perfectly capable of being named. One danger of romantic scorn for the reliability of words is that it introduces confusion where there is none, creates a muddle for the innocent and a camouflage for the disingenuous.

Two other examples of the mismanagement of words—without benefit of Radcliffean aura—are provided by Catherine's companion and hostess at Bath, Mrs. Allen, and Isabella's braggart brother John. Both are vain and dull-witted characters who demonstrate the folly, selfishness, and tedium of using words as adornments of the self rather than as means of communication. Mrs. Allen has one subject, fashion, and nearly all of her talk, wherever it begins, comes around eventually to the tilt of her bonnet or the state of her muslin. While she is a relatively harmless and comic character, she is also incapable of doing good. She cannot comfort Catherine nor serve as a moral guide, because she cannot think of her except as the wearer of so many yards of material. When Catherine asks her opinion about the correctness of riding in an open carriage with a man to whom one is not engaged, Mrs. Allen displays the limit of her understanding and sympathy: "Open carriages are nasty things. A clean gown is not five minutes wear in them. You are splashed getting in and getting out; and the wind takes your hair and your bonnet in every direction. I hate an open carriage myself."

John Thorpe is a vulgarized, stupider version of his sister. Also thinking the Morlands are wealthy, he continually attempts to impress and flatter Catherine. He boasts about his horses, his carriage, his drinking parties at Oxford, repeats and contradicts himself, and punctuates every other sentence with an oath. Words fail him only when he tries to enumerate Catherine's qualities:

"You have more good-nature and all that, than anybody living I believe. A monstrous deal of good-nature, and it is not only good-nature, but you have so much, so much of everything; and then you have such—upon my soul I do not know any body like you."

The humor of the scene stems from the fact that the missing word for which Thorpe seems to be groping is all too plain. It is not language which fails the man, but the man who fails language, and in doing so reveals his want of honesty, affection, and wit along with his want of words. Catherine, too, at this relatively early point in the novel may be said to fail language—she does not use words precisely and does not easily see through the muddled jargon of the Thorpes. But her failure is not of a moral sort. She is merely ignorant. By learning the ways of words, she will gradually come to know more of the world and of herself.
Her teachers are Eleanor Tilney and, more particularly, Eleanor's brother Henry, two conventional, yet sincere, charming, and even noble persons. Through them—and especially through the way they speak—Jane Austen makes an impressive defense of social convention and shows the egotism and futility of ignoring or scorning it. When Catherine and Eleanor first meet, they exchange the usual pleasantries, but after the absurd exclamations of Isabella Thorpe, polite commonplaces seem almost rich with meaning. At least, they convey the idea that two young ladies are happy to have met and are content in one another's company, though neither may find the other, after five minutes, dearer than her own life, the sweetest creature she ever saw, "amazingly" clever, ravishing, clairvoyant, in short, a combination of virtues altogether "inconceivable, incredible, impossible." In the company of Eleanor Tilney, Catherine does not reach for superlatives nor is she showered with them. Jane Austen merely tells us that they met with "civility" and "good will":

And though in all probability not an observation was made, nor an expression used by either which had not been made and used some thousands of times before, under that roof, in every Bath season, yet the merit of their being spoken with simplicity and truth, and without personal conceit, might be something uncommon.

Catherine's most instructive teacher is Eleanor's brother Henry, the hero of the novel. He is, in nearly all respects, the reverse of the male protagonist of a romantic novel. He is at home in society, a minister and country gentleman, cheerful-natured, an obedient son and courteous brother, well-educated, slightly pedantic, presentable but not striking, intelligent but not a genius. His courtship of Catherine takes the form of a series of lessons in semantics, through which he reveals his own affection for her and teaches her to judge and discriminate among words as an aid in judging and discriminating among people and circumstances.

Henry's first lesson stresses the importance of language as a conventional approximation of reality, an artificial convenience which can express much so long as it is not confused with the reality itself. He draws a comparison between a dance and a marriage which demonstrates the metaphorical nature of language while defining the necessarily conventional basis of all social intercourse:

"We have entered into a contract of mutual agreeableness for the space of an evening, and all our agreeableness belongs solely to each other for that time. Nobody can fasten themselves on the notice of one, without injuring the rights of the other. I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not choose to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbors."

"But they are such very different things!—"

"That you think they cannot be compared together."

"To be sure not. People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance, only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour."

For the moment, Catherine has missed the point of the lesson as well as the bantering tone of the teacher. But Jane Austen's hero, thinking it unnecessary to speak up for order, speaks up instead for the importance of recognizing its essential components. For Catherine, marriage is marriage and dancing is dancing. Like most other things in her mind, they have no connection. Different names for different things with no apparent basis for comparison. Yet Tilney has begun to show that the most trivial as well as some of the most important social actions involve, in one way or another, making contracts which involve rights, duties, and most un-Godwinian of all, voluntary mutual conformity. The characters in Northanger Abbey, as in all of Jane Austen's novels, are constantly "engaging" themselves to others, to walk, to dine, to visit, to marry. And the worst thing a person can do is to enter into an engagement dishonestly—like Isabella with James Morland—or
to break it without sufficient cause—again like Isabella, or like General Tilney when he expels Catherine from his house after having invited her to stay as long as she pleased.

In the next lesson, Henry attempts to show that language too is a kind of "contract of mutual agreeableness" with principles and rules which ought to govern those who "engage" to use it in the presence of others. Though he is a minister, it is not the meditational but the conversational precision of Catherine which he seeks to improve. Like Isabella, though without her ulterior motives, Catherine tends to use words like "amazing," "horrid," and "tremendous" to describe matters of little consequence. One day, while walking with Henry Eleanor Tilney, she asks Henry if he does not think *The Mysteries of Udolpho* "the nicest book in the world."

"The nicest;—by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding."

"Henry," said Miss Tilney, "you are very impertinent. Miss Morland, he is treating you exactly as he does his sister. He is forever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you. The word 'nicest,' as you used it, did not suit him; and you had better change it as soon as you can, or we shall be overpowered with Johnson and Blair all the rest of the way."

"I am sure," cried Catherine; "I did not mean to say anything wrong; but it is a nice book, and why should not I call it so?"

"Very true," said Henry, "and this is a very nice day, and we are taking a very nice walk, and you are two very nice young ladies. Oh! it is a very nice word indeed! It does for everything."

In a world of Catherine Morlands—to say nothing of Isabella and John Thorpes—Henry's schoolmarmish manner seems forgivable if not heroic. Having demonstrated something of the analogical nature of language in his first lesson, Tilney proceeds to argue that a verbal representation of reality—even if it cannot reproduce that reality to perfection—need not miss it by a mile. Human experience is rich and varied, but Jane Austen and her hero, both admirers of Dr. Johnson, could not agree that the English language was without resources to describe a considerable portion of it. One remedy for speechlessness or, what amounts to the same thing, the indiscriminate use of a few words, is a larger vocabulary—a mind in touch with other minds through the conventional but many-faceted medium of language.

Of course, a good heart is essential, for, without it, language, however precise, can become a fashion like any other, vain, inconsequential, and inert, a piece of mental apparel to be put on and off without feeling or taste. Right feelings we know Catherine possesses: Jane Austen explains that though she often "knew not what to say and her eloquence was only in her eyes . . . the eight parts of speech shone out most expressively, and [one] could combine them with ease." But taste, or the ability to see connections and to make distinctions, Catherine lacks from want of instruction and practice. When Isabella Thorpe decides, for example, to wear exactly the same dress as Catherine at a ball so that the men will take notice of them both, Catherine does not see it as a tasteless and unfeeling maneuver to flatter and outshine her at the same time. Isabella borrows styles in dresses, as in words, without regard to elegance or sensitivity to the feelings of others, but to gratify a momentary vanity. She lives from whim to whim and from day to day, changing her manners and moods as the wind blows, and following no governing principle beyond that of "improving her situation." She is without taste for the same reason that, on another level, she is without morality: she does not make coherent connections between herself and other people; between her words and her actions, or even among her own utterances, which Catherine eventually recognizes as a tissue of "inconsistencies" and "contradictions."

Unlike Isabella's, most of Catherine's mistakes originate from an excessively high opinion of nearly everyone. Still, there is a narrowness, a kind of selfishness, even in this, for it stems from judging the world only in terms of the self rather than in relation to a larger social context. Catherine always means what she says, even
when her words are not well chosen, and she assumes therefore that everyone else is the same. Tilney's third lesson, then, is an attempt to urge Catherine to weigh words against the habits and actions of the speaker rather than simply against her own feelings. When she attributes Henry's brother's flirtatious interest in Isabella to his "good-nature," Henry tries to show her the basis of the error:

"With you, it is not: How is such a one likely to be influenced? What is the inducement most likely to act upon such a person's feelings, age, situation, and probable habits of life considered?—but how should I be influenced, what would be my inducement in acting so and so?"

"I do not understand you."

"Then we are on very unequal terms, for I understand you perfectly well."

"Me?—yes; I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible."

"Bravo!—an excellent satire on modern language."

Catherine has unwittingly put her finger on one of the most important points that Henry has been trying to make: that language is worthless if not intelligible. But she has not yet seen that the "intelligibility" of words depends upon several things, including their emblematic relationship to external reality, their logical relationship to one another, their personal relationship to the speaker, and their circumstantial relationship to the one being addressed. Until she can see the importance of these relationships she will continue to misuse words and misjudge people.

Jane Austen realizes that, though Henry Tilney is an excellent teacher, his lessons are too abstract and subtle to have immediate effect on his pupil. Catherine needs a concrete confrontation with the errors of her ways and the applicability of his theories. Her opportunity comes when General Tilney, the widowed father of Eleanor and Henry, invites Catherine to visit their country house, Northanger Abbey. Already fond of the brother and sister, and intrigued by the thought of living in a reconstructed Gothic ruin, Catherine accepts. Actually, the house is bright, cheerful, and Gothic only in a few minor details, but Catherine is hardly in it before she begins imagining herself in the role of a Radcliffean heroine. She digs for ancient parchments in chests and cabinets, lies awake trembling on windy nights, and deduces, from the strict and domineering manner of the General, that he must have persecuted his wife and sealed her up in some hidden chamber of the house until she went mad or died.

Determined to get to the bottom of the "mystery" and expose the General to justice, Catherine resolves to visit the bedroom where Mrs. Tilney is said to have died of a fever nine years earlier. All the more suspicious because the General does not show her this room when giving a tour of the house, Catherine ventures to it alone one afternoon before tea, expecting she hardly knows what "gloomy objects," what "proofs" of the General's cruelty. She finds, instead, a "well-proportioned apartment, an handsome dimity bed, arranged as unoccupied with an housemaid's care, a bright Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes and neatly painted chairs on which the warm beams of a western sun gaily poured through two sash windows!" Disappointed and ashamed, she dashes out into the hall where she meets Henry and confesses her suspicion, which he greets with mild dismay and a rational explanation.

The point, of course, is that Mrs. Tilney's death is a subject about which Catherine really has nothing to say. It is both amusing and rather touching that she should crave so frantically to "explain"—even in absurd terms—the death of her friends' mother. It is the only subject in the novel which Jane Austen seems to admit is "beyond words." The image of death—one of the rare examples in all of Austen's works—is not a blood-stained dagger or a murky chamber, but "unoccupied" bed in a perfectly neat, ordinary, though empty
room. Mrs. Tilney dead is Mrs. Tilney "not present," a vacancy except in the memory of her family. Neither Catherine Morland nor the reader has cause or capacity to say anything more about her. And in the world of Jane Austen, the best thing to do when one has nothing to say—that is, nothing which can add to the instruction or comfort of others—is not to lament the impotence of words, but to turn to subjects where they can be of some use.

If, for example, Catherine had devoted the time spent wondering about the late Mrs. Tilney in speaking to and, above all, listening to General Tilney, she might have deduced, not that he was an English Montoni, but a prosperous parent with military fondness for order and obedience, and a tendency to petulance when his dinner was not served on time. She might further have deduced, from his comments about his house, his son, and her family (which he has never met), that he thinks her a good match for Henry and, for some reason, imagines her wealthier than she is. General Tilney is a quick-tempered snob, not a murderer, but Catherine learns that these unsensational vices are quite enough to cause her a kind of pain which has nothing to do with old parchments or phantom footsteps. When the General conveys through his daughter that Catherine must terminate her visit and return unaccompanied to her parents' home, she suffers genuine anguish for the first time in the novel. In comparing the distress of her first and last nights at Northanger Abbey, Catherine finally perceives distinctions of the sort Henry Tilney had tried to show her from the beginning:

That room, in which her disturbed imagination had tormented her on her first arrival, was again the scene of agitated spirits and unquiet slumbers. Yet how different now the source of her inquietude . . . Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion.

Though Catherine is not altogether sure why the General is angry with her, she realizes that his rude termination of her visit is an "evil" more immediate than the sort by Mrs. Radcliffe. His sudden breaking of a social engagement is both cause and symbol of serious ruptures in the life of Catherine, of her friendship with Eleanor and her love for Henry. Catherine learns from the General's treatment, that a human being need not be a murderer or rapist to do harm. Later, it turns out that John Thorpe, who had originally exaggerated Catherine's wealth to the General, had also informed him, upon seeing his own suit discouraged, that she was an opportunist from a family of scheming paupers. Henry finally clears away the confusion, apologizes to Catherine and her family, secures his father's grudging consent, and marries his well-instructed pupil.

It may be argued that, in dismissing physical violence and emotional extremes from her novels, Jane Austen too artificially limits, not only the size of her own canvas, but, by implication, the range of describable reality; that in a novel like Northanger Abbey, she seems to be saying, not simply, "I choose to write about 'this' because it is what I know," but "I do not choose to write about 'that' because it is silly, unimportant, or unreal."

Though by no means her richest or greatest work, Northanger Abbey is perhaps the most useful of her novels to consider in a discussion of this problem. It is more than a joke at the expense of Ann Radcliffe. Aside from the epistolary parody, Love and Friendship, it is the one sustained and explicit example we have of Jane Austen's reaction to the subject matter and technical devices common to much romantic fiction. As for subject matter, our insight into Jane Austen's attitude comes, as usual, from a speech of Henry Tilney's. When Catherine blurts out her suspicion that his father is a murderer, Henry reacts with characteristic logic:

"Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians . . . Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being
known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing?"

... [If] we take Tilney's dismay at face value, we have neither followed the advice he gave Catherine to judge a person's words in relation to his "feelings, age, situation, and probable habits of life," nor have we understood the extent to which Austen's irony enlarges possibilities even at the expense of her own heroes and heroines. Tilney himself is not too perfect to fall into priggish overstatement which reveals the limitation of his otherwise "nice" perceptions. That Catherine's particular suspicions are without substantial cause or probability is evident, but that a concealed murder is unthinkable in Christian England is by no means so.

If Catherine's behavior has often shown ignorance of the value of social and verbal convention, Henry—like his father, though with less rigidity—shows in this speech the absurdity of overreliance on conventional assumptions. True, Catherine is shown to be foolish to have mistaken the world for a Gothic romance, but then Jane Austen does not quite let her hero get away with endowing his countrymen and era with all the virtues of reason and self-control. In fact, she emphasizes the silliness of Henry's speech by making Catherine believe it wholeheartedly, just as she had believed what was contrary to it three minutes before. Later, in the privacy of her room, she meditates and elaborates upon her new-found wisdom: "Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not as spotless as an angel, might have the dispositions of a fiend. But in England it was not so; among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad."

By viewing her hero's complacency ironically, Austen reveals that her own had its bounds. Her circumvention of the dark and "large" themes characteristic of romantic fiction, represents, not a failure to see all painful realities, but one way of acknowledging their force. Like her favorite, Dr. Johnson, her representations of rational order often derive their vigor from a vivid sense of the alternatives. True, those alternatives were not madness or violent death, but isolation, sterility, the sense of a life without security, affection, or use. Yet they were no less desperate for being unsensational.

What Johnson achieved through constant inquiry and argument, Jane Austen achieved in her own way through irony: elasticity within a convention. "Freedom" is not a word she uses very often, whereas "grace" is everywhere in her fiction. As she demonstrates in *Northanger Abbey* and all of her other novels, an ironical vision is cynical only when the conventional forms employed are thought to be without value and are manipulated for purposes contrary to mutual "convenience." As Henry Tilney sees, at least most of the time, where more than one person is involved, conventional forms are necessary stays against intellectual confusion and moral riot. They are, in the literal sense, guardians of sanity. He also sees that any convention—verbal or social—insofar as it is a sign of a "coming together," must involve compromise and never can, under any conceivable circumstance, suit all the peculiarities and complexities of a single human being. Austen's;—and to some degree, Tilney's;—recognition of the importance of the individual sensibility and its inevitably imperfect adjustment to established form is one source of the ironic tone of the novel.

Henry Tilney, when not lapsing into priggishness, speaks with a witty lightness which shows that he can appreciate a convention and express himself through it without letting it manipulate, rigidify, and annihilate his human nature. His realm is not a prison cell but a ballroom, and his wish is not to escape it but to master the rules and share their benefits with others. Convinced that some form is necessary and that no form suits all temperaments, he is not interested—as so many romantic heroes are—in changing the laws of society or nature. He maintains enough distance to show that he sees the inadequacy even of those conventions he finds necessary and pleasing.

Though he is forever talking about precision, his primary lesson is one of balance. Just because people, like words, are imperfect, there is no reason for them, through carelessness, to permit themselves to be irrational and immoral as well.
Jane Austen's answer in the same period of challenge which produced so much radical and passionate literature, is reached not by rebellion and flight, but through education. When Catherine tells Henry that she has "learned" from Eleanor to love a hyacinth, he congratulates her, saying, in his briefest but perhaps most effective lesson, "It is well to have as many holds upon happiness as possible." Jane Austen nowhere denies the splendor of Mont Blanc; she merely speaks up for hyacinths. *Northanger Abbey* is a modest, even slight book, about one quarter the length of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. But as a display of the disciplined mind and the well-chosen word it does more than all the hysterical criticism of the periodicals to deflate some of the poses and excesses of Romanticism. When Catherine suggests to Henry that "to torment" is a good synonym for "to instruct," he agrees that discipline is often painful:

> But... even you yourself, who do not seem altogether particularly friendly to very severe, very intense application, may perhaps be brought to acknowledge that it is very well worth while to be tormented for two or three years of one's life, for the sake of being able to read all the rest of it. Consider—if reading had not been taught, Mrs. Radcliffe would have written in vain—or perhaps might not have written at all.

Once again, Catherine has used a word imprecisely and Henry has corrected her. And once again his lesson appears to be after Jane Austen's own heart. Yet the impression lingers after reading this book that if one character makes too much of words like "torment," the other makes too little of them. A reasonable and socially conventional man can educate a young woman out of her unfounded fears, but he is not, therefore, St. George. There are dragons he cannot touch. Through a crack in the door of an empty bedroom and the petulance of a narrow-minded father, Austen gives a glimpse of the demons which prevent Henry Tilney from looming with perfect invulnerability over the fretful Catherine Morland. Austen's mode is ironic and her range modest, but she has explored the same division of mind which is at the core of romantic fiction.

**Criticism: Jane Nardin (essay date 1973)**


[In the following essay, Nardin discusses Catherine's education in the moral significance of social propriety..]

**Duckworth on Catherine's moral growth:**

*Northanger Abbey*, while it does not reflect the same persistent awareness of an economically debased society, takes its own close look at the conditions of social existence. As well as being a response to the Gothic novel, it is, to borrow Malcolm Bradbury's phrase describing E. M. Forster's fiction, a "sociomoral" novel, and in her description of Catherine, Jane Austen, provides an early attempt at defining proper moral behavior in the face of a largely immoral world. In describing Catherine's journey from Fullerton to Bath, to Northanger, and then back to Fullerton, Jane Austen follows the pattern of the English novel of education in which, from Defoe and Fielding onward, movement through space has accompanied a moral enlightenment on the part of the protagonist. In Catherine's case, there is little psychological development, and while this is not a *sine qua non* of the novel of education—Tom Jones undergoes little psychological change—it becomes in *Northanger Abbey* a matter of dissatisfaction both for the reader and, I think, for the author.

But if Jane Austen fails structurally and thematically to combine a novel of manners and a literary response to the Gothic novel, we should nevertheless be aware of her positive moral intentions in *Northanger Abbey*. An examination of the heroine's experience in Bath with the Thorpes and at Northanger with Henry Tilney reveals Jane Austen's direction, even if the moral journey is not completed satisfactorily.
Northanger Abbey is, in part, a spoof of gothic and sentimental novels. But its main action—the realistically drawn picture of an unformed young girl's education in the complexities of real life—can be fairly easily detached from the elements of literary burlesque with which it is surrounded and discussed on its own terms. By tracing the development of Catherine Morland's character we can discover that her misconceptions about the true nature and value of proper manners play a role in her most serious errors of judgment. Since the nature and significance of the literary allusions Jane Austen makes in Northanger Abbey have been intelligently and, in my opinion, exhaustively discussed by other critics, I intend to mention them here only insofar as they are relevant to the real adventures of that believable human being, Catherine Morland, whose growing up is one of the main subjects of Northanger Abbey. Literature plays a part in Catherine's education, as it does in that of so many other Jane Austen heroines, but to approach the novel as primarily a literary satire tends to force the reader to overestimate the importance of burlesque elements in Catherine's characterization. I hope to demonstrate here that literature does not, in fact, play the central role in the learning process which the ignorant Catherine must undergo if she is to cope effectively with the rigors of adult life.

At the beginning of Northanger Abbey, Catherine is unformed, but it would be a mistake to consider her as a mere tabula rasa. In the course of the novel, a number of scattered references are made to the nature of Catherine's family and to the sort of upbringing she has been given. If we combine the bits of evidence with which we are provided in these references, we can form a fairly adequate idea of the sort of sheltered world Catherine has known before her introduction into the wider and more perilous society of Bath. It is, of course, from the world of her childhood that Catherine has drawn the opinions concerning manners, morals, and human nature with which she will evaluate the new society she is entering.

Perhaps the most significant thing which we learn about Catherine at the opening of the novel is that she is "as free from the apprehension of evil as from the knowledge of it." The neighborhood of Catherine's home at Fullerton parsonage apparently has provided her with only a very small circle of intimate acquaintances and those mostly of the best moral character. Her own parents are sensible, unpretentious, modest, generous, and well-bred. They are, in fact, "plain, matter-of-fact people, who seldom aimed at wit of any kind; her father, at the utmost, being contented with a pun, and her mother with a proverb; they were not in the habit therefore of telling lies to increase their importance." Outside of her own immediate family, Catherine's only close friends are the Aliens. When in search of amusement in the country, Catherine tells Henry Tilney, "I can only go and call on Mrs. Allen." "’What a picture of intellectual poverty,’" Henry replies, and he is certainly right. For Mrs. Allen, as Jane Austen takes pains to point out, is a veritable cipher of a woman, "one of that numerous class of females whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at their being any men in the world who could like them well enough to marry them." And Mr. Allen is just such another plain and unpretentious man as Catherine's own father. We can conclude Catherine's other acquaintances to be neither numerous, nor intimate. Unlike Isabella Thorpe, Catherine mentions no old friends by name. And we learn that not one family in the neighborhood of Fullerton has a son of anything like the proper age for becoming Catherine's lover. All this suggests a very restricted society.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that Catherine's limited circle of acquaintances has provided her with several examples of unpretending merit, but has given her virtually no first-hand knowledge of evil in any of its human forms. One of the most important things that is going to happen to Catherine in the course of Northanger Abbey is her encounter with evil. She must discover for herself the characteristic ways in which human evil manifests itself in polite English society. In this task the experiences of her early life can help Catherine in only two possible ways. First, she can hope to recognize evil by its contrast with the sort of goodness she has previously known. Second, she can trust to the experiences of a wider world than that of Fullerton, which her reading has vicariously given her, as a guide in understanding the new types of people she will encounter at Bath. For Catherine is a reader. We learn that before going to Bath, Catherine has read...
some history, which she dislikes, some Pope, some Gray, some Thompson, and some Shakespeare, plus Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, entire. This list is rather impressive and there can be no doubt that the quality of Catherine's literary fare drops sharply when Isabella Thorpe begins recommending her own favorite novels. On Isabella's advice, Catherine switches from Richardson to the genteel gothic fiction of Mrs. Radcliffe. She is, apparently, also planning to read several books by imitators of the sensational gothic novelist, "Monk" Lewis. We might hope that Catherine's earlier reading of respectable authors has provided her with ideas that will prove useful in evaluating the varied society of Bath, but Jane Austen makes it clear that Catherine's reading has been of a desultory and light-hearted nature and cannot be expected to supply anything "serviceable" in dealing with the "vissitudes" of her new life. It is, as we shall see later, only the reading in gothic novels which Catherine does after she reaches Bath, that remains fresh enough in the young heroine's mind to be drawn upon for aid in understanding and interpreting her unprecedented experiences of evil. The didactic literature of which Mrs. Morland is fond (*Grandison* is her favorite, and she is impressed by *The Mirror's*; instructive essays) has made little or no lasting impression on her daughter. And this probably represents Jane Austen's considered opinion of the educational value of didactic fiction for the average young mind.

Catherine's experiences before she goes to Bath, then, have not taught her how to deal with people who are selfish, vain, pretentious, and improper in their social behavior. Her first acquaintance with such people is in Bath. Her first reaction to such people is characterized by her failure to realize that they are different from people whom she has previously known. Catherine's own family are completely without pretensions to being anything other than ordinary people; they do not affect to rise above "the common feelings of common life." Their manners are conventionally proper, their understanding of reality quite adequate to the demands of everyday life. There is no need for Catherine to take her parents at anything other than their face value and for a long time she fails to realize that the world is full of pretentious and affected people who cannot be accepted at their own estimates of themselves. Indeed, an excessive willingness to believe what people say of themselves remains a part of Catherine's character throughout the novel, and this trait is moderated, rather than completely cured, by her experiences.

Catherine first encounters human evil, which in *Northanger Abbey* typically takes the form of selfishness, vanity, pretension, and impropriety, in the persons of Isabella and John Thorpe. It immediately becomes clear to the reader that both John and Isabella have absolutely no feeling for others and no commitment to truth of any sort. They are also greedy and financially ambitious. In *Northanger Abbey*, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, a man's manners are seen as the social manifestations of his moral condition. Manners here reveal, rather than conceal (as is partially the case in *Persuasion*, for example), the reality of character. And the manners of the Thorpes mirror their characters perfectly. They are both pretentious, but too shallow and foolish to ground their pretensions on any solid understanding of reality, and John and Isabella betray both their dishonesty and their inability to understand the real world in their manners. Neither has much understanding of even the minor rules of propriety governing ordinary social interaction. Both create their own idiosyncratic codes of propriety designed to meet the needs of their overweaning egos. Thus John Thorpe "seemed fearful of being . . . too much like a gentleman unless he were easy where he ought to be civil, and impudent where he might be allowed to be easy." In other words, John disregards all the ordinary, minor rules of civility in order to prove to himself and to others that he is in command of any social situation. John's disregard of conventional decorum when it conflicts with his own ends extends to the major, as well as the minor, rules of propriety. He is quite prepared to lie about both trivial and very important matters at any time and doesn't even have the sense to be disturbed when he is found out. The rule of propriety which prohibits lying (whether in everyday social relations or where something crucially important is concerned) is a very basic and significant one, resting virtually on the line where conventional propriety and pure morality merge. Yet John ignores it openly and repeatedly, telling lies which are sure to be found out about even the most significant aspects of social relations. And this is the outward evidence that he has absolutely no idea of what is important in social behavior, either from the point of view of mere social acceptability or from that of morality. He is beyond the pale.
Isabella's social behavior is a bit less divorced from social and moral reality than her brother's;—but not much. Like John, Isabella invents her own rules of propriety (both major and minor) to suit the needs of the moment. When James Morland, for example, asks her to dance twice at the same ball, Isabella comments to Catherine: "'Only conceive, my dear Catherine, what your brother wants me to do. He wants me to dance with him again, though I tell him that it is a most improper thing, and entirely against the rules. It would make us the talk of the place.'" To this James replies, somewhat perplexed, "'Upon my honour .. . in these public assemblies it is as often done as not,'" and the reader can entertain no doubt that he is quite correct. Not only does Isabella invent her own rules as she goes along, but in addition, she interprets the significance of other people's social behavior—which is, of course, the outward manifestation of their inward feelings and judgments—in a totally idiosyncratic fashion. The significance which Isabella reads into other people's manners bears virtually no resemblance to the significance those manners would have if interpreted according to the clues contained in the conventional code of propriety. Thus, when Isabella sees a young man, with whom she and Catherine are unacquainted, looking at Catherine, her immediate conclusion is, "'I am sure he is in love with you.'" And when she is informed that the Tilneys seemed out of spirits the day Catherine dined with them, Isabella reads their behavior as symptomatic of "pride, pride, insufferable haughtiness and pride."

To some extent, Isabella's idiosyncratic code of propriety is of an ad hoc nature. She is willing to make up a rule to suit a particular occasion, use it once, and drop it forever. Nonetheless, her code of propriety at all times displays certain characteristic qualities. Isabella's own rules of propriety and mode of interpreting the social behavior of others are drawn from sentimental fiction and disregard, as we have said, the conventional propriety of real life. Like the heroine of a sentimental novel who finds herself drawn by an irresistible affinity towards a mind of similar excellence, Isabella forms friendships which "passed so rapidly through every gradation of increasing tenderness, that there was shortly no fresh proof of it to be given." This "literary" mode of forming friendships ignores the cautious rules of conventional propriety, the purpose of which is, in part, to make it impossible for two people to achieve a high degree of intimacy before they have had time to gain real knowledge of each other's characters. Similarly, in seeing evidences of romantic passion in a passing glance, Isabella is judging manners by the significance they would have in a sentimental novel and disregarding the fact that manners have a very different sort of significance in common life.

Isabella's motives for attempting to import the manners of literature into real life are not difficult to discover. She is a beautiful, but undowered, young woman whose every hope of achieving status, comfort, and respect in life depends on her ability to make a good marriage. Marriage and the flirtation and romance which lead up to it are the only things that have any real significance or interest for Isabella. And the conventions of behavior characterizing the sentimental novel, conventions which attribute extraordinary emotional importance to the most ordinary social behavior, permit Isabella to find the romance she is searching for, virtually everywhere she looks. If she operated according to the minor conventions of everyday propriety, it would be much more difficult for Isabella to think of romance all the time.

The pursuit of a husband for a young lady of Jane Austen's era was necessarily a passive one, mostly a question of waiting to be chosen. Isabella, it is true, makes this pursuit as active as she can, physically chasing good-looking young men through the streets of Bath. Yet it is clear that even though Isabella is willing to violate the major rules of propriety which forbid her to seek a husband actively, the scope for action that will not obviously defeat its own ends is very narrow in this area. Isabella is therefore terribly bored and part of her attempt to live according to the conventions of literature is motivated by her desire to give some interest and significance to her own trammelled existence. By describing her own life as if she were the heroine of a sentimental novel, Isabella can convince herself that she is a fascinating woman experiencing exciting adventures. Thus, she discusses her extremely placid and commonplace romance with James Morland in completely inappropriate terms: "'The very first moment I beheld him—my heart was irrecoverably gone. . . . Oh! Catherine, the many sleepless nights I have had on your brother's account—.. . I am grown wretchedly thin I know . . . ''' etc., etc.
All this reflects not only Isabella's boredom and her anxiety about her own fate, but also her vanity and her overweaning desire for attention and consequence. She wishes to seem fascinating not only in her own eyes, but also in the eyes of others. Jane Austen does not overlook any of the pressures which make Isabella's behavior what it is, yet she has no sympathy with her. One of the most fundamental points made in *Northanger Abbey* is simply that decent and intelligent people must come to terms with the fact that real life is usually dull, that it provides only restricted opportunities for action, and that most people (even if they are well above average in every way) can hope neither to be exciting in themselves, nor born to exciting fates. Early in the novel, Jane Austen describes a conversation between Catherine and Miss Tilney in which "not an observation was made, nor an expression used by either which had not been made and used some thousands of times before . . . in every Bath season." But Jane Austen does not censure Catherine and Miss Tilney for the fact that their remarks are totally unoriginal in content. Instead, she congratulates them on the manner in which they have spoken: "with simplicity and truth and without personal conceit." For this is, indeed, "something uncommon." Catherine and Miss Tilney are to be congratulated because boredom and conceit are not strong enough forces in their natures—as they are in Isabella's;—to make them wish to escape from the restrictions of dull reality. They have come to terms with their own essential ordinariness. It is, of course, ironic that true adventure will come to both of them—as it never will to Isabella—yet they would not be rational if they were to expect it, and they would be less rational still if they were to expect it as a part of every day's program. The minor rules of propriety receive Jane Austen's approval in *Northanger Abbey* because she believes them to be based upon an understanding and an acceptance of the restrictive realities of everyday life. The proprieties of the sentimental novel, according to which Isabella attempts to live, however, are based upon an attempt to transcend the restrictions of everyday reality and to achieve a freer and more exciting state of being. Such an attempt Jane Austen believes to be doomed from the start, simply because most human beings, and therefore their everyday lives, are extremely limited.

And Isabella's is not the only example of an attempt to import the conventions of literature into real life which can be found in *Northanger Abbey*. Indeed the novel is full of attacks on a variety of false and unrealistic conventions of taste, emotion, language, and manners, ultimately drawn from the world of the sentimental novel, which have become acceptable in polite society. The convention of taste which dictates that everyone must get tired of Bath after six weeks, for example, is derived from the common assumption of sentimental fiction that truly exalted minds are peculiarly susceptible to the charms of nature. Yet the very people who profess a disgust with Bath and a passion for the country, as Henry Tilney points out, "'lengthen their six weeks into ten or twelve, and go away at last because they can afford to stay no longer.'" Similarly, the manners of the fop, which Henry parodies, derive from fiction their basic assumption that the most trivial relationships between a man and a woman must be charged with emotion. Thus, when Catherine tells Henry that she has been in Bath about a week, he replies:

"Really!" with affected astonishment.

"Why should you be surprized, sir?"

"Why, indeed!" said he, in his natural tone—"but some emotion must appear to be raised by your reply."

All these basically literary conventions of taste and proprieties of behavior have gained currency because people wish to give to their own daily lives some of the excitement characteristic of the lives of fictional heroes. But Jane Austen points out that no set of proprieties can make sense unless it accepts, as its starting point, the fact that real life—not invariably, as Catherine will discover, but basically nonetheless—does not share the excitement of fiction. Real life can be exciting, but it is certainly not exciting all day and every day, and the minor rules of propriety are meant to apply to everyday conduct. When excitement does come into real life, it comes, as we shall see, in its own characteristic manner, which is not the manner of sentimental or gothic fiction.
Since before meeting the Thorpes, Catherine has had virtually no experience with the sort of person who pretends to be something that he is not and who therefore cannot be taken at face value, for a long time it simply does not occur to her to doubt that the Thorpes are exactly the sort of people they pretend to be. John, of course, does not take Catherine in nearly as long as Isabella does. This is partly because his lies and distortions of fact are so blatant and frequent that even the credulous Catherine cannot help noticing them. But Catherine comes to dislike John Thorpe less because she sees through his pretensions than because she dislikes the sort of person he is pretending to be. The role John chooses to play is that of the hard-drinking, free-spending, yet financially shrewd, man-of-the-world, who despises sentiment, ceremony, and literature, who can dominate any social situation, and who never denies himself a pleasure. Catherine never even realizes consciously that John is anything but the shrewd, skilled, and dominating manipulator of others he believes himself to be—she dislikes him because the sort of man he pretends to be is totally offensive to her both from a moral and from an aesthetic point of view.

With Isabella the case is far different. Isabella presents herself as the heroine of a sentimental novel: full of warm, generous, uncontrollable feelings, loyal to her friends, uninterested in money. Catherine wholeheartedly approves of such a heroine. When Isabella professes a sentiment like, "were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice," Catherine finds it a "grand idea." Since Catherine approves of the sort of heroine Isabella is pretending to be, she cannot reject Isabella until she sees through the falseness of Isabella's pretensions. This sort of looking below the surface is something Catherine finds very difficult to do—consciously at least—yet Catherine begins to suspect Isabella before she leaves Bath to visit Northanger Abbey.

While she remains at Bath, Catherine begins to understand Isabella's essential dishonesty only because Isabella's selfishness and vanity often cause her behavior to be radically at variance with the dictates of conventional propriety. And to the rules of conventional propriety, it soon becomes clear, Catherine has a deep and fairly well-considered commitment. When, for example, Mr. Allen hints to Catherine that there may be some impropriety in the unchaperoned drives she has been taking with John Thorpe, Catherine immediately reproaches Mrs. Allen, "Dear Madam . . . then why did not you tell me so before? I am sure if I had known it to be improper, I would not have gone with Mr. Thorpe at all." Considerations of propriety always come before considerations of mere pleasure with Catherine, and not merely because Catherine is afraid to judge and act for herself. Fairly early in the novel, John and Isabella try to convince Catherine to break an engagement she has made to take a country walk with the Tilneys, on the false excuse that she has just been reminded of a prior engagement to drive with them. Catherine's reactions to this incident prove that she has a basically sound, though not a consciously worked-out or really theoretical, understanding of the functions fulfilled by the conventional rules of propriety in an ordered society. In refusing to violate the minor rule of propriety which forbids one to break an engagement merely because one has received a second invitation, Catherine tells the Thorpes, "Indeed I cannot go. If I am wrong, I am doing what I believe to be right." Thinking the incident over later, she reflects that "she had not been withstanding them on selfish principles alone [she does, of course, prefer to go with the Tilneys], she had not consulted merely her own gratification; . . . no, she had attended to what was due to others, and to her own character in their opinion." Catherine understands the basic moral function of the minor rules of propriety: that they provide a fairly sensible guide to the consideration and attention we owe to other people in society. And she also understands that since these rules are commonly accepted and commonly believed to be sensible and moral, we can violate them only at the risk of losing the good opinion of others. Therefore, when Catherine sees Isabella disregarding some of the most significant and moral minor rules of propriety, she begins, though tentatively, to suspect that her friend is not quite the generous and sensitive person she pretends to be. When Isabella urges Catherine to lie to the Tilneys, Catherine is even capable of suspecting that Isabella may in fact be "ungenerous and selfish, regardless of everything but her own gratification." When Isabella's literary pretensions conflict even with the everyday minor rules of propriety, there is never any question that Catherine's approval and allegiance remain with the rules.
Catherine's commitment to both the major and minor rules of conventional propriety is deep. Yet for such an unreflective and unsophisticated young lady, she seems to have a very reliable instinct concerning which minor rules of propriety are important because they have moral significance and which may be safely disregarded, on occasion, because they are matters of custom and ceremony only. A distinction virtually identical to the one made in *Pride and Prejudice* is at issue here. The rules of propriety are divided into those with a basic moral justification (this class includes all the major and many minor rules) and those which are matters of fashion and convenience alone (only minor rules fall into this class). But Catherine's understanding of the distinction, unlike Elizabeth Bennet's, seems to be instinctual, rather than conscious. Catherine is adamant in her refusal to break her engagement with the Tilneys (which would be inconsiderate and hurtful, hence immoral). But after she discovers that John Thorpe has broken the engagement behind her back, she chases the Tilneys home to their lodgings "and the servant still remaining at the open door [which they have just entered], she used only the ceremony of saying that she must speak with Miss Tilney that moment and hurrying by him proceeded upstairs" to set matters right. That her mode of entry is highly improper (the general finds it very odd) does not bother Catherine. She seems to sense that on this one occasion she has a rational and moral reason for breaking the minor rule which says that a visitor must wait to be shown in by a servant—and she is quite right in her assumption that the Tilneys will understand and approve her motives. Catherine believes that when an essentially moral or justifiable intention conflicts with a minor rule of propriety, the rule must go. However, her deep commitment to all the rules of conventional propriety simply because they are rules indicates that she does not consider this likely to happen very frequently.

It is difficult, then, for Catherine to appreciate the value of Henry Tilney's somewhat unorthodox manners. His disregard of ceremony, particularly in the interests of a joke, is often striking. Compared to Catherine herself, Henry plays fast and loose with the minor rules of decorum. Catherine sees that Henry's "manner might sometimes surprize" a person deeply committed to the conventional rules of propriety. When she first meets him, this leads her to suspect that "he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others," in other words, that his unorthodox manners indicated a want of respect for and kindness towards other people. But when she gets to know him better (and, incidentally, falls in love with him) she is able to see, and quite correctly so, that in spite of his frequent disregard of ceremony "his meaning must always be just." The fact that the narrator pokes fun at Catherine's infatuated willingness to admire even "what she did not understand" in Henry's social behavior, does not in any way invalidate Catherine's essentially sound estimate of Henry's manners. After Henry reproaches Catherine for the liberties she has been taking with his father's character, she is overwhelmed with guilt and self-reproach and fears she has lost his good opinion forever. But when the two next meet, Henry alters his manners and pays Catherine "rather more attention than usual." This "soothing politeness" gradually raises her spirits "to a modest tranquility." It also proves that Henry understands that the essence of good manners is a generous, moral consideration for others, rather than a lifeless adherence to all the conventional rules of propriety. At the end of the novel, Henry refuses to break, at his Father's command, his tacit engagement to marry Catherine—an incident which parallels Catherine's earlier refusal to break her engagement to walk with Henry and his sister. Like Catherine, Henry will not break the important, moral rules of propriety, but he sets considerably less store than she does on the minor rules which regulate only custom and ceremony. The main difference between Catherine and Henry's views of propriety is that Henry is quite conscious that he violates the conventional minor rules when he feels himself justified in doing so, while Catherine, though she occasionally acts upon this principle, never consciously realizes that technical impropriety is frequently justified.

Catherine's encounters with the Thorpes and with Henry Tilney have demonstrated that though her judgment of others may not be shrewd or penetrating, her instinctive understanding of the nature and function of good manners is basically sound. It is Catherine's encounter with General Tilney—by far the most evil person she meets in the course of the novel—that will reveal the inadequacies of her ideas concerning propriety as tools for understanding others. General Tilney, to an even greater degree than John and Isabella Thorpe, is selfish, vain, pretentious, and ambitious. His manners express his character just as clearly as their manners express theirs. But, unlike John and Isabella, the general is intensely aware of the rules of conventional propriety and
though his every action violates the spirit of those rules, their letter is sacred to him. The general's particular pretension is that of good breeding. He describes and considers himself as the most courteous man in the world. When Catherine is first introduced to General Tilney, he receives her with "ready . . . solicitous politeness. . . . To such anxious attention was the General's civility carried that, not aware of her extraordinary swiftness in entering the house [as described above, Catherine has pushed her way past the servant] he was quite angry with the servant whose neglect had reduced her to open the door of the apartment herself . . . it seemed likely that William would lose the favor of his master forever, if not his place, by her rapidity." Thus, on General Tilney's first appearance in the story, the character of his manners is clearly revealed. All the ceremonies of civility are offered to Catherine, whom the general wishes to please for purely selfish reasons. All the content of truly proper social behavior is ignored in the general's suspicious and resentful conduct to his blameless, but also helpless, servant.

Catherine, as we have seen, has a deep commitment to the conventional rules of propriety, though she is also willing to dispense with some of their purely ceremonious manifestations. And she is unusually slow in seeing through the pretensions of others. The general's pretension to good breeding, supported as it is by a consistent, if superficial, adherence to the conventional propriety Catherine values, takes Catherine in completely. Insofar as Catherine is able to see through Isabella's pretensions, it is because Isabella's behavior repeatedly and fairly openly violates rules which Catherine understands and approves. But the general pretentiously parades his allegiance to those very rules and for a long time this confuses Catherine deeply. When she dines with the Tilneys, Catherine is puzzled that "in spite of [General Tilney's] great civilities to her—in spite of his thanks, invitations, and compliments—it had been a release to get away from him." When Catherine sees that the forms of conventional propriety are absent from Isabella's behavior, she is capable, though dimly, of suspecting that the moral and emotional content of true propriety is absent too. But with the general, Catherine mistakes the form for the content and fails to realize that the presence of the former is no guarantee of the latter. Catherine's own behavior demonstrates that, tacitly at least, she is able to discriminate between the important or moral and the trivial or merely ceremonial rules of propriety. But that virtually all the major and minor rules can be divorced from their moral content, manipulated in a manner directly contrary to their basic intention, and yet not quite openly violated, simply does not occur to her. Yet this is precisely what General Tilney characteristically does.

"Well, Eleanor, may I congratulate you on being successful in your application to your fair friend [to visit Northanger]?” [he asks his daughter.]

"I was just beginning to make the request, sir, as you came in."

"Well, proceed by all means. I knew how much your heart is in it. My daughter, Miss Morland," he continued, without leaving his daughter time to speak, "has been forming a very bold wish."

Passages such as this one demonstrate that General Tilney's commitment to the proprieties is extremely superficial. Though he pays lip service to the rule of decorum which says he must allow his daughter time to finish the private conversation which he has unwittingly interrupted, in actuality he doesn't let her say another word. The hypocrisy with which he manipulates the forms of politeness is so transparent that Catherine's persistence in viewing him as a model of decorum becomes striking evidence of an almost pathological inability to look below the surface of social pretence. Before her visit to Northanger Abbey, Catherine senses something odd about the general, but is quite unable to define what is wrong. Although one purpose of good manners is to put others at their ease, the general's behavior makes Catherine intensely uncomfortable. However, she attributes this discomfort solely to "her own stupidity" and not to something lacking in his manners.
When she is thrown into intimate contact with General Tilney, as a guest in his house, prolonged and close observation of his character forces Catherine to consider the question of why "so charming a man seemed always a check upon his children's spirits," why everyone is afraid of him in spite of his ostentatious politeness. It is in attempting to solve this mystery—and for her it really is a mystery—that Catherine first tries to apply the notions she has recently derived from gothic fiction to real life. It is not unnatural that General Tilney should remind Catherine of a gothic villain. The unmitigated evil that she senses in him is, as we shall see, really there. What gothic fiction has taught Catherine is that evil men, such as she suspects the general of being, express their wickedness in violent ways, but shroud their crimes in the deepest mystery. Two ways of solving the puzzle of the general are open to Catherine. The correct way is to conclude that General Tilney's superficially civil manners are not good manners, because they actually express his selfishness and egotism in a disguised, but perfectly recognisable, form. The incorrect, "gothic" way—which Catherine, characteristically, adopts—is to accept his conventionally proper manners at face value (as good manners, that is) and to conclude that those manners are an elaborate blind which conceals his real, horrible character. Thus, Catherine's first conclusion about the general is that there is a radical disparity between his good manners and his bad morals, and that those bad morals have expressed themselves only in secret crime. Such a conclusion is supported both by the view of human nature Catherine has found in the gothic novels she read at Bath and by her own unquestioned value for the forms of conventional propriety as good in themselves.

Henry and Eleanor Tilney, it might be added, are not in the least confused about their father's character or manner, and both attempt to enlighten Catherine on these points by discreet hints. But the rules of propriety demanding filial respect prohibit Henry and Eleanor from speaking openly about General Tilney's faults and Catherine, for a long while, consistently misinterprets their hints in accordance with her gothic preconceptions. Eleanor's decorous attempts to enlighten Catherine about the general invariably misfire. On Catherine's first morning at Northanger, for example, the general wishes to take an early walk at the precise moment when Catherine fervently wants to be shown around the Abbey. Characteristically, he masks his selfishness beneath the forms of propriety. "Which would she [Catherine] prefer? He was equally at her service.—Which did his daughter think would most accord with her fair friend's wishes?—But . . . Yes, he certainly read in Miss Morland's eyes a judicious desire of making use of the present smiling weather.—... He yielded implicitly and would fetch his hat." No less characteristically, Catherine accepts his speech at face value and laments to Eleanor "that he should be taking them out of doors against his own inclination, under a mistaken idea of pleasing her." Eleanor, who is well aware of her father's motives and meaning, is confused by the fact that propriety forbids her to speak openly and says only, "Do not be uneasy on my father's account, he always walks out at this time of day." This hint seems plain enough, but Catherine "did not exactly know how [it] was to be understood. Why was Miss Tilney embarrassed? Could there be any unwillingness on the General's side to show her over the Abbey?" And it is at this moment that the idea of a dark crime which General Tilney has committed within the Abbey's walls begins to take form in Catherine's mind. If Catherine had been able to understand the general's manners on her own or from Eleanor and Henry's hints, her gothic delusions would have had no mystery to give them their start.

Henry's hints about his father—never as guarded as Eleanor's;—grow gradually more open as he comes to know Catherine better. It is mostly as a result of Henry's instruction that Catherine finally comes to a valid understanding of the general's character and manners—and we must next examine the process by which she reaches this understanding. To a large degree, Henry's own manners can be seen as a reaction against his father's social behavior. The general respects the forms of propriety while disregarding their spirit. Henry, on the other hand, tends to be rather careless about the minor forms, but is at all times considerate of others and faithful in discharging his moral obligations. Henry can refer to Eleanor in public, most improperly, as "my stupid sister," yet his company and kindness are clearly her greatest comforts. General Tilney, on the other hand, is scrupulously polite to his daughter, yet tries her patience continually and severely. Henry's own manners provide a running commentary on those of his father and it is her observation of Henry, as we have noted, that first suggests to Catherine that "meaning" may sometimes be more significant than "manner." Thus
Henry's manners have provided Catherine, from the beginning, with the key to General Tilney's mystery. But Henry's explicit instructions are also needed if Catherine is to learn how to use that key.

Puzzled by the disparity she finds between the general's "good" manners and the evil which she senses is a part of his character, Catherine, as we have seen, invents a gothic solution. The general is a criminal, probably a wife-murderer, who carefully hides his true character under a mask of propriety. Luckily for Catherine, Henry discovers her suspicions (which are not very well concealed) and reads her a long lecture on their injustice.

Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. . . . Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you.—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open?

This is an interesting speech. In the first place, Henry makes no real attempt to defend his father's character; he does not claim that his father is a good man who would not wish to commit a murder under any circumstances. No, Henry's defense of his father from Catherine's charges rests on quite other premises. The basic assumption here is that even criminals are rational and are not likely to commit crimes that are going to be discovered and punished. And the age is such a public and suspicious one that a prominent man like the general could not hope to murder his wife and escape exposure and ruin. Therefore, the general probably did not murder his wife. This, it seems to me, is the logical structure of the argument Henry is making here. Evil exists, as Catherine now suspects, but evil people are not going to act in ways that will get them into trouble. For they can easily find ways of expressing their true natures without openly violating the accepted "laws of the land, and the manners of the age." This, of course, is what General Tilney does.

Henry's lecture makes a deep impression on Catherine, but she does not really understand it. In the first place, she is somewhat confused by Henry's assertion that his father loved his mother as well as such a cold man can love anyone. In making this claim, Henry is not trying to prove to Catherine that his father is basically a good man. On the contrary, he refers explicitly to his father's bad temper and lack of tenderness and says nothing that indicates a belief that the general might not have had criminal impulses of various sorts toward people other than his wife. But this distinction is lost upon Catherine. She now sees that "the manners of the age" must be "some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved," but she again makes her characteristic error of confounding "manner" and "meaning," or "habit" and "heart." If the manners of the age do not permit murder, if the general has not, in fact, murdered his wife, then Catherine concludes that the impulse to commit murder or other sorts of crime must also be absent from the general's psychological makeup. Yet this is precisely the assertion that Henry cleverly avoids making. "Among the Alps and Pyrenees [where the extreme manners of gothic fiction hold sway]," Catherine muses, "perhaps there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not spotless as an angel, might have the dispositions of a fiend. But . . . among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general, though unequal, mixture of good and bad" (my italics). Because English laws and manners forbid murder or other extreme forms of violence, Catherine concludes that there are no English fiends. And since the general has been cleared from her "grossly injurious suspicions," the most Catherine is willing to say against him is that he is "not perfectly amiable." Though the narrator presents Catherine's conclusions without apparent irony of tone, it soon becomes clear that Catherine is mistaken in her belief that General Tilney's is a mixed character containing more good than bad.

Henry soon becomes aware that in spite of his instructions, the removal of her gothic delusion has left Catherine with the almost equally erroneous belief that the general's superficially civil manners are evidence of a basically sound, if not perfectly amiable, character. When the general civilly remarks that Henry need pay
no special attention to the dinner he is to give for his family at Woodston, Catherine as usual accepts the statement at face value. Henry is forced to tell her quite openly that the general is being insincere and, in fact, expects a superb dinner to be prepared for him. This is a revelation to Catherine. "The inexplicability of the General's conduct dwelt much on her thoughts . . . why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood?" Catherine has finally asked herself the appropriate question. How can people be understood if the forms of good manners are no guarantee that the content is present? The answer is breathtakingly simple: people's pretensions to good manners must be consciously and continually questioned, not only when, as with Isabella and John Thorpe, the forms are often absent, but also, as with General Tilney, when the forms appear to be present.

The revelation of Isabella's two-faced conduct toward Catherine's brother James provides a catalyst which arranges all Catherine's earlier vague suspicions of her friend in a clear and ordered pattern. She realizes at last that Isabella "is a vain coquette . . . she never had any regard either for James or for me." Similarly, General Tilney's character must be revealed in a dramatic and unmistakeable form if Catherine is to understand it—and fortunately for Catherine, such a revelation is made. General Tilney has been courting Catherine as a wife for Henry under the mistaken impression that she is an heiress on a spectacular scale. Learning his mistake, he turns her from his house in the rudest possible manner and orders his son to think of her no more. Henry, however, is delightfully loyal to Catherine and when he tells her the whole story of his father's motives, Catherine concludes "that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character or magnified his cruelty." This is Catherine's final judgment of the general and I believe it to be essentially valid, in spite of the fact that it sounds less balanced than her earlier conclusion that the general had a mixed character.

Jane Austen seems to have in mind here a simple estimate of the moral significance of murder which she considers relevant to General Tilney's behavior. Murder may be conceived as a totally egotistical act. For in practical terms, even if he is not aware of it, a murderer necessarily values his own desires or needs at an infinitely higher rate than those of his victim. Even the victim's right to live cannot influence the murderer, who must think only of himself. Now this sort of unbounded selfishness, which I think Jane Austen has in mind here as part of the very definition of a murderer, is the general's most prominent character trait. And when General Tilney expells Catherine from his house, Jane Austen means us to see his action as a domestic parody of a killing. Catherine's continued existence in the general's vicinity has become highly disagreeable to him and in this respect Catherine resembles the typical murder victim. The general, like a real murderer, wants his victim eliminated as completely and quickly as possible from his world. In turning Catherine out of his house without the slightest consideration for the rights which the code of propriety gives her at his hands, the general parodies the actions of the murderer whose own interests necessarily are more important to him than any of his victim's rights. As Catherine now realizes, the general really is something of a fiend.

The difference between General Tilney and the average gothic villain, then, is not to be found in the quantity or quality of evil in their hearts. Rather it resides, as Henry has known all along, in the manner in which that evil is expressed. Murder is quite decorous in gothic fiction, but in England it is likely to be punished, for it violates the laws and manners of the age. Villians like General Tilney will therefore tend to express their evil impulses without defying law and custom openly enough to get themselves into trouble. General Tilney, of course, represents an extreme manifestation of this tendency. His manners invariably express the evil in his heart, but General Tilney is able to preserve all the forms of conventional propriety intact, except on the one occasion when he expells Catherine from Northanger. Here, his wrath and resentment are so great that they simply cannot be expressed within even the purely formal constraints of his usual code of propriety. However, it is significant that even in his most extreme wrath, the general violates only the minor rules of propriety and not the laws of the realm. At the worst, he has exposed himself to such halfhearted censure as Mrs. Allen's, "I really have not patience with the General"—but he is certainly safe from any serious form of punishment. And this, it seems to me, is what Catherine must learn about the difference between life and gothic fiction: the
same evil and potential for violence are present in both, but in real life evil tends to be expressed in ways which are customary and socially acceptable and which therefore expose the evil doer to little risk of punishment. And the rules of propriety, though basically moral in intention, in practice are quite flexible enough to permit bad people to express the evil in their hearts without getting themselves into serious trouble. Life and fiction differ in "manner" more than in "meaning." It is only by realizing how completely a conventionally proper manner can be divorced from the basic moral meaning it ought to have, that Catherine can come to understand the relationship between General Tilney and the typical gothic villain.

Catherine's original gothic fantasies about General Tilney represent a garbling of the truth, rather than a complete delusion. And when she reacts to Henry's remonstrance by concluding that there is no resemblance between life and gothic fiction and that the general is a mixed character whose professions of civility and generosity have at least some value, Catherine is as far from the truth as ever. It is only at the end of the novel (and with the help of a very complete revelation), that Catherine begins to gain some real understanding of General Tilney. The narrator describes General Tilney's letter consenting to Henry and Catherine's marriage as a document "very courteously worded in a page full of empty professions." I think we can assume that the narrator's viewpoint here is now shared by Catherine. Catherine has finally realized that courteous professions can be empty, that the forms of good manners are ultimately quite separable from the inward virtues they are supposed to represent. Catherine has never, as we have seen, made this mistake in her conduct—her manners have always been based on good morals and a realistic, if tacit, understanding of what is important in social behavior. But she has been only too willing to accept other people's unsupported pretensions to good manners or good taste at their own valuations. Catherine's rejection of Isabella Thorpe and General Tilney shows that she finally realizes that in her own era a more or less well-supported pretension to virtue and propriety is the characteristic manner of evil.

**Criticism: Eric Rothstein (essay date 1974)**


[Here, Rothstein explores Austen's narrative technique in Northanger Abbey, claiming that the central theme of the novel emerges from the interplay between the respective educations of Catherine and the reader.]

In *Northanger Abbey*, as in a number of works of eighteenth-century fiction (say, *Tom Jones*), the protagonist and the reader undergo parallel, but in almost no way identical, educations. The reader, as Austen's irony announces in the first paragraph, is to be led toward something better than the conventional novels to which she alludes again and again in the course of the book. As to the protagonist, the first chapter offers a dry account of Catherine's progress in music and drawing; these early lessons are extended by Mrs Allen and Henry Tilney, who teach her how to choose muslins and compose picturesque scenes, and are also extended by Catherine herself, who learns first from books and then by testing experience through trial and error. All this is obvious enough. The connections between Catherine's education and ours, however, are less obvious: so are those between two modes in Catherine's own development, the social (Bath) and the literary (Northanger Abbey). Here, to some critics, the coherence of the novel seems to break down, an event to be explained from Austen's biography. She did, after all, move from literary satire in her earliest works toward psychological and moral issues in her mature fiction: *Northanger Abbey*, in between the two, seems to look both ways, and Janus Austen fails where young Jane or mature Jane succeeded. I do not think that this is a necessary hypothesis, and I should like to devote the rest of this article to proposing a more flattering one, in which the tables are turned. That is, I propose that the strength of *Northanger Abbey*, and its theme, emerge from the connections between Catherine's education and ours, and between the social and literary modes in her experience.
The connections are made peculiarly complex by Austen's granting Catherine an autonomy from the novel, of the sort that we readers naturally maintain. A look at the first chapter will suggest what I mean. There, a volley of innuendos about her future heroism makes one include under 'education' all Catherine's movements toward 'heroic' status, the freshening of her adolescent complexion as well as her growth in memorizing moral sentences. Much of Austen's irony at this point comes from her pretense that in real life, the life that her novel imitates, Catherine can 'learn to be a heroine,' a category not proper to real life at all, but only to the repertoire of fiction. Superficially, such irony looks like a special irony of Fielding's, the 'transformation of a spontaneous and impromptu action into one performed to accord with a formal pattern... [which] imposes on the unthinking or spontaneous actions and deductions of the characters a strong suggestion of deliberations and definite intention; the instinctive and intuitional become conscious and purposeful.' But in Fielding, such a transformation is a means of enlarging the scope of expectations within which we see the character. As his diction grows more formal, trivia try on epic armour for size and so are given their proper measure within the limits of action. No matter how trivial Catherine may or may not be, however, she cannot be given proper measure by trying on a heroine's furbelows, because the formal patterns that stand behind her spontaneous actions have no set value. Dignity, in Fielding, is at least a provisional norm; novelistic heroism in the first chapter of Northanger Abbey is not. As we see Catherine passing from infancy to mid-adolescence, we see the firm fact of her normality measuring the truth to nature of the sort of fiction which trades in heroines. The method of Fielding has been stood on its head so decisively that Catherine, in her nondescript childhood, becomes the main witness of Austen's own imitative truth to nature. In Northanger Abbey, then, the characters are declared to be logically prior to the fiction, and therefore ideally autonomous of it. Fielding establishes the world for Tom Jones; Catherine, as an index of normality, establishes the world for Austen, and thus exceeds the fiction in which she appears. At the same time, obviously, the novel contains Catherine and offers us a way of dealing with her experience—according to the laws of fiction—which she cannot know.

We can see this play between control and independence still more openly in Austen's treatment of Eleanor's marriage, 'an event,' the narrator says, 'which I expect to give general satisfaction among all her acquaintance. My own joy on the occasion is very sincere.' Here the mobiographer's pose amuses us, especially because the marriage seems to have been brewed up all of a sudden to get the plot together, and the narrator to be rejoicing not for Eleanor but for her own last-minute ingenuity. As the passage goes on, however, she checks our amusement by continuing the pose to say something for which we no longer feel irony appropriate: 'I know no one more entitled, by unpretending merit, or better prepared by habitual suffering, to receive and enjoy felicity.' This is not funny. The narrator seems to be taking the independence of Eleanor seriously, rather in the manner of a biographer, who knows that for him character and form are independent as well as interdependent. Is the 'tell-tale compression of the pages' by which the reader foresees a quick and happy dénouement, for example, the comment of a biographer or of a contriver of fiction? For both kinds of author, after all, the compression of pages is tell-tale, although the source of control over length differs.

Similarly, when Catherine comes back to her home in Fullerton, Austen repeats the tone of heavy irony about heroines and heroism with which Catherine was introduced to us at the beginning of the book, also in Fullerton: oine in a hack post-chaise, is such a blow upon sentiment, as no attempt at grandeur or pathos can withstand. Nothing, at first glance, seems less appropriate than this tone. The irony does not, as in the first chapter, preclude tragedy or sympathy: twenty-eight chapters of Northanger Abbey have cured us of looking for tragedy and left us incurable as to sympathy for Catherine. Nor does she now fancy herself a prospective heroine; for the first time, she does not. Yet it is no accident that this renewal of irony comes just after the point that corresponds to the anagnorisis and peripeteia of an Aristotelian plot, when her expulsion from the Abbey has informed her what the spirit of Gothic violence might really mean, and has set in motion for her a redefinition of the Abbey, of Bath society (as typified by John and Isabella Thorpe, whose casual slander and golddigging glamour respectively refer straight to the General's motives), and eventually of Fullerton itself, whose adequacy Catherine is to find she has outgrown. It is at this point in the book that she can be least scathed by Austen's irony, and therefore when Austen finds it safest to reassert her authorial context of order,
correlative with Catherine's. I will turn to Austen's context, which is connected with our education, and Catherine's, which is concerned with her own, quite shortly.

First, however, I might note that the autonomy of the characters is not merely a logical inference. It is intended and purposive. It sets this novel apart from the formulatic novels being satirized, novels that pretend to let one look directly at the lives of the characters without an author's intrusions, but which in fact impose a crude and familiar pattern on those lives. Austen lays claim to more frankness and less imposing of patterns. Another purpose of the autonomy enjoyed by the characters is to make quite clear a parallel between Catherine and us. She, with her free and unconstrained will, is trying to 'read' events, using inferences from her experience (including that from novels); we are doing the same thing, except that the events we are 'reading' are those within a novel. Finally, the autonomy of the characters, and therefore their freedom, is important in a novel which puts stress on education, a matter of choice within a context of established possibilities. The co-ordinates of values and prediction that operate here refer directly to a freedom of assessment and to an ability to erect at least provisional laws, in short to a balance between the claims of 'liberty' and 'necessity' (as Hume called them). The Mysteries of Udolpho, with its formulae, concentrates on necessity, the impositions of the unchosen on individuals; the narrator's voice in Northanger Abbey supplies that dimension, but Austen must, and does, balance it with the other dimension, that of liberty, to enable education to go on. She makes the form of the book, unlike that of Emma or Persuasion, independent of the heroine's mind or perceptiveness, and the heroine ingenuous and unfledged enough, unlike Emma Woodhouse or Anne Elliot, not to cloud with her own personality the world she must interpret. This reduction of personality makes it possible for Austen to keep our attention on Catherine's freedom and also to bring protagonist and reader into line with each other. To Austen, after all, her 'reader' is also a creature of reduced personality, a mere common denominator of real people, marked by a good heart, a moderate knowledge of the world, and a certain alertness.

As to Catherine's 'context of order,' as I have called it, it is designed to be, and is in fact, simply the sum of her experience as recorded in Northanger Abbey. Austen's, which is also made ours, has an additional depth, from literary convention. I can illustrate the effect of this difference most easily with an example. Near the end of chapter 1 comes a list of choice phrases from 'works [that] heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventual lives.' At first, Austen seems only to be making fun of sententiousness, or perhaps of pulling such moral blossoms from their proper gardens in Pope, Gray, Thomson, and Shakespeare. A closer look suggests that she has a positive point: so as to make the blossoms grow in new soil, they have to be part of a new garden. Catherine's literary snippets do respond in some degree to the forthcoming vicissitudes of her 'heroism.' The subjects of the six quotations are every one of them to be a major theme in Catherine's life, for they include (in order) social unkindness, obscured merit, education, passionate deductions from trifles, equality of suffering regardless of rank, and the pain of thwarted love. If the quotations do not soothe Catherine, they at least serve her. They offer her a matrix for her experience, and incidentally, they rebuke by anticipation the sort of literal-mindedness that Catherine is later to exhibit in applying literature—Gothic formulas—to life. None of the quotations, as stated, actually works out in her adventures. She does not bear about the mockery of woe, suffer jealousy, sit like Patience on a monument, get trodden on like a beetle, or waste her sweetness on the air of Fullerton; nor does she meet anyone who does any of these. 'The young idea' is taught 'how to shoot,' but not (as in Catherine's source, Thomson's Spring) by parents, all of whom—the Morlands, the Aliens by proxy, Mrs. Thorpe, and General Tilney—make pedagogues at best mediocre. What the quotations do, then, is to point to modes of experience cognate or complementary to Catherine's. She must translate these modes into her own idiom and make them existentially viable, if only by rejecting them for alternative responses in dealing with her public, personal, and inner lives.

She cannot, of course, do this. Once she loses the context—her destiny as a heroine—which is her principle of economy and selection for these quotations, the quotations themselves seem pointless for her. For us, however, the novel itself provides the principle of selection. Whereas for Catherine heroism and her real life
are disjunct, we see them as parts of a single continuous mode of experience, a novel, within which whatever
the novelist selects maintains a purpose. In addition, we can transfer the meaning of the quotations because
Austen has shown us how to do it. This same first chapter, after identifying Catherine with the natural, has
already converted the child of nature into something very much like a child of the novelist's art. The thin
sallow tomboy, that is, has grown steadily prettier. The little girl has traded her insensibility for the shallow
sensitivity of the adolescent, which for a heroine is the right direction. This process hints to us that Austen's
irony will not turn out to be so exclusive as one might have thought at the start of the chapter. The seemingly
excluded elements, without their conventional plumage, can reappear in the perspective her irony creates, to
do their jobs under new working conditions. Without this hint to improve upon, and without the fact and form
of the novel to offer pattern to her, Catherine's reality remains only the immediate linear sequence of her
young life. She cannot be, like us the readers, objective and systematic. When her sense of her heroism ebbs,
her collection of literary snippets has no meaning \textit{qua} collection for her, but for us it is an artistic grouping
contrived by Jane Austen, and thus has a meaning beyond any that the most profound and alert heroine, living
within the novel, could find in it.

Another, more important, intermeshing of the social and literary themes in \textit{Northanger Abbey}, as seen
through the independent perspectives of Catherine and the reader, comes in chapter 14. Here Henry Tilney
confesses quite honestly that he enjoys the tear-stained maidens and saturnine Italians of Mrs Radcliffe. From
such a paragon of ironists, a confession like this is not to be taken lightly, and we are appropriately grateful
for plain evidence of Henry's humanity. None the less, we must look at his commendation in context. The
discussion about Mrs Radcliffe is parenthetized by Catherine's being twitted for misuse of words ('amazingly,'
'nice'). There follows an exchange about history, which Eleanor says she likes both for its truth and for its
fiction (its dramatic embellishments of the attested facts); then an exchange about education, promptly
illustrated by Catherine's being taught informally about the picturesque; and lastly a contretemps in which
Eleanor takes Catherine's intimation about 'something dreadful' to come out in London as prophetic of a riot
instead of a Gothic thriller.

Ignoring the separate benefits of all these discussions for Catherine, one can see that the subjects discussed are
really an analysis of the Gothic novel into components: words, pleasure for readers, history, didacticism,
picturesque scenery, and the violence of life which it professes to imitate. Austen makes clear that these are in
fact Gothic elements. The words that Catherine abuses appear in her discussion of \textit{Udolpho}, and the
'something dreadful' turns out to be a novel. Picturesque scenery comes up because the 'beautiful verdure and
hanging coppice' of Beechen Cliff remind Catherine of the French scenery in \textit{Udolpho}. Historians are
compared with novelists here, and elsewhere the age of Blaize Castle ('The oldest in the kingdom,' John
Thorpe assures her) and Northanger Abbey clearly connects the past and the Gothic novel. As to novelistic
didacticism, or what one can and cannot learn from novels, that is so obvious a theme in this book, and so
obvious a concern of writers like Mrs Radcliffe, that I need not press the point.

In chapter 14, then, Austen fans out these components of the Gothic novel, so that each is exposed against a
norm of some sort. The discussion moves in steady sequence from the more abstract to the more immediate,
from the proper use of affective words to the proper horror at the mobs of Gordon or Robespierre, or, as I
think more historically likely, of the United Irish Society. In between, on either side of the talk about
education, lie the use of fictional art to dress raw annals, and, as its more substantial counterpart, the use of
picturesque art to organize one's view of raw nature. We seem to have the full range of novelistic pretensions
tested against norms, and to discover that on every ground but that of giving pleasure, the novels fail at doing
what they should. Their indiscriminate emotionalism leads to a collapse of verbal and moral precision. Their
historical and scenic folderol teaches one neither to understand nor to see. Henry's commendations are given
the limits that he himself only half bothers to voice; the context asserts the \textit{dulce}, but hardly the \textit{utile}
of fiction. The only crucial element in novels which chapter 14 does not mention, and thereby spares, is the least
'literary' of all; I mean the mimetic. Austen has suggested earlier, in chapter 5, that this is the genuinely useful
part of fiction, which clarifies the dispositions of character and social intelligence in actual life. She has
exemplified her point through the whole of her original volume 1 (chapters 1-15) during which the overtly 'literary'—the source of Catherine's illusions and Isabella Thorpe's poses—has been opposed to the real world, plain language, and calm analysis.

The second half of the novel, however, is to reintegrate the real world and that of literary convention through the central symbol (and titular 'character') of the novel, Northanger Abbey itself. Therefore, just as Catherine's group of literary clichés in chapter 1 turns out to provide a sort of thematic index for her later adventures, so the grouping of chapter 14 provides an index to the Abbey, in which her novelistic and social interests coincide. Words and violence, history and scenery, and education come together in two levels at Northanger Abbey. We have appearances: rhetorical gallantry from a military man, taking place in a building that blends medieval grandeur with modern comfort, set among 'knolls of old trees, or luxuriant plantations, and . . . steep woody hills rising behind to give it shelter.' Appearances have their seamy side in the duplicity of the General's words and the brutality of his conduct, and in the subjugation of history and scenery alike to his greed for mercenary succession in the family and for show. These two treatments of the grouping in chapter 14, each modifying but not denying the other, are Austen's complex alternative to the stock components of the novel. In our—and Catherine's;—movement between these two complementary treatments is the education in 'reading' that stands at the midpoint of the grouping in chapter 14, where 'to torment' and 'to instruct' may become synonyms. The process of learning through pain makes Catherine's and Henry's exercise in subjective lexicography end up a good bit truer than either could realize.

Another kind of revision that we can perform, and Catherine cannot, carries predictive weight within the story. I am thinking of the translation of the Radcliffean dramatis personae into the idiom of Northanger Abbey. If we consider the sequence of Mrs Allen, the younger Thorpes, and General Tilney, we find that we have pastiches of the Gothic novel's watchful chaperone, confidante, unwelcome suitor, and titled villain. But they are not pastiches of the same sort. Mrs Allen is the null version of the chaperone. Isabella is a genuine but corrupt confidante, and her brother a shrunken but certainly genuine unwelcome suitor. The General, finally, is a reasonable facsimile, within a social world, of a Montoni or Schedoni. The sequence moves from burlesque to imitation (in the eighteenth-century sense) of the Gothic, setting up complementary ways of using Gothic fiction within the new idiom of Northanger Abbey. By the time Catherine spends her last wakeful night in the darkness of the Abbey, the Gothic mode has been emptied through the transfer of its energies into her experience and ours. For Catherine, this is psychologically and finally true. For us, as we are sympathetic with her, it is aesthetically true: we at once see the General as the point of convergence where the evil of a Radcliffe villain can meet everyday life, and also as the point of divergence where everyday life fades off into the silliness of dark keeps and darker plots. If we define the General's power of villainy by his character as a Montoni, we cannot forget that sensible people find Montoni a cardboard barbarian. The General may also be more menacing because he is less absurdly parodic, 'realer,' than the other Gothic pastiches; but he shares with Mrs Allen and the Thorpes a literary allusiveness that is predictive. His acts are limited by our knowledge of their Gothic ancestry, and his villainy lives within a world whose claim to be final and tragic has been disputed by the smiling irony of the narrator from the first paragraph on.

Austen reinforces our sense of sequence among these characters—Mrs Allen, the young Thorpes, General Tilney—by making them progressive examples of a single theme, that of egoism, which is particularly appropriate to the self-aggrandizement and self-indulgence that Gothic novels nourish. She starts with Mrs Allen's costume, an external embellishment for a woman barren of both mind and children, a woman for whom dressing takes the place of beauty and social graces. Here the tone is light, the vice fixed on transiency (fashion, individual appearances at discrete events) and therefore without effect. The Thorpes advance this one notch. The egoism of John Thorpe has as its concrete symbol a horse and carriage, which suggests a mobility and continuity denied Mrs Allen. His main interest, in getting someplace, shows itself through gossip and anecdote and fantasy, all shoddy forms of historical sequence. And like his sister, he dispossesses objective time for the profit of personal time, connected with the speed of his horses, as Isabella's is connected with duration and punctuality in romantic or social engagements. Isabella is her brother's counterpart too in
her claim of permanence, through fictions of Mrs Radcliffe's or her own, for her flux of actions. For her and John fiction and autobiography are identical. Her concrete symbol, the Gothic novel, and John's, his equipage, join in the abortive trip to Blaize Castle, that sham of the 1760s which John declares the oldest castle in the kingdom. When we pass to the General, and Gothic interest shifts from Blaize Castle to Northanger Abbey, we shift from the false history that the Thorpes represent to the real history of the General. His material version of the Thorpes' fantasy life, centring upon familial past and succession, has a real expression in property. The temporal and spatial extension of General Tilney, his ownership of the world, is greater than the Thorpes', and the Thorpes' than Mrs Allen's, just as is true of the share of reality granted each as a Gothic pastiche. The General's zeal for punctual attendance to his wishes follows from the Thorpes' use of personal time, completing the series of progressive analogies.

Austen dwells upon these thematic analogies to the extent that her characters share traits they need not have, like imprudence (would a real General Tilney be taken in by an obvious upstart like John Thorpe?), inability to put themselves in the place of others, and a disregard for truth. These characteristics are plausible enough, but one can think of unpleasant egoists—Blifil, for instance, or Mr Murdstone—who do not fit this mould. In *Northanger Abbey*, we get a continuity of temperament from one to the other so as to keep the analogies on the surface. We also get a continuity in the narrative. Mrs Allen introduces Catherine to the Thorpes, in a scene that not only broaches the theme of false history, in Mrs Thorpe's interminable reports of her familial past and present, but also implies some equivalence between Mrs Allen's and Mrs Thorpe's obsessions. The young Thorpes, whose mother imparts to them her garrulous self-centredness and her abilities as a historian, take over the middle of the novel, counterposed by their antitheses, Henry and Eleanor Tilney. From this opposition emerge the last two characters we meet, General and Captain Tilney, who are at least half Thorpean, certainly more than half in their sense of ethics. Therefore, one of our first glimpses of each of these men is in connection with a Thorpe—John and General appear, for a task of pretence, at a play; the Captain and Isabella in the superficial concord of a dance—and the two liaisons thus formed determine the action of the rest of the novel through Catherine's leaving the Abbey.

Such continuity in the thematic action lends strength to our predictions. We can, for instance, limit our fears of what each malefactor may do, simply because each acts under the largely discredited aegis of his predecessor. In Bath, a lie from John Thorpe succeeds in snatching Catherine from the amiable Tilneys, in a parody of the stock abduction scene: she cries out for him to stop while he laughs, smacks his whip, encourages his horse, makes odd noises, and drives on. When the same man's lie leads to her being snatched from the same amiable company at Northanger Abbey, the pattern reaffirms itself to the discredit of the General, who has been its agent. We do not know at the time of Catherine's exodus why she is being cast out, so that our scorn is largely retrospective; but in between the two events, the narrator mockingly remarks of the General's eldest son, Captain Tilney, that his admiration of Catherine 'was not of a very dangerous kind. . . . *He* cannot be the instigator of the three villains in horsemen's great coats, by whom she will hereafter be forced into a travelling-chaise and four, which will drive off with incredible speed.' Thorpe's parodic action, followed some chapters later by the narrator's irony about the same kind of action, can hardly help bringing our sense of pattern and our literary consciousness to bear upon the General's brutality, cutting it down to size. Similarly, pattern limits one interpretation of the General's puzzling courtliness to Catherine, that he himself has amorous designs on the heroine after the fashion of Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto* or the Marquis of Montait in Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*. John Thorpe has been such an idiotic suitor that his example keeps the potential menace of General Tilney leashed; and Austen reinforces the pattern by showing us the triviality, and benefits, of Captain Tilney's faithlessness to Isabella, which Catherine learns of in the chapter before the General displays his faithlessness to her.

If one asks why Austen had to supply such close narrative continuity to get this sort of analogical effect, the answer may lie in her equivocal treatment of the genre 'novel.' In *Northanger Abbey*, the normative schemes of the genre meet with such irony that they must be lent a provisional validity by the procedure of the plot, which is our immediate reading experience. Austen lends them validity too by making us feel the degree to
which she, as author, is in conscious control. For example, in the first half of the book, she offers us a
symmetry of characters. Three girls visit Bath, one a false friend of Catherine's, one a true. Each has a brother
who courts Catherine, and Catherine and Eleanor have a brother who courts Isabella. Both Catherine's friends
have widowed parents, an indulgent mother for Isabella and a tyrannic father for Eleanor. Each Morland child
is the companion of one, and the victim of the other, Thorpe child. When this sort of symmetry has been
exploited, and Catherine leaves Bath for Northanger, Austen turns to a different sort of patterning, a balance
of chapters. The novel as a whole has one chapter each of introduction and conclusion which bracket fifteen
chapters in Bath and fourteen after Bath, the breaking point here being Eleanor's invitation to Northanger
Abbey. Three chapters (17-19) pass between that invitation and the actual departure from Bath, three between
Eleanor's declaration that Catherine must leave the Abbey (28) and the chapter of conclusion. The intervening
period of visit has as its midpoint the imbroglio about the General's treatment of his wife (23-4); which, with
its Gothic and social elements, acts as a transition between the three chapters (20-2) in which historical reality
chastizes Catherine's conventional Gothicism, and those three (25-7) in which reality chastizes her romantic
friendship with Isabella. The reader can hardly muster up surprise when he learns that Austen has placed the
Abbey on so direct a line with Fullerton and Bath that Catherine's journey home is almost a physical repetition
of her journey to the Tilneys.

In what she does for us, Austen is partially reminiscent, once again, of Fielding, the Fielding of Tom Jones.
He too helps the reader with thematic analogies, uses formal pattern to assure one of his control, and flaunts a
well-developed self-awareness of his own job as novelist, so that we in turn become aware of ours as readers.
She differs from him, though—and I mention him largely as the greatest and most obviously congenial
predecessor of Northanger Abbey—in two important ways, her use of allusion (the Gothic pastiches) to offer
valid a priori predictive patterns to us, and her refusal ever to deceive us as our fairweather friend, the narrator
of Tom Jones, so often does. A strong measure of a priorism is not surprising from someone writing when
Austen did, nor is the fact that with the Gothic pastiches, as with Catherine's quotations and the conventions
of the formulaic novel, we are dealing with the redemption of groups or structures by transplanting them, not
simply with categorizing or assimilating individual phenomena. Austen's method thus is quite different from
the burlesque of her juvenilia or the typical use of allusion for praise or blame. Her refusal to deceive us as
Fielding does, makes our job easier but forfeits a measure of sympathetic understanding between her reader
and her heroine; never forced to realize that we share Catherine's incapacities, we can remain rather olympian.
As a result, one is inclined to see the book as a rational exploration of a certain kind of problem, the way in
which reading a work of fiction differs from 'reading' real life, with the formulaic novel of Mrs Radcliffe and
the redemptive novel of Jane Austen as two cases in point.

If in fact that is the problem set by Northanger Abbey, let us turn to Catherine, unprotected and naïve, to see
what her methods of 'reading' are. She has no narrative continuity or balance of chapters to help her, but
conceivably her novelistic reading might lead her to see analogies and Gothic pastiches, and thus to be offered
clues of some necessarily vague sort. Catherine, however, only reads in sensu litterali. When her Gothic fears
about the cabinet and the General prove false, she gives up on them, instead of trying to see how they might
apply to the perceivable realities of life at the Abbey. In that idiom the General is, as we have said, Austen's
Montoni—an avaricious warrior with an eye for a young lady's inheritance—and the laundry list in the
cabinet, as we learn by the end of the novel, is the social memoirs of a wretched captive. Here is the cue for
the conscious tear: the mute voice of a young lover who stayed in the same room as Catherine, suffered from
the same relative poverty as Catherine, and met with a contempt that anticipates her fate, just as his being
freed for money and marriage anticipates (and effects) her fate. The narrator pretends to introduce this last
point only as a means of doing her own laundry, tidying her novel, but as we have seen, that pose of hers does
not deny the autonomy of her characters.

Catherine simply underreads, not overreads, in the Abbey. Once 'the visions of romance were over,' she still
lacks common sense, which in this novel has no limits except those inextricable from human frailty: common
sense knows that if fiction exists, and if people eagerly read it, there must be something to what it says. A
kind of clue to this is offered Catherine by that model of common sense, Henry Tilney. He remonstrates with her, for her suspicions of his father, in one of those periods that make even amateur Jane-ites gasp: ‘Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open?’ These spies and this sinister 'laying open' are inversions of Gothic secrecy which are quite equivalent to it in restrictiveness. The power of inversion is to be shown in the General's anti-Gothic crime, that of posting the heroine to the bosom of her family on a Sabbath in spring—admittedly under conditions that make the General almost criminal indeed. But understandably, a Catherine lost in her shame cannot pick up Henry's nuance of tone. If she were a subtle enough reader to have done so at any time, she would not have had to be lectured in the first place.

Social forms, then, are the only a priori patterns which Catherine can use as a guide. To some extent, within the social classes among which she moves, they are a passable guide, but more for us than for her. We know that the economy of a novel tends to exclude the unique discontinuities of behaviour that mark our own lives, the results of a morning's dyspepsia or an afternoon's look at the state of the stock market. Novelistic acts are likely to be emblematic acts, expressions of a character's ethos within social norms. In real life, where such economy is rarer, one must test the degree to which acts are emblematic. The tool is empathy, intuiting someone else's dispositions and loci of action. Although a debased form of empathy is the art that the Gothic novel most demands, Catherine has never learned it. As Henry Tilney tells her: 'With you, it is not, How is such a one likely to be influenced? What is the inducement most likely to act upon such a person's feelings, age, situation, and probable habits of life considered?—but, how should I be influenced, what would be my inducement in acting so and so?' We have talked about a lack of empathy in our sequence of egoists, about Mrs Allen's assuming universal concern with her pelisse, or Thorpe's bragging about his bibulous nights to a shocked country girl. In terms of values, Catherine's egoism is far more benign than theirs, since it rides on the crupper of her guilelessness and good nature. In terms of prediction, however, it is deadly. Even if it were not, Austen's problems of prediction are such as can baffle the exemplary Tilneys, who misconstrue Catherine's riding off with Thorpe when she was to walk with them. They take her association with the Thorpes as a token of one thing, we of another; and this is a matter of empathy. But even we are as badly fooled as is Catherine when Eleanor asks her to visit the Abbey 'in an embarrassed manner.' What we put down to modesty really comes from the moral humiliation of having to perform a friendly act to a friend hypocritically, at parental command. Both motives, within the same set of social norms, would fit Eleanor's character; we work by probabilities and are wrong. In this 'novel of manners,' manners express character and ethical values, but completely so only in retrospect, only in the shape of history or art, not life.

All Catherine's education can do for her, then, is to lead her to realize how various situations might turn out, to see the alternatives to her own way of putting things together. Such a realization about ambiguities and the need for at once thinking like oneself and like others is the groundwork for irony. I do not mean an irony for the sake of detachment, except insofar as judgment needs disinterest, but for the sake of keeping open the complementary perspectives on the judgments one has made. That sort of irony is the goal, within the story as related, of Catherine's education. Her marriage to its finest exponent, Henry Tilney, marks not so much her leap to reason and wisdom—no one in a sensible book is wise at eighteen, if indeed at all—as her being united to a source of ironic vision, and thus becoming genuinely educable. Catherine's Bildung, we may suppose, shifts into high gear only after Northanger Abbey ends.

What the narrator's voice does in the form of the novel, then, Henry Tilney does in the narrative. Their irony sets forth the middle road between personal freedom and constraint. Personal freedom as an absolute ideal marks the wilful hypocrisy of the General and the Thorpes, whose worlds are fictions of their own contriving. Constraint marks the Gothic novel, in which fate and chance make all acts of will tentative. Henry and the narrator treat personal power or impotence, learning and fallibility, as part of a universal plan involving those Humean categories, liberty and necessity. Both can accept the valid shaping function, and also the limits, of
personal fictions. The sign of their acceptance is their flexibility. Henry's first meeting with Catherine is an exercise in ironic pretence that echoes the narrator's pretence, he in terms of social form as she of novelistic form. Henry starts with the role of the Dutiful Partner, shaping 'his features into a set smile, and affectedly softening his voice . . . with a simpering air.' He next thrusts upon Catherine the role of the Dutifully Journalizing Ingénue. And then, with a straight face, he communes with Mrs Allen about muslins, entering into an impromptu reduction of reality, with improvised rules, instead of the stock reductions of a moment before. Henry's behaviour roughly approximates the narrator's taking the role of the Authoress in chapter 1, thrusting upon Catherine that of the Heroine, and then entering into the characters' own versions of reality with an irony suddenly more covert. One of the crucial functions of the first three chapters is to use a transference of what the philosophers call 'dispositional' values, from the novelistic to the social idiom, so as to make Henry the narrator's viceroy. With this level of control now established within the narrative, Austen can introduce Catherine to its parodies, the Thorpes and the Gothic, in chapters 4 through 7. Henry's pliability and comprehensiveness are norms by which one tests their rigidity of disposition.

The narrator's viceregal use of Henry does not keep her from intervening too. It is easy to see why. Henry's irony tries to place within his world the characters and events that emerge within his field of experience. The narrator's irony tries to place within her world, the novel, the characters and events that she has endowed with their own life. To a large extent, these worlds and their populations coincide so that Henry can be a kind of spokesman for the narrator, and share in directing the energies of good sense. None the less, one of the themes of Northanger Abbey is precisely that the described world is different from the description of that world, in that the one is free and the other is fixed. Henry is to Catherine as the narrator is to us. To have a character take over the narrator's voice, therefore, would destroy a major interest of the book, by conflating its analogous but competing idioms. For this reason the narrator must continue to intervene. Perhaps one might add as a principle that the narrator ought to use a range of tones and techniques as great as she can, just so long as she does not distract the reader. The greater her formal virtuosity, the more energy she pumps into the organization of her novel, the more the aesthetic perspectives of Northanger Abbey can compete for our attention with the story being told. One of the virtues of this book is its controlled restlessness of narrative modes. Conversely, once Henry Tilney has proved his flexibility of response, he need show no range of ironic (or narrative) techniques. He must give validity to his irony by showing its relative adequacy to the situations around him; and so the situations around him grow increasingly complex and demanding, to test Henry's attitudes in this way. The narrative voice, then, is capable of change but not development; Austen's characters, including Henry, are quite capable of development but only rarely and surprisingly of change.

As I disagree with those critics who charge inconsistencies in tone between the 'Gothic' and sociological parts of the novel, I disagree with those who charge inconsistencies in viewpoint. Austen chose in Northanger Abbey, for elaborate and well-defined aesthetic reasons, to adopt a mode common in her predecessors. 'Inconsistencies' mark Tom Jones and Tristram Shandy too, if one takes the speaking voice behind the novel as that of a character rather than that of a rhetor. Unlike Henry Tilney, the narrator is not viewing events but relating them. Hence her concern about her function as novelist. The points of view that she may adopt, moment by moment, in helping the reader grasp the subject matter may very well be continuous with the points of view represented by the different characters. Her decision to say what one of her characters might have said, given his ethos, may be captious or uneconomical—though in Northanger Abbey, when the rhetorical demands of specific cases are considered, it almost never is—but such a decision cannot create inconsistency in method with her letting the characters speak for themselves on other occasions. Similarly, Henry Tilney may, without being inconsistent, imitate a stock character on one occasion, and, on another, speak in his own ironic voice. In short, shifting rhetorical techniques do not entail shifts in character because they do not entail character at all. At this level of abstraction, the narrator and Henry are interchangeable. But only the narrator remains at this level of abstraction.

Henry has a character of his own, then, which Austen must keep distinct from her narrator's personality. He is fallible, so as to show us the profits and pitfalls of someone's doing in real life what we keep doing as readers,
solving difficulties and making predictions by using a priori structures. Although his intelligence makes us believe in his independence, he is deeply bound up in the action of the novel. At each step in the second half of the novel, someone hedges him into embarrassment: first his brother, then his father, and finally his fiancée-elect. Our sight of him at Fullerton, numb, dumb, and blushing, sets him as far apart from the narrator as does the act of moral courage that has brought him there, for blushes and bravery (unlike shifting rhetoric) do refer to character. Weakness and strength both proceed from commitment, which representationally frees Henry from the narrator and grants him the sort of autonomy that Catherine and Eleanor enjoy by the end of the book. Once he stands firmly and solely within the depicted world of the novel, he can go on with his nuptial duties long after the final paradox on the final page of the book. What Catherine has not learned along with us, from the form of the novel, she will learn from the narrator's kindred spirit, who has now moved to her side. Henry, a clergyman like her father, can carry her off to Woodston, which is a kind of Fullerton plus civilization, and can improve the stock moralizing of her mother's Mirror (or of the narrator's final, tongue-in-cheek sententiousness) into a moral perceptiveness answerable to experience.

Our education is so parallel with Catherine's that we might be expected to have a formal equivalent, within the process of reading our novel, to the irony of complementary perspectives which she must learn to apply to 'reading' real life. That formal equivalent is, of course, the necessary ambiguity of the narrative in terms of its freedom from and dependence upon the hackneyed devices of fiction, and in terms of its priority to and dependence upon the characters whose lives it describes. The ambiguity can not be resolved, but just held in equilibrium like the figure and ground relationship in an optical illusion: are the ascending white stairs 'really,' when the drawing is turned about, black stairs going down? We conceive the illusion only by maintaining both possibilities at once. Austen's way of keeping this equilibrium is, as far as I know, original enough, although her self-consciousness about the powers of the novel points back to her legacy from Fielding and Sterne, who also knew that the epistemological patterns of novelistic form create a gulf between reader and character. The more the character approaches the freedom of the reader, the further apart grow their respective ways of dealing with reality, except perhaps in those books where form becomes a function of a protagonist's psychology. That is the kind of novel to which Austen turned after Northanger Abbey, with a subtlety and force of moral analysis not to be found here. Those virtues, fortunately for her reputation and for our pleasure, can compensate to us for her having abandoned the novel of ideas, and deserted the eighteenth-century—and modern—theme of the interplay between writer, reader, and character.

**Criticism: Katrin Ristkok Burlin (essay date 1975)**


*In the following essay, Ristkok Burlin interprets Northanger Abbey as a "single, complex treatment of the theme of fiction."*
necessity for the professional novelist in a world thoroughly permeated by delusive fictions. From her astonishingly aggressive authorial 'intrusion' near the opening pages of *Northanger Abbey* to defend the novel, to her noisy reentrance at its end, Jane Austen's motive is to fight for her craft, to prove that it is the responsible novelist who protects us by teaching us through his art to recognize and discriminate among the fictions of life and art alike.

The traditional reading of *Northanger Abbey* sees it as falling unhappily into two disparate halves: a satisfying 'Bath' volume of realistic fiction, exploring social and moral values, and a disappointing 'Northanger' volume of rather flat burlesque of the Gothic, sentimental novel. But A. Walton Litz [in *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development*, 1965] offers the key to unlock the door between these volumes by suggesting that 'in learning to handle the fictions of the Gothic world Catherine comes to recognize the other fictions which haunt her life.' Those 'other fictions' are, in fact, the principal concern of *Northanger Abbey*. Jane Austen's method is to expose the reader to four kinds of fiction: (1) the absurd extravagance of sentimental Gothic fictions; (2) the satiric, educative fictions of Henry Tilney; (3) the manipulative, egotistical fictions of the Thorpes; and (4) the satiric and realistic fiction of *Northanger Abbey* itself. Volume I (Bath) is dedicated to the creation of fictions; Volume II (Northanger Abbey), to their realization. The elegant thematic and structural transition between the volumes is effected by Henry Tilney's creation of a burlesque fiction, as he drives Catherine in his curricle from the one locale to the other.

Since the basic structural unit of all these fictions is language, the relationship between fiction and the chosen word is a major theme in *Northanger Abbey*. How Jane Austen's characters use language serves as an index to the kinds of fiction they create, as Joseph Wiesenfarth has elegantly demonstrated in *The Errand of Form*. There are four different kinds of language: (1) the 'best-chosen language,' the tool of the responsible novelist; (2) 'novel slang,' the vocabulary of the sentimental, Gothic novelist; (3) 'common cant,' the basis for social fictions; and (4) 'nice' diction, the instrument of corrective fiction. The battle for the heroine's understanding as well as her person, waged among these fictions with their distinctive linguistic weapons, creates the strategy of *Northanger Abbey* 's action and structure.

Because it begins as a burlesque, the novel initially invites laughter at its heroine's expense. But some important suggestions lurk beneath that burlesque. In the exploration of Catherine's early response to fiction the emphasis, however comic, falls on the unthinking nature of her enjoyment, 'for provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection,' she liked fictional narratives very much. Unheroically normal, Catherine's 'mental development' fits neatly into Dr Johnson's outline of 'The Climacterics of the Mind':

> If we consider the exercises of the mind, it will be found that in each part of life some particular faculty is more eminently employed. When the treasures of knowledge are first opened before us, while novelty blooms alike on either hand, and every thing equally unknown and unexamined seems of equal value, the power of the soul is principally exerted in a vivacious and desultory curiosity. She applies by turns to every object, enjoys it for a short time, and flies with equal ardour to another. She delights to catch up loose and unconnected ideas, but starts away from systems and complications which would obstruct the rapidity of her transitions, and detain her long in the same pursuit. (*Rambler* No. 151)

Catherine's 'slovenly' attitude to 'complications' leads characteristically to the adolescent's problem of discriminating among fictions.

If *Northanger Abbey* is Catherine's 'introduction into life' through fiction, Henry Tilney is the master of ceremonies. He is to enrich her understanding by making her acquainted with a complex world of fictions, to guide her to the point of his own cool judgment of literary fictions and keen sense of social fictions. But why should this experienced critic of both society and fiction, this wit and champion of the integrity of language,
take interest in an inexperienced, literal-minded, uncritical young girl with a small stock of ideas and utter ignorance of the implications of language? If *Northanger Abbey* is to be more than a burlesque, if it is to meet the standards set by the new realistic novel, we must be made to believe in Henry Tilney's attraction to Catherine. One realizes through Jane Austen's success in achieving this in *Northanger Abbey* how much less schematic and more subtle it is as a novel than *Sense and Sensibility*, where Jane Austen 'flattened' her characters for the sake of its argument. Surely *Northanger Abbey* bears the marks of a mature re-working. Catherine never loses her youthful 'roundness.'

The relationship between Henry and Catherine is believable for many reasons: he is an eager teacher, she, an ardent pupil; she is found of him, he is found of admiration. But what makes the relationship most persuasive is that Catherine is unafectedly good, and Henry, like Jane Austen herself, admires goodness more than cleverness. Jane Austen thinks this an important point, and indicates so by qualifying the disparaging remarks on Catherine's 'mental endowments' with which she had opened the novel with the more flattering remarks on the excellence of Catherine's disposition, with which she opens the chapter immediately following. It is *she* who tips the scale from 'mind' (ignorant) to heart ('affectionate').

Catherine's simplicity, her tendency to express honestly what she thinks and feels, and her puzzlement when confronted with deliberate ambiguity are exploited by Jane Austen to expose the fictions of the society to which she is now introduced. As Hugh Blair indicated [in *Lectures on Rhetoric and the Belles Lettres*, 1965], however, 'The great advantage of simplicity of style, like simplicity of manners, [is] that it shows us a man's sentiments and turn of mind, laid open without disguise.' To effect her exposure of social fictions, the novelist endows her heroine with what Blair terms, for want of a better English adjective, 'the naive style':

> It always expresses a discovery of character . . . that sort of amiable ingenuity or undisguised openness which seems to give us some degree of superiority over the person who shows it; a certain infantine simplicity, which we love in our hearts, but which displays some features of the character that we think we could have art enough to hide; and which, therefore, always leads us to smile at the person who discovers this character.

For those who want to hide sordid motives behind the cloak of ambiguity, Catherine's simple requests for clarification and explanation prove a source of perpetual embarrassment. This aspect of her naïveté delights Henry. He uses it both to teach her to understand the meanings to which she may give unconscious expression and to give her innocent satires a sophisticated thrust. In a typical scene, the interplay of dialogue between Catherine's naïve and Henry's sophisticated styles satirizes common social fictions and abuses of language, while suggesting the novel's fundamental theme.

The task, then, of teaching Catherine falls to Henry, whom most critics have perceived as her mentor, or guide, or even as Jane Austen's surrogate. She is rescued from the tedium of a conventional Bath ballroom by the witty fictions of Henry Tilney precisely at the moment she is most conscious of 'intellectual poverty.' It is Henry's ability to bewilder her through those fictions that charms Catherine immediately; there is a mystery in his manner, and she finds mystery intriguing. As Stuart M. Tave points out [in *Some Words of Jane Austen*, 1973], 'Henry knows how to use art.' Like his author, he has a multiplicity of poses, and in this scene he adopts that of a conventional Bath beau, satirizing ballroom dialogue while testing the quality of Catherine's responses. He is able to create such a fictional character of himself because Bath beaux have, in fact, begun to model themselves after the pattern established by heroes of sentimental novels. As Howard S. Babb points out [in *Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue*, 1961], Henry's satire is designed to prick the bubble of false emotionality, and his artificial manner ought to warn Catherine that she is entering a world of 'assumed' poses and affected responses.

When he perceives that his first fiction has puzzled Catherine, for she has 'turned away her head,' Henry reshapes the situation with yet another fiction: Catherine must keep a journal. Each entry in this fictive journal...
is cleverly 'contrived' as an explicit expression of Catherine's interest in Henry; implicit in each is Henry's interest in Catherine. The verbal artifact of the fictive journal permits him to indulge himself in the novelist's delight in exploring points of view. He shows Catherine how different he might appear from two possible views: he is the subject of both fictive entries, but each presents him as an utterly different character. And through the medium of this fiction he also immediately shapes her point of view: the 'heroine' in the 'sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings—plain black shoes' is delighted with her author and eager to review his future 'novels.' And indeed, Henry has invented this fictive journal precisely to win her critical esteem.

But if the fiction of Catherine's journal was invented largely to foster intimacy between author and reader, Henry must abandon it if he is to generalize about 'journalizing'; her journal had to be flattering, and Henry's real opinion of the habit directly contrasts with his ironically expressed praise. When he enlarges his attack to incorporate journal-keeping in general, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate as objects of Jane Austen's irony the language and conventions of the popular novel from those of Bath society. The shift from creator of verbal artifacts to critic, however, clearly points to the novel's theme; while Norman Page has said that all of Jane Austen's early novels are 'about language,' I would prefer to say of Northanger Abbey that it is about language as it is shaped into pseudo-fictions, imitations of novels.

Henry's satire of the trivial and narcissistic journals kept by young ladies at Bath alludes also to the tiresome convention by which popular novelists expediently advance a narrative: the journal kept for 'absent cousins' that enables a heroine to detail her adventures at length. Henry's distaste is provoked by the carelessness of style all journal-keeping fosters. Preserved as a journal must be from rigorous critical scrutiny, it makes no demands on its author, and only reinforces bad habits of language and insipidity of thought. Dr Johnson's contemptuous description of the familiar letter as 'pages of inanity' (Rambler No. 152) would perhaps best express Henry's real opinion of ladies' journals. His extravagant praise of 'journalizing' as leading 'to the easy style of writing for which ladies are so generally celebrated' is Catherine's introduction to irony. For the first time she perceives that words may be used to convey the opposite of their literal meaning. Henry does not admire an 'easy style of writing,' which he sees as compounded of 'a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar.' To call such a style 'easy' is to cover careless and hasty execution with a flattering cliché. It is a misplacement of value on 'quickness' or on 'ease' above precision and care that Henry isolates as pernicious to good writing and rational communication.

Henry's notorious concern for precision in language, first commented upon by his sister, has been too frequently rehearsed to require elaboration here. His lectures on correct usage are scattered throughout the novel, his own tutors having been, as Eleanor points out, Johnson and Blair. The words whose misuse offends Henry, such as 'nice' and 'amazingly,' had in some part been collected by Blair in a list of synonyms 'to show the necessity of attending to the exact import of words.' His definition of 'amazement' ('I am amazed, with what is incomprehensible') indicates the direction in which Henry works to disabuse Catherine. Henry, the inveterate fiction-maker, possesses in his artful language those qualifications Dr Johnson set for modern fiction: 'It requires, together with that learning which is to be gained from books, that experience which can never be gained by solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world.' Learned, sociable, articulate and critical, Henry creates fictions 'to initiate youth by mock encounters in the art of necessary defense, and to increase prudence without impairing virtue' (Rambler No. 4).

His fictions are thus very much like Jane Austen's: delicious inventions with a moral core. Satiric by nature, he too believes that fiction ought 'to give the power of counteracting fraud' (Rambler No. 4). His expressed opinions are nearly always consistent with his author's; he teaches in the same way and with nearly equal success. But his own fictions, those made up quite independently of his author, ought not to be accepted uncritically, as if they were hers. Henry is but the creature of Jane Austen's imagination, with a properly subordinate place in her work.
Ardent, eager, and empty, Catherine's mind is stimulated by Henry's fictions and prepared to encounter the world of the novel itself, experience heightened by fiction. But when removed from his direct influence, she is shown to have been rendered vulnerable to the world of real fictions, the novels of the circulating library. Again Jane Austen, in drawing a realistic picture of her heroine's intellectual development, seems to follow the guidance of Dr Johnson's analysis of the growing mind in *Rambler* No. 151.

While the judgment is yet unformed and unable to compare the draughts of fiction with their originals, we are delighted with improbable adventures, impracticable virtues, and inimitable characters.

With one important qualification, her solid integrity, Catherine's mind is the prototype of the typical novel-reader's, described by Dr Johnson in *Rambler* No. 4. As such, it would seem vulnerable to the dangers Johnson finds in 'The Comedy of Romance.' This is his term for the new novel, dangerous in providing

the entertainments of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.

Perhaps one of the happiest uses of fiction is its capacity to teach those who, like Catherine, are 'not altogether . . . particularly friendly to very severe, very intense application.' It would be foolish to patronize Catherine because she prefers fiction to history. Her choice of fiction and her infatuation with it are silly. But the tendency of her mind, its bent towards fiction, is not. What it manifests is a craving—in the midst of a trivial little world—'for a more splendid order of things.' Blair discovers a satisfying explanation for man's urge for fiction in Lord Bacon:

Lord Bacon takes notice of our taste for fictitious history, as a proof of the greatness and dignity of the human mind. He observes very ingeniously, that the objects of this world, and the common train of affairs which we behold going on in it, do not fill the mind, nor give it entire satisfaction. We seek for something that shall expand the mind in a greater degree: we seek for more heroic and illustrious deeds, for more diversified and surprising events, for a more splendid order of things, a more regular and just distribution of rewards and punishments than what we find here: because we meet not with these in true history, we have resource to [the] fictitious. We create worlds according to our fancy, in order to gratify our capacious desires, (italics mine)

The Thorpes, too, have a 'taste for fictitious history,' but it is a corrupt taste, 'satisfying' a corrupt palate. They do not crave 'a more splendid order of things,' but the 'things' themselves. They do not have the novelist's passion for an 'ordered' world. The issue they take with 'the common train of affairs' is not that it does not 'fill the mind' but that it fails to fill the pocket. They seek, through their fictions, not to celebrate heroic deeds or the triumph of justice—as do even the 'romancers' *Northanger Abbey* often mocks. Their fictions are a mockery of poetic justice, for the Thorpes want to pervert justice to reward only themselves. Neither Thorpe as 'novelist' is interested in the possibilities of the imagination for 'expanding' the mind; imagination is not something they value except as a means to an end. Their fictions, therefore, are not a 'proof of the greatness and dignity of the human mind,' but of its meanness and egotism. They do, indeed, 'create worlds according to their fancy, in order to gratify their capacious desires,' but those desires are 'capacious' only in the sense of the largeness of their greed.

Isabella's quick intimacy with Catherine is itself a borrowing from the novel of sensibility, but Catherine is too naive to perceive that her new friend is herself a fiction, her character, vocabulary, and sentiments all emanating from the circulating library to which she now introduces Catherine. The further introduction to John Thorpe merely precipitates the heroine deeper into the 'land of fiction,' a world of fictitious novelists.
Under the influence of a self-created delusion that Catherine is rich, Thorpe affects not only admiration for her, but, through the 'cant terms of men of fashion,' a fictional presence that he thinks will win her. His steady stream of aggressively masculine fabrications rather offends than pleases Catherine. Despite his vigorous assertion that he has 'something else to do' than read novels, 'the stupidest things in creation,' that 'something else' proves to be the business of creating fictions and plots of his own to entrap the presumed heiress.

To alert the reader to the complexity and subtlety of social fictions, Jane Austen makes the Thorpes not only the fiction-makers we are accustomed to meet in society, but ironically turns them into 'novelists.' They structure their fictions according to the novel's conventional form, incorporating plots (often unfolded by consequent action), detailed description, the creation of character and dialogue, and the establishment of setting. All these novelistic devices are intended to create the illusion of verisimilitude.

Though the reader has been prepared for John's first major 'novel' by his history of petty fictions, its extravagant inventiveness and richness of detail still astonish—extravagance and richness directed, however, to 'exalt' neither the mind nor the morals. He simply wishes to alter circumstances to suit his present ambitions. Starting with a simple though false eye-witness account, claiming four times to have seen the fictive Tilneys abandoning Catherine, he proceeds rapidly from false journalism to the creation of a 'novel' of betrayed friendship, always adapting his technique to the ideals of 'the Familiar Novelists' whose complex constructs attempt to create the illusion of truth.

When one realistic possibility still holds Catherine back from crossing the threshold of Thorpe's fictive world, he brings together all the elements of his fiction to dramatize its fable. It is a final extension that comes closest to a piece of literary fiction, incorporating the creation of character and circumstance, illustrated with a piece of action, again characteristic of Thorpe's horseflesh-fancy ('a man who was just passing by on horseback').

Catherine's hesitation ends with the ending of the fiction. For not having recognized Thorpe's story as a fiction, she is forced to pay the consequences, which, ironically, take the form of the romantic heroine's most conventional dilemma—being kidnapped by the villain and misunderstood by the hero. A moment later Thorpe falls through the trap-door of his own staged fiction when he unwittingly tests it by reality. Catherine's reflections at the moment of revelation are a mixture of Thorpe's fiction and Mrs Radcliffe's, unconsciously battling with Henry Tilney's truth. Each of her discoveries about fiction is made in a context richly confected with layer upon layer of fictions, each serving as an ironic commentary on the other. Thus Catherine submits to Thorpe's novel because she had already so extravagantly tasted of Mrs Radcliffe's.

The Thorpes' second major fiction lies at the heart of the novel and is co-authored; its intent is to reshape the existing situation. Isabella provides the conventional social fiction of the 'previous engagement'; John invents the detail, embroidering the dull social fiction with a novelist's delight in particularity and fitness. While Catherine energetically strives for the truth, Thorpe has put Isabella's social fiction into action, playing author to a fictive Catherine, making her his creature, writing her dialogue, endowing her with his own motives and morals, determining her actions, and deciding her fate. Clearly, had Catherine not denied Thorpe the right 'to invent any such message,' it would have altered relationships, changed attitudes, and settled an impenetrable mist of indistinctness upon the heroine's language, style, and judgment.

Henry, on the other hand, uses his witty fictions to introduce Catherine to the complexities of the real world and the abuses of the Thorpes. Because Babb has offered so excellent an analysis of the materials of Henry's most elegantly witty fiction, the marriage/country-dance emblem, I will not discuss it here. I will point, however, to its being clearly a fiction, and not the product of a technique Babb terms 'metaphoric indirection.' Henry is not only making a fiction, but acting the part of the novelist. Having no space to prove the point at large, I introduce two excellent witnesses to the character of my argument: Dr Johnson and Jane Austen herself. Henry's invention of the emblem is 'an effusion of wit,' a product of the same qualities we saw mapped out by Dr Johnson as necessary for the novelist in Rambler No. 4; in Rambler No. 194, he identifies
the same qualities as necessary for such an 'effusion':

Wit, you know, is the unexpected copulation of ideas, the discovery of some occult relation between images in appearance remote from each other; an effusion of wit therefore presupposes an accumulation of knowledge: a memory stored with notions, which the imagination may cull out to compose new assemblages.

Jane Austen, in her own 'Defense' of fiction, cites the requisite qualities for the novel, or for the kind of mind necessary to produce it:

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 (my italics).

Henry's third attempt at fiction-making occurs in the context of one of the most significant chapters in *Northanger Abbey*. Chapter xiv, almost entirely taken up with the walk 'round Beechen Cliff,' forms the nexus of the central themes of this novel: it explores at many levels the consequences of the abuse of language and is rich in implications about the use and abuse of fiction. During the walk, Henry is to discover how lost in fiction Catherine has become, and how her originally simple point of view and small vocabulary have been limited by the narrow scope of her reading and acquaintance—the novels of Mrs Radcliffe and of the Thorpes.

The walk begins with a significant discussion of fiction. Catherine discovers the error of one of her commonplace assumptions, that 'young men despised novels amazingly,' for in his witty defense of *Udolpho*, Henry allows that once he had begun that romance, 'I could not lay it down again—my hair standing on end the whole time.' He defends romances, though satirically, and attacks facile generalizations instead. Continuing in the parodic mode, he further encourages Catherine in her naïve acceptance of the Gothic as real, referring to the 'Julias and Louisas' of that world as if he assumed them to be as intimate with her as 'your friend Emily.'

When Eleanor turns the subject to history, we learn something crucial; what Catherine 'cannot be interested in' is 'history, real solemn history'; her preference again is for the ideal over the real. But Jane Austen also uses Catherine's candor to score a few points for her own craft. Catherine finds history to be more sensational than fiction—the quarrels of popes and kings, with and pestilences, in every page.' It is 'tiresome' in that it has no mixed characters, less relevance to everyday experience than novels, and, though 'a great deal of it must be invention,' that invention is 'dull.' By pointing to the strong element of fiction in any history, Jane Austen indirectly argues for the role fiction plays in revealing truth. As the recorder of more commonplace events, the novel has a respectability of its own and need not descend to that common dodge of beleaguered novelists and masquerade as 'history.'

In the ensuing discussion of picturesque beauty, Jane Austen unites the three themes of point of view, language, and fiction. The Tilneys, in their knowledge of the picturesque, have a better vantage point and richer vocabulary than Catherine's. Henry attempts to teach these to Catherine: 'He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades.' Correcting Catherine's conventional and limited point of view, he again attempts to teach her to see imaginatively, and critically. But while Jane Austen allows Henry thus to jostle Catherine's mind into action, she also uses his lessons to satirize a fashionable cult with its own slang and advances her theme of fiction. For Catherine is 'so hopeful a scholar' of the picturesque that she dismisses what her common sense tells her, even of present realities, so 'that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath.' Adopting Gilpin's point of view, she populates the land with romantic figures.
The discussion of the picturesque forms ‘an easy transition’ from the regions of rhetoric back to the ‘fields of fiction.’ Jane Austen is forcing us to realize that the real world does serve as a source of fiction if looked at from the imaginative point of view, with a mind alive to the possibilities of the scene presented. In his ‘Observations on the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmorland,’ Gilpin himself suggests the relation of the picturesque—as it comprehends the sublime—to the imagination and its creation of fiction:

> It is impossible to view such scenes as these without feeling the imagination take fire . . .
> Every object here is sublime, and wonderful: not only the eye is pleased; but the imagination is filled. We are carried at once into the ‘fields of fiction,’ and romance. Enthusiastic ideas take possession of us; and we suppose ourselves among the inhabitants of fabled times. The transition, indeed, is easy and natural, from romantic scenes to romantic inhabitants.

The more sensible Henry, viewing the land, ponders instead ‘inclosures’ and ‘the state of the nation.’

In the context of Henry's 'short disquisition’ on politics, Catherine's report of having heard 'that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London,' is not recognized by Eleanor as 'novel slang,' but to mean the coming of a dreadful riot. By repeatedly stressing that the words Catherine uses are a friend's (probably Isabella's), Jane Austen deliberately transfers the responsibility from Catherine's intimacy with the wrong kind of fiction to one with the wrong kind of person. Eleanor's fears are a fiction based on a fiction, which Henry clarifies by turning Catherine's repetition of novel slang into the thing itself: ‘Three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern.’ But the danger of a careless use of violent words is expressed in Henry's fabrication of his own vivid but realistic horror-story. He is not content to relegate the 'horrors' Catherine had inadvertently raised to the world of the circulating library; these dangers have to be expressed through a novel different in quality from *Udolpho*. His novel is a vivid but realistic horror-story. He even makes his fiction personal, bringing truth home, by exercising the authorial prerogative to dispense with his characters, and knocking down his brother Frederick with a brickbat for the sake of his theme. His exploitation of extravagant cliché—'the streets of London flowing with blood' and 'the hopes of the nation'—suggests that such language is not limited to novels where it titillates the private sensibility, but may be exploited by the unscrupulous to work up the emotions of a mob into acts of violence. Henry is remembering the Gordon Riots as he reminds Catherine of the consequences of inflammatory language in the real world. [Norman Page, in *The Language of Jane Austen*, 1972] comments perceptively on this passage: 'an illustration, very pertinent to the central theme of the novel, of the confusions arising when the make-believe of fiction is mistaken for reality.'

The first volume seems to end with a stalemate in the battle of fictions for Catherine's mind. Isabella has successfully carried off her fiction of love and friendship, for she is engaged to James. But, through the power of his story-telling, Henry has strong hold of Catherine's mind. We do not yet know that Catherine is being carried to Northanger Abbey because of a fiction. During the journey, however, when Henry tries through his last fiction to laugh Catherine out of her romantic expectations of the Abbey, he succeeds instead in inadvertently persuading her of their truth. What makes this fiction of Henry's different from his others is that he yields to the temptation to go beyond his parodic intent. Catherine's flattering comparison of his fiction with those she has read, and his own delight in his skill of invention, is so gratifying that he is unable to resist taking advantage of the novelist's power to control—even to infatuate—his audience. For the first time Henry takes conscious advantage of Catherine's naivety, and does so to her disadvantage. Because he forms his parody from the materials of her reading at Bath, it releases the effects of ‘that sort of reading’ in which she had there 'indulged' and seizes such power over her imagination as to determine the major portion of her actions at Northanger.

Unthinkingly, or perhaps because he is a 'novelist' of the commonplace by nature after all, Henry furnishes his fictional abbey with the chests and cabinets of the real Abbey. Unfortunately, he has transformed them through the medium of his fancy into enchanted objects. When Catherine finds herself surrounded by the
apparatus of Henry's fiction at the Abbey itself, she believes quite naturally that she is indeed in a world ruled by the laws of fiction. Henry's 'novel' eases her over the threshold of the fictional world by making her feel familiar with its interior. But what is most significant about this fiction is that at the crisis of his narrative Henry abdicates his authorship, telling his heroine 'to use her own fancy' to complete it. If Catherine is indeed preoccupied with her 'fancy' during the first portion of her stay at Northanger Abbey, she has been given leave to do so. This is the first fiction Henry has not finished, and the first he has not wholly shaped to fit satiric or pedagogic purposes. With the interruption of the story, a temporal dimension is for the first time introduced into Henry's fictions. All his other fictions were carefully separated from reality, established as verbal artifacts, a 'journal,' an 'emblem,' the circulating library 'history' of the 'riot.' When Henry fails to enclose this fiction, it breaks loose and invades the rest of the novel.

Her Gothic adventures at Northanger are frequently referred explicitly to the influence of Henry's fiction by Catherine herself. Ultimately she blames him for some of her 'folly.' The 'darkness impenetrable' of Catherine's mind symbolizes the point of greatest submission to fancy; the illusions of fiction do not stand the test of daylight. But each time experience reveals to Catherine the absurdity of a romantic expectation she repents heartily—only to fall again the next moment a victim to further temptation. Her unconscious persistence in imaginings is indicated to us by the way in which she assigns malignant motives to inanimate objects, blaming a chest or cabinet for misleading her instead of herself for being misled.

Jane Austen deflects the responsibility for her heroine's delusions from Mrs Radcliffe's professional fiction to Henry's arrogantly amateurish interpretation of it. Whatever the cause, the effect is to call into question Henry's wisdom as satirist and maker of fictions. In this last fiction Henry is 'dangerously' close to usurping the author's place. 'Dangerously,' because without the author's providential powers he involves his heroine in perplexities he has not foreseen, while even the popular novelist is responsibly capable of seeing the heroine through to the resolution of her troubles. And there are perplexities he cannot foresee, such as those brought about by his own father's involving Catherine in fictions. General Tilney is as interested as the Thorpes in seducing Catherine for his own 'interest' through the creation and manipulation of fictions; like the Thorpes, the General maintains a fiction about himself. To realize his ambitions he uses language much as the Thorpes do.

But General Tilney is himself to prove more naively and dramatically susceptible to the most extravagant of fictions than Catherine. It is his belief in fictions, not hers, that is to change the course of her life. Though we cannot know that the sudden and excessive fiction of his friendship for Catherine has originated in his belief in John Thorpe's tales about her, we ought as alert readers to have suspected it, for even Catherine notes the change in the General's attitude to her after he has been talking to Thorpe. To dramatize the dangerously secret pervasiveness of fiction, Jane Austen keeps deliberately silent about this fiction while keeping the reader distracted at the forestage of her fable—trying to keep him, that is, abreast of the fictions in which Catherine is steadily entangled despite her own efforts to understand her experience.

As Catherine attempts to act out Henry's fiction, experience helps dissipate its effects. She comes to perceive its absurdity, to discover that it is impossible to sustain a fiction of this kind in the real world. But the more powerful and therefore more pernicious influence of Gothic fiction cannot be cured by experience alone. Jane Austen is careful to deflect responsibility away from Henry to Mrs Radcliffe for Catherine's most horrid delusion about the Abbey: her impertinent suspicions about his father's involvement in his mother's death. These distasteful speculations are clearly related to her reading of Udolpho—she thinks General Tilney a Montoni—and free Henry to scold her for her delusions.

Henry has to summon all his energy to address to Catherine that passionately forthright lecture. He may never engage in fiction-making again. His appeal to her that she use judgment must bring forcefully home to her that she has never once judged her reading by any critical standards. Henry's 'address' and Catherine's response to it have been so fully discussed by critics that I will only point to what may need further attention. Henry's
catalogue of the rational bases of judgment 'Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you'—is really a thinly disguised statement of the laws of probability Jane Austen feels ought to govern the world of the novel as they do the real world. Catherine's 'disenchantment' is used similarly. It states more or less explicitly some of Jane Austen's own convictions about the limitations of 'romance' (while acknowledging its charms), and suggests some of the values of the new realistic fiction, such as the admission of 'mixed characters' into the 'literary corporation.' Other than this, it is important for the thematic cohesiveness of Northanger Abbey that Jane Austen should in both passages nominate language as a means by which evil is dissipated.

Catherine's new anxieties are realistic, for they originate in her acquaintance with the illusory realities of the Thorpes, 'mournfully superior in reality and substance' to those caused by Mrs Radcliffe—not because their fictions are more real or substantial than hers, but because their consequences are more painful and lasting in reality and substance. She is the innocent victim of their deceptions; she has played no conscious part in their illusions.

Isabella's letter is important but again so commonly discussed that I will only note its salient features for this argument. Isabella writes obviously in hopes of salvaging a fiction of feeling for James, and tries to invoke Catherine's help to remake the illusion. Her letter is, therefore, a testament to the Thorpes' faith that false words can 'set all to rights,' that they can talk into and out of existence whatever they wish. This letter is replete with fictions besides those of love and friendship: the language of fiction ('He is the only man I ever did or could love'), the fiction of the 'cold, or something,' the fiction of not understanding the quarrel, perhaps even the fiction of having 'mislaid' James's 'direction.' Isabella's shoddy reconstruction of the fiction of sentiment no longer deludes a Catherine made sensitive to fictions. Catherine acknowledges that she has never known the real Isabella at all: 'So much for Isabella,' she cried, 'and for all our intimacy!' When Catherine wishes she had never known an Isabella, Henry assures her, 'It will soon be as if you never had.'

But the Thorpes' fictions are not as easily dissipated as Henry's assurance to Catherine would suggest. The atmosphere created by delusions is so thick that it confuses even the deceivers. The Thorpes' lies actually change reality. We now see Catherine become the 'involuntary, unconscious object of a deception' over which she has no control. When the General discovers the futility of his fiction of friendship for Catherine, he dismisses her from the Abbey in a rage that postpones explanations. Catherine is violently forced into acting out the violence the Thorpes have done to language. Henry's retrospective narrative at Fullerton of John Thorpe's double-lie reveals that when Thorpe boasted to Henry's father about Catherine to enrich his own image, the wily General had planned to plunder him of his spoils. But to believe either of Thorpe's extravagant fictions (Catherine as the 'heiress of Fullerton,' possessing a 'rich aunt,' and 'sinking' siblings, etc.) the General must indeed have read pamphlets to the exclusion of novels, or he would have recognized in Thorpe's stories the sentimental clichés John has so obviously borrowed from the circulating-library novel.

The General's easy acceptance of Thorpe's double-fiction as real explains that violent act of his in expelling Catherine from the Abbey, an act for which Jane Austen has been so roundly criticized. Maria Edgeworth protested that 'the behaviour of the General in Northanger Abbey, packing off the young lady without a servant or the common civilities which any bear of a man, not to say gentleman, would have shown, is quite outrageously out of drawing and out of nature.' But the General's act is psychologically consistent and 'artful' as well.

Subject to his fictions about himself and what is truly valuable, the General has ceased to be real and thus becomes susceptible to behaving like a figure in a novel rather than a real man. He is a villain, just as Catherine thought, but in a fiction of John Thorpe's making rather than Ann Radcliffe's;—or even Jane Austen's. If the General cannot judge Thorpe's fictions rationally, how can he be expected to behave rationally? If he somehow does believe in romantic nonsense, why should he not follow its codes?
When Thorpe discovers the reality that negates his original fiction, he contradicts it with another of equal but negative extravagance. This double-lie about Catherine to the General is therefore clearly prefigured in the earlier double-lie to Catherine about James's gig. We are thus shown that the trouble with a personal, impulsive motive behind the creation of fictions is the subjectivity that leads the creator to destroy as impulsively as he creates. Life imitates art, and by exposing Thorpe's double-lie Jane Austen reverses the formula by demonstrating how easily she can manipulate such conventional plots as Thorpe's, how casually create and destroy at will. The damage done by Thorpe's lies is too extensive for her own characters to cope with successfully. Jane Austen must step in to reorder the world of *Northanger Abbey*—not, indeed, to its original order, for that is permanently changed, but into happier terms than the manipulations of the Thorpes have effected.

For Jane Austen, language is not the appropriate medium for the expression of strong emotion. She distrusts the language of emotion: in making the expression of feeling too facile, it dissipates its strength and encourages insincerity and hypocrisy. Language is a corrupt mirror for feeling: it distorts emotion by reflecting it as either grotesquely overblown or excessively shallow. Because Catherine's feelings are fresh and strong, she has neither the need nor the vocabulary to parade them; her emotion is expressed in the 'language of nature,' though she 'knew not what to say':

> her eloquence was only in her eyes. From them, however, the eight parts of speech shone out most expressively, and James could combine them with ease.

The superiority of this silent grammar of emotion is confirmed in Blair's *Lectures*:

> Now the tone of our voice, our looks, and gestures, interpret our ideas and emotions no less than words do; nay, the impression they make on others, is frequently much stronger than any that words can make. . . . The signification of our sentiments, made by tones and gestures, has this advantage above that made by words, that it is the language of nature. It is that method of interpreting our mind, which nature has dictated to all, and which is understood by all; whereas, words are only arbitrary conventional symbols of our ideas; and, by consequence, must make a more feeble impression.

Jane Austen exploits the irony that mute gesture is actually more eloquent than the most extravagant and elevated language of emotion to point up the absurdity of the Thorpes' parade of sentiment: all their excesses of sentimental language communicate less feeling than one look or gesture or movement or silence of Catherine's. In one sense, the 'silence' into which the 'good' characters fall as the novel reaches its conclusion is a mute protest against the corruptions of language that have brought their affairs to a crisis.

Even eloquent, witty, language-conscious Henry, the eager follower of Blair and Johnson, is reduced to silence under the influence of strong emotion. When, anxious and embarrassed, he arrives at Fullerton, his powers of speech desert him. At the Aliens, Henry 'talked at random, without sense or connection'; to Mrs Morland, who has difficulty 'finding conversation for her guest,' he can say 'nothing to the purpose.' Henry has come close to usurping his author's role of teaching the importance of precise language. Now he becomes the victim of her benign irony. For just before the chapter that introduces Henry to the Morlands, Jane Austen has noisily re-entered her novel to claim authorship, and to take possession of its characters and materials. The assertion of herself as the 'contriver' of this fiction is dramatized by reducing her creations to silence as she raises her voice.

Her tone toward her own fiction at the beginning of the novel (always excepting the 'Defense') is quite different from that of the voice in the 'intrusions.' Unassuming, unassertive, she affects to be bemused by the strangeness of the fiction it has devolved upon her to relate: it is so strangely like life and so unlike romance that she does not know quite what to make of it. Most of the burlesque of the Gothic/sentimental fiction in the
Bath episodes is characterized by this ironic tone. In reserving till later most of her intrusions as acknowledged author, while drawing her reader's attention to the faults and follies of another fiction, she quietly allows her own fiction-makers to set their contrivances in motion; as Darrel Mansell says in another context [in The Novels of Jane Austen, 1975] 'this puckish withholding on the narrator's part . . . creates a faint comedy between Jane Austen and her own characters that runs through the novels.'

In fact she does not raise her voice until her heroine finds herself in perplexities based on fictions from which she is unable to extricate herself without her author's help. It is Catherine's violent and unexplained dismissal from the Abbey and ignominious return to Fullerton which prompt Jane Austen to make her second major 'intrusion' into Northanger Abbey:

A heroine returning at the close of her career, to her native village, in all the triumph of recovered reputation . . . is an event on which the pen of the contriver may well delight to dwell; it gives credit to every conclusion, and the author must share in the glory she so liberally bestows. But my affair is widely different.

Assuming an ironic sympathy with the shallow artistic fulfillment, the 'sweet elation of spirits' for what are essentially fairy-tale devices, Jane Austen implies that not only do such contrived and fantastic 'happy endings' suspend the judgment of the reader by making him too happy to be critical, but they seem to have the same effect on the author.

From such fictions Jane Austen carefully distinguishes her 'affair.' The thrust of Northanger Abbey, whose hero falls in love with the heroine from gratitude for her esteem, is a 'blow upon sentiment.' Its attempt is at neither 'grandeur' nor 'pathos' but at the 'midland counties' and 'central parts' of emotion. Appropriately, Jane Austen concludes the passage with a realistic touch, apt to the quality of her fiction different from popular novels—the brief reference to the Sunday loiterers of this small town for whom a passing hack postchaise is an occasion for the exercise of 'fancy.'

By reminding the reader at the crisis of the novel's affairs that it is a novel, the artist's delighted assertion of controlling power points explicitly to fiction as the central theme of Northanger Abbey. Jane Austen's rescue of her favorite characters from the consequences of irresponsible fiction-making calls attention to her own supremacy as fiction-maker. In each 'intrusion' she strengthens the novelist's position by speaking out boldly as the contriver of fictions of which she is not ashamed, but proud to shape and control. Making overt her own novel's parody of bad fiction, she explicitly distinguishes what she is doing from the efforts of others. [In Nineteenth Century Fiction 25 (1970)] Donald D. Stone cites Frank Kermode's idea that the novel is 'a history of anti-novels,' adding his own observation that 'it is by attacking the conventions of "fiction" that the novel maintains its position as a transcriber of reality.'

Frankly acknowledging her craft, Jane Austen draws the reader into the process of fiction-making—even, in one 'intrusion,' soliciting his help for the best, i.e., the most probable, disposition of her materials. The reader is obliged to read fictions less passively, and, by taking a creative attitude to the novel, to appreciate it as an intellectual exercise, not as a sentimental escape. Encouraging his consciousness of Northanger Abbey as fiction, she opens its materials to him and endows him with some of her own awareness of its possibilities. Emulating Henry's advice to Catherine, she can even appeal to her reader's imagination for help in concluding her fiction satisfactorily: 'Consult your own understanding, your own sense of what is probable, your own observation of what is around you.'

In sharing with her reader the true fictional process, after having shown him the nature and consequence of 'false' fiction, lies Jane Austen's strongest, most telling defense of the novel. But perhaps its most charming revelation is Jane Austen's notion that the real motive for authorship should be the creation of joy in the assembling of materials to express truth. That is the explanation for the cheer with which she breaks into the
novel to share directly with her readers her confidence in their mutual happiness at her ingenious invention of a reward for all of Eleanor Tilney's sufferings. The sketchy portrait of Eleanor's lover is, of course, exquisitely appropriate to the merry tone of the passage, while the particular detail with which Jane Austen condescends to 'finish' her depiction of Eleanor's lover mocks the superficial neatness of the Gothic novel. She has constructed her own novel, so surely to expose its 'tendency'—the exploration and resolution of fiction—that she impertinently invites us at the end of *Northanger Abbey* to misinterpret its materials.

She can permit herself the fun of making her heroines patronize the source of their being, the circulating library, itself a world of fictions, and form their friendships through the reading and discussion of fictions, without ever compromising their reality. She even interrupts them in their reading by suddenly exhorting other novelists to defend the fiction her own heroines so richly enjoy. This infamous defense of fiction is strategically placed early in her novel. What it achieves in this position is to force the reader to scrutinize the fictive process. With its apparent contradiction of the burlesque opening, the 'Defense' makes it plain that the parodic passages of *Northanger Abbey* are not intended to reject fiction, but to refine and redefine it.

Another such strategically placed defense occurs in her two critical 'asides'—to society, and to 'the capital pen of a sister author'—where Jane Austen yokes fiction with society, making clear at an important stage of the novel that the value of fiction (if it is responsibly handled) lies in the power to tell truth about life. For the source of this kind of fiction, unlike that of an *Udolpho*, is society; the novel pays back its debt through offering society a corrective fiction.

As Catherine increasingly submits her understanding to fiction, before we judge her we ought to remember that we have been warned. The world in which Catherine exists is itself an illusion; we can therefore only judge her foolishness as long as we ourselves foolishly believe in the reality of the fiction that gave her being, the 'reality' by which we determine what is 'illusion.' That Henry Tilney believes in the superior power of fiction over 'naked instruction' is demonstrated each time he engages to teach Catherine. For Jane Austen believes as firmly as Blair that it is not the novel but 'the faulty manner of its execution, that can expose it to any contempt.'

It is in her 'dear Dr Johnson' that we find a practical justification for the novel. For if Dr Johnson intended in *Rambler* No. 4 to warn readers and writers of the 'new' novel's dangerous possibilities, he also saw its use as a safeguard for innocence. In depicting society realistically, the 'modern' novel taught innocence what to fear, and ignorance what to detest:

> These familiar histories may perhaps be made of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality, and convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions. . . .

> The purpose of these writings is surely not only to show mankind, but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with less hazard; to teach the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by Treachery for Innocence, without infusing any wish for that superiority with which the betrayer flatters his vanity; to give the power of counter-acting fraud, without the temptation to practice it; to initiate youth by mock encounters in the art of necessary defence, and to increase prudence without impairing virtue.

*Northanger Abbey* is, of course, a novel of this nature. It offers through the depiction of its innocent heroine in the hands of a manipulative, greedy society—her head the more easily turned because of the irresponsible fiction in which she indulges—a moral lesson for young readers. But it offers also a far more sophisticated lesson, for more sophisticated readers, about the nature of fiction and the art of the novel.
Criticism: Michael Williams (essay date 1986)


[Below, Williams analyzes style in Northanger Abbey, arguing that the novel exhibits a complex unity that eludes simple classification.]

"Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it. I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world."

(Catherine Morland on The Mysteries of Udolpho)

Everybody knows that Northanger Abbey is a parody of the Gothic novel. Everyone sees that it is also, to borrow the sub-title of Fanny Burney's Evelina, the 'history of a young lady's entrance into the world'. And a well-established tradition insists that these two aspects of the novel are incompatible, even that the existence of each one is an active threat to the functioning of the other. Of course, the novel is also about reading and pleasure, reading and instruction. Does this help to heal the fracture?

The novel was probably first drafted after the earliest versions of what were to become Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice. In 1803 the manuscript was sold to a publisher, but never published by him, and Austen repurchased it thirteen years later. After 1803, she probably revised it at least once, but the nature of the revisions can only be guessed at, and in the last months of her life she wrote of having laid it aside in an apparently unsatisfactory condition: it was published posthumously. All of this seems to suggest that the novel is both 'early' and 'unfinished'; that it is a not-quite-successful experiment by a novelist who was yet to achieve the coherence of maturity; and that it is not much more than a bridge between the vigorous and perceptive parodies of the juvenilia, and the substantial achievements of the later novels.

The novel has, of course, never lacked defenders: but if their attempts are regarded successively, then they can still seem in fact to be revealing an incoherence in the novel. Unifying patterns are perceived, but only by including some and not all of the novel's facets. What is omitted is then often criticised as being crude or irrelevant. A sophisticated account of the problem has been given by A. Walton Litz [in Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development, 1965]. He suggests that the chapters primarily concerned with parody—the first two, and the five concerned with Catherine's Gothic fantasies at the Abbey—'from detachable units.' He concedes that 'the Gothic elements are a brilliant commentary on Catherine's general character and behaviour', and he argues that Catherine is at once the anti-heroine, created in reaction to the Gothic conventions, and a heroine being educated 'into reality'. Yet he also insists that the expression of the novel's main themes is 'hampered by lapses in tone and curious shifts in narrative method', and he concludes that 'Jane Austen was experimenting in Northanger Abbey with several narrative methods she had not fully mastered, and the result is a lack in consistency of viewpoint'. In other words, the reader is prevented from engaging fully with the text.

Others have tried to perceive a unity in just this diversity of method. Katrin Ristkok Burlin [in Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays, edited by John Halperin, 1975] insists that the novel is a 'single, complex treatment of the theme of fiction', in which the reader is exposed to four different kinds of fiction. These are 'the absurd extravagance of sentimental Gothic fictions', 'the satiric, educative fictions of Henry Tilney', 'the manipulative, egotistical fictions of the Thorpes', and 'the satiric and realistic fiction of Northanger Abbey itself. But surely the novel is not only about reading and fictionalising, in the way that this categorising suggests? Jan Fergus concedes that 'the novel is about writing novels', but her interest is largely confined to the elements of burlesque; and, though she also claims that the processes of education are important in the
novel, this is only as far as they affect the reader, since for Fergus the heroine is deliberately excluded from such processes. Eric Rothstein [in University of Toronto Quarterly XLIV (Fall 1974)] takes a significantly larger view of the question of education, in developing his argument about how 'the strength of Northanger Abbey, and its theme, emerge from the connections between Catherine's education and ours, and between the social and literary modes of her experience'. But, since his is a sophisticated extension of the contrast between high-flown Gothic improbabilities, and the ordinariness of the everyday, he is silent on the important non-Gothic literary links with the novel. Frank J. Kearful [in ELH 32 (December 1965)] claims that the unity of the novel resides in a complicated interplay of satire and serious novel: but he has to redefine the parody in the first two chapters to make it into satire and thus a part of his formulation. Kearful also exemplifies the danger of making too much of the novel as a many-faceted thing. For him, Austen

is writing what is not simply a novel or a satire, a burlesque or a parody, a comedy or a tragedy, a romance or an antiromance. She is, rather, combining elements of all these in such a fashion as to make us aware of the paradoxical nature of all illusion—even those illusions by which we master illusion.

But that begins to read like Polonius's recommendation of the Players; certainly it is more than Kearful's argument actually supports. Then, too, he assumes that the differing 'methods' exist as large and sequential blocks of chapters, but this leaves him insufficient scope for dealing with the way that there can be a shift of 'method' from sentence to sentence, or even within one sentence.

It begins therefore to seem that the novel is indeed attempting to pose important and difficult questions about the links between fictional and actual worlds. But, if we are not to conclude that the questions are muddled, we must find a form in which the different elements of parody, satire and education novel can each take their due part. This means in turn that we must establish a way in which the reader is able to respond simultaneously in different ways to the different elements, when they combine. Perhaps we need to think in terms of a continuum, one that will enable us to perceive a diversity of positions, and the complex interchange between the different positions that are reflected in the novel. At one end, there are accounts of Gothic, some so broad as to be pastiche, or even simple imitation, rather than parody; there are the occasions of genuine and cutting parody of the Gothic, and there are the significant echoes, often parodic, of non-Gothic literature; there is the standing of parody of novels into satire on the reading of novels, and that satire into a different but related satire on the social life of Bath, where art is the stylised representation of life, and life can seem to be an imitation of the imitation; there is the more straightforward reading of books for entertainment and education, and there are other means of acquiring education to be tried out, as a means of preparing for and coping with the exigencies and the commonplaces of everyday life. If the novelist touches frequently on different points along this continuum, singly and in combination, then it will be possible for the reader to see the Gothic and the anti-Gothic elements mingling, but also in contrast. Catherine Morland is a heroine in everyday ordinary unheroinesness; she avidly follows the careers of 'genuine' heroines in the books she reads: but she can also—on occasion—quite naturally become a comic approximation to the specifications of the high Gothic. None of these possibilities is complete in itself; each exists and functions in combination with the others.

That begins to hint at the complexities of the dialectic relationship between the reader and this text. But it is not merely that Northanger Abbey presents a complex combination of elements with which the reader can engage in a correspondingly complex dialectic relationship. The artful playing with possibilities and combinations that constitutes the text suggests that Austen is in some special sense aware of the potential that exists in the resulting dialectic. One could say that she is inviting the reader to share a joke with her about the nature of that dialectic. One could say that she is playing a 'game' with the reader in which she seeks to outwit him (and the reader who does not fully perceive the 'game' will still help to create a dialectic but will do so with what is significantly less than the text). Either way, this implies a large, conscious, ironic awareness on the part of both author and reader of the relationship between text and reader.
This is not to turn Austen into a daringly experimental twentieth-century novelist. Fielding and Sterne had already variously demonstrated how far a novelist could go in not dealing directly with his readers, but in teasing and mystifying, in digressing and explaining, and in arguing with his readers about the way the novel should develop. If *Northanger Abbey* is a direct descendant of these novels then we should expect it to declare its ancestry nowhere more clearly than in the opening pages, because, when a novel is self-consciously concerned with its existence as a novel, and its relations with its readers, the opening will of course be the ground for the first skirmishings with the reader. The obvious example of this must be the first pages of *Tristram Shandy*; but, for the purposes of *Northanger Abbey*, *Tom Jones* is probably more instructive. Fielding's interest in opening chapters turns out to be an elaborate joke at the expense of the reader. Authors, his narrator argues, should provide a 'bill of fare' before inviting readers to partake. The irony behind the seemingly reasonable suggestion becomes obvious when he tells us that his own bill of fare is 'no other than HUMAN NATURE', since this, he admits, is 'the subject of all the romances, novels, plays and poems, with which the stalls abound'. But what counts, he says, is 'the author's skill in well dressing it up'. And in extending his metaphor he is soon parodying the use of metaphor, so that we can smile with him while knowing that he is laughing at us. All he offers is the broadest of declarations—that at first his will be the 'more plain and simple manner' and that he will later add 'all the high French and Italian seasoning'. But then, in not answering the questions he sets himself, Fielding's narrator has actually demonstrated something significant about the way he intends to handle his material, and the kind of relationship he is seeking with his reader.

At the opening of *Northanger Abbey* Austen, like Fielding, sets out to play on her reader's expectations, and to reveal something of her narrator's functioning. But we are left less sure of what that functioning is, and of how her narrator stands, exactly, in relation to the material of the novel. If Fielding's narrator is ambiguous, he is at least a recognisable force, constantly and insistently drawing attention to his actuality and his opinions. Austen's is puzzlingly demure.

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard—and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence, besides two good livings—and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as any body might expect, she still lived on—lived to have six children more—to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself. A family of ten children will be always called a fine family, where there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number; but the Morlands had little other right to the word, for they were in general very plain, and Catherine, for many years of her life, as plain as any.

And so we move on through the list of all the ways in which Catherine Morland is not a heroine. The effect, though, is to threaten any attempt by the reader to find a secure basis for his understanding. The opening sentence appears to have behind it the authority of the axiom, yet it carries no actual endorsement from the narrator, and is no more than an appeal to the consensus that is yet to be established. The ambiguity centres on the word 'heroine', and if we glance down the page then it seems at first as if there is just a simple irony at work: Catherine is a straightforward inversion of some of the more hackneyed conventions of the popular novel. But such a formulation soon fails to contain the problem, because, if Catherine is not a typical heroine, then what is she?

We are faced with the engaging puzzle of finding a way of being interested in a heroine who is 'ordinary' and thus 'realistic', but also not 'real'; is necessarily a heroine, even if a dull one, whose dimensions and functions
can only be communicated to us by way of the dangerous and confusing and ridiculed literary conventions. Nor is it only that the realistic account of the education of an ordinary girl is beset by complicated jokes and questions about the way novels are written and the way they are read. The biographical details of this seemingly unsuccessful heroine are themselves a tangled string of paradoxes and ironies, each requiring a slightly different kind of unravelling from the one that precedes it, each weakening a little our grasp of what has already been revealed. A 'family often children' is 'fine', at least in the everyday conversational sense, but then this loose usage is criticised by the application of serious and good sense; serious, that is, until we realise that it is heads, as well as arms and legs that must be counted. Then we are told that the Morlands are 'in general very plain', so the word 'fine' is entirely inappropriate except in the already discredited conversational sense.

Later, it is revealed that Catherine's abilities are 'extraordinary', and the narrator seems to be operating with fairly simple reversals, since it is clear that Catherine is 'extraordinary' only because she is ordinary. It is natural therefore that she 'never could learn or understand anything before she was taught', since this places her in direct opposition to the absurd literary convention by which heroines acquire extraordinary knowledge and abilities unaided. But then we are told that Catherine is also 'often inattentive, and occasionally stupid', and here no simple reversal seems possible: 'ordinary' may mean 'life-like' but it is also rather dull. Yet of course it is a well established (though not quite universal) convention that a heroine be beautiful: and it is a universal convention that a heroine be interesting in some way. It is only at the very end of the long first paragraph, when we are told of her love of 'rolling down the green slope at the back of the house', that we can properly disentangle the ambiguities. It is the vividness, the particularity of this small detail, given ostensibly in Catherine's favour but apparently operating against her, that has on reinterpretation to be seen to work for her, that fixes some secure basis for our interest in Catherine. If she is ordinary, then she is also refreshingly natural, and she possesses the natural vitality of a ten-year-old child.

This security, though, is also momentary. The second paragraph informs us, with a telling irony, that Catherine becomes 'almost pretty'; the third that she has lost her tomboyish ways and is 'in training for a heroine'. So she stocks her memory with quotations that will comfort and sustain her through the 'vicissitudes' of heroineship. The quotations themselves are not surprising, given that this is a family in which Sir Charles Grandison is read (a favourite, incidentally, of Austen herself), but 'new books' are not easily obtained. Yet they present us with a very complex irony. Catherine, the vital 'person' who once enjoyed rolling down banks, and who even now has only a vague apprehension of what it is to be a heroine, is nevertheless the heroine of this novel, one who attempts to study the habits and functions of other heroines. Her eager response to Twelfth Night, which the narrator argues is proof that she is a promising apprentice heroine, is also evidence of the naïve literalness with which Catherine sometimes approaches literature. And this is a quality that will actively determine her career as the heroine of this novel. To Catherine, 'a young woman in love always looks—"like Patience on a monument/Smiling at Grief'.

In many ways, the opening chapters of Northanger Abbey are the most challenging and disconcerting for the reader. Elsewhere the separate workings of the parody, the satire and the education novel, and the different ways in which they combine, can be as complicated and surprising (can even surprise because we have lapsed into a false security): but the later chapters tend to be a more thorough exploring of possibilities that have already been sketched. In this respect, the range of literary reference in the opening pages is interesting. It is usually assumed that this is confined to the Gothic, but, as the questions about beautiful and interesting heroines suggest, the range is actually much wider. And in this breadth there is an important clue of the functioning of the literary allusions and the parody in the rest of the novel, and to the connections between this and other elements in the novel.

The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), much discussed in the novel, is obviously one source, but it is not the only Gothic source. Further, Mary Lascelles has shown that the signally unaccomplished Catherine Morland of the first chapters is much more like the opposite of Charlotte Smith's Emmeline (1788) than anything in the
Radcliffe novels: she adds the wise proviso that there is 'great similarity among the heroines of that age'. This takes us away from the purely Gothic, since *Emmeline*, though it has distinct Gothic touches, is also a quite respectable daughter of a Fanny Burney novel. The range of reference extends even beyond this point: being locked up by one's father is an almost indispensable part of a Gothic heroine's career, yet it is also a practice common to the fathers of Sophia Western and Clarissa Harlowe. And, when we are told that Catherine is so unheroinely as to prefer cricket 'not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush', we have moved to the area of the then current children's literature, and the pages of Thomas Day's *Sandford and Merton* (1783-9), or—even more likely—Sarah Trimmer's *Fabulous Histories* (1786): teaching children to be kind to animals was a part of Day's function and it was central to Trimmer's; both were also eager to offer practical instruction in natural history.

This widening of the range of reference operates as yet another means of undermining our attempts to find a simple and coherent pattern. There is, though, another significant consequence: Austen is not merely warning us that a too-literal application of fictional conventions can be dangerous; she is also deliberately invoking and examining the literary tradition within which such warnings were given. In eighteenth-century writing, the omnivorous tradition that charts an excessive preoccupation with reading, and demonstrates its consequences for characters whose expectations of reality are too much governed by the conventions of literature, became, itself, a stock part of the literary landscape, so that it could be established by a few hints. In *The Rivals* (1775) Sheridan's Lydia Languish illustrates the point exactly: we know precisely what to make of her as soon as we know of her voracious delight in novels; it becomes natural that she should have 'very singular taste'. We can anticipate that she would hugely enjoy an elopement; we can even guess the terms in which she would understand the experience:'—so becoming a disguise!—so amiable a ladder of Ropes!—Conscious Moon—horses—Scotch parson.'

*Northanger Abbey* has been connected by the critics with a particular strand within the tradition. This is made up of the many rigid imitators of *Don Quixote*, for whom the delusions generated by popular literature are the theme, rather than merely a theme, and who borrow Cervantes's shape to suit their own narrowly didactic purposes. Thus Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) looks to the heroic French romance of the previous century; Richard Graves treats Methodism and John Wesley in *The Spiritual Quixote* (1773); Maria Edgeworth's tale *Angelina: or, L'Amie Inconnue* (1801) is aimed at the excesses of the sentimental novel. And Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (1813) is directed at the Gothic novel, but also includes references to works as diverse as *Sir Charles Grandison*, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, and Madame de Staël's *Corinne*. Austen herself responded with 'very high' pleasure to *The Female Quixote*, and she thought *The Heroine* a 'delightful burlesque' (*Letters*). Something of this can be glimpsed if we consider a passage from *The Heroine*. Cherry Wilkinson is convinced that she is a 'Heroine', and that her real name must be Cherubina de Willoughby; so her father, a mere farmer, cannot be her father.

'What!' cried I, 'can nothing move thee to confess thy crimes? Then hear me. Ere Aurora with rosy fingers shall unbar the eastern gate—'

'My child, my child, my dear darling daughter!' exclaimed this accomplished crocodile, bursting into tears, and snatching me to his bosom, 'what have they done to you? What phantom, what horrid disorder is distracting my treasure?'

'Unhand me, guileful adulator,' cried I, 'and try thy powers of tragedy elsewhere, for—I know thee!' I spoke, and extricated myself from his embrace.

'Dreadful, dreadful!' muttered he. 'Her sweet senses are lost.' . . .
I relate the several conversations, in a dramatic manner, and word for word, as well as I can recollect them, since I remark that all heroines do the same. Indeed I cannot enough admire the fortitude of these charming creatures, who, while they are in momentary expectation of losing their lives, or their honours, or both, sit down with the utmost unconcern, and indite the Wittiest letters in the world.

Barrett's version is of particular interest in relation to *Northanger Abbey*, because of the way it does not confine its attention to a single kind of literature. But it must also be clear that this kind of parody can only work in superficial and crude ways, and in this respect Barrett is typical of this strand of the tradition. There is a certain lack of skill and confidence, an uneasy interaction between 'fancy' and 'reality': in the passage from *The Heroine*, for instance, the joke about heroines writing elegant accounts of horrible experiences is apt, but only if we are not made—as we are—to think too closely of Cherubina actually sitting down to write this account. So, in general, the frequent and earnest reminders of the realism of the setting are self-defeating, and require as frequent explanations of the elaborate mechanisms at work in sustaining the illusions of the central character. That means, inevitably, that the sustained illusion will become progressively less likely, less interesting, less entertaining. Similarly, there is an over-eagerness in emphasising the moral: usually there is a solemn invocation of Cervantes, and the moral lesson he can teach; usually too there appears a worthy and wordy doctor of divinity, at the end of the novel, to lecture the character into a proper understanding of himself, and to ensure that the reader also gets the point.

It is worth noting, by contrast, that Cervantes himself never allows these problems to obtrude in *Don Quixote*. He relies, rather, on the degree to which he can control our sympathetic laughter, and he trusts to the workings of the burlesque. There is none of the muddling preoccupation with the problems of realism: the Don sees giants, we know they are windmills. Consequently, also, Cervantes shows no felt need to preach illusions out of the reader, can afford even to suggest that religious discourse is an ineffectual means of curing the Don: it is turned into the joke about a 'great and pleasant Inquisition' of the Don's books; quickly becomes parody, in the pedantic debate of the merits of each book; then becomes a satire on the careless zeal of such Inquisitions, when the priest loses interest and the books are indiscriminately burned.

While it would be perfectly correct to argue that Austen has a share in this tradition, it is surely wrong to suggest that *Northanger Abbey* is a significant reflection of that share. It is in the juvenilia, in works such as *Love and Friendship*, that there is the single-minded burlesquing of the Lennox or Barrett kind. Even here Austen shows herself, unlike them, to be free from the distracting preoccupation with the need to ensure that the picture is 'real' and the character 'deluded', and like Cervantes she turns the moralising into a target for more burlesque. When Sophia dies—she is 'carried . . . off by a galloping Consumption', the result of fainting on damp ground—it is as one heroine speaking to another, not as someone cured by her desperate plight of the fanciful illusions generated by novels, that she utters her last words to her friend: 'Beware of swoons Dear Laura. . . A frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious; it is an exercise to the Body & if not too violent, is I dare say conducive to Health in its consequences—Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint—' (*Minor Works*).

But there is another strand of the tradition that links Cervantes with Austen, one that will occasionally borrow something from the more simple burlesquers, but is much more broadly interested in the relationship between fiction and truth. Fielding acknowledged his debt to Cervantes on the title page of *Joseph Andrews*, and in that novel he made what he had borrowed into something that is very much his own. Smollett and Sterne are both under the influence of the same tradition, and Scott connects interestingly with it when, at the start of *Waverley*, he explains how Edward Waverley's reading has coloured his mind: Scott deliberately repudiates any link between his novel and the simple burlesques in imitation of *Don Quixote*, and the contrast he draws with Cervantes is put in terms which could be applied, almost exactly, to Catherine Morland. His subject, he says, is not.
such total perversion of intellect as misconstrues the objects actually presented to the senses, but that more common aberration from sound judgement, which apprehends occurrences indeed in their reality, but communicates to them a tincture of its own romantic tone and colouring.

It is after all the mere sight of the furnishings of Mrs Tilney's room that destroys Catherine's most fervid Gothic imaginings. Henry's subsequent lecture merely helps to fix that lesson. So, in making its own distinctive contribution to this more elevated strand of the tradition, *Northanger Abbey* is also showing how it fulfils the promise of its opening chapters. Catherine is the 'heroine' deluded by reading who must be brought to her senses, and yet she is also, more broadly and subtly, the young girl who has been somewhat confused by the difference between appropriate and inappropriate ways of understanding the world. She is put right by the pedagogically inclined 'hero': but Henry, while he can be pedantic, can also at times be possessed of a narrator-like irony, and he can be a young man who is rather too partial to his own wit. Further, he can teach her so well, and she be so effectively taught, not only for the sound literary reason that he is the wise hero and she the erring heroine, but because they are, albeit unequally, in love. There is also a final twist: we can see the way parody shades into satire, and the way both are intimately bound up with the education novel, but the parody is also a parody of parody, and Henry, the exhorting clergyman who has just come back from attending to affairs in his parish when he finds Catherine outside his mother's room, is also Austen's mocking echo of the wordy divine who so often dogs the closing pages of the lesser burlesques.

That should alert us to the way that the relation between *Northanger Abbey* and its sources and targets is constantly varying. Eric Rothstein argues that there is a pattern in the variation of treatment from character to character: 'Mrs Allen is the null version of the chaperone. Isabella is a genuine but corrupt confidante, and her brother a shrunken but certainly genuine unwelcome suitor. The General, finally, is a reasonable facsimile, within a social world, of a Montoni or Schedoni.' But this only partially holds. Isabella is a 'confidante', but she also sees herself as a 'heroine', and is a much closer and more consistent approximation to the Gothic model than Catherine herself. John Thorpe is the 'unwanted suitor' but he also comes close, on occasion, to displacing the General as 'villain'; and the General's 'villainy' is modified by the fact that he is the dupe of John Thorpe. Even Mrs Allen is not always merely the 'null version of the chaperone': it is clear that she in no way fits the Gothic requirements of her role, and it is as clear that she cannot properly fulfil ordinary everyday expectations about chaperones, since she is incapable of giving Catherine almost any useful guidance. But there are occasions when she much more actively inverts her role. Catherine's entrance to Bath's Upper Rooms is delayed until Mrs Allen, herself, is provided with 'a dress of the newest fashion'; they enter late because it is Mrs Allen who is 'so long in dressing'; and then Mrs Allen does so with 'more care for the safety of her new gown than for the comfort of her protegée'.

The range of variation in the use of literary devices is most obvious with Catherine herself. After her first meeting with Henry, for example, she is puzzled by his apparent disappearance from Bath: 'This sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero, threw a fresh grace in Catherine's imagination around his person and manners . . .'. A perfectly understandable response, but one which does not allow for the actual and perfectly ordinary explanation, yet also begins to suggest the excitement that a genuine Gothic heroine could have wrung from the situation. Conversely, when John Thorpe carries her off in a carriage, away from the interesting Tilneys, and towards the delightful horrors of Blaize Castle, the parody seems obvious enough, especially when we realise that, though Catherine thinks it genuine, Blaize is sham Gothic; especially when John Thorpe's bluster ('But Mr Thorpe only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on') is the caricature of a typical Gothic villain. In fact the moment brings together a rich diversity of literary and social patterns. The business of the heroine being abducted in a carriage is a familiar enough Gothic cliché, but a famous non-Gothic literary abduction (one that Catherine herself would have known of) occurs in the exemplary pages of *Sir Charles Grandison*. And in *Northanger Abbey* part of the force and part of the comedy derives from the fact that Catherine is, on this occasion at least, entirely unresponsive to literary parallels, whether Richardsonian or Gothic, and sensibly and volubly insists on
regarding John Thorpe's behaviour as being no more than rude and deceitful.

The practice of writing and reading novels is of course also openly debated by the narrator. The most obvious instance, outside the opening and closing chapters, is the 'defence of the novel' and, here as elsewhere, what might appear plain and simple turns out to be difficult and divergent. As the appeal for sisterly support from other heroines suggests, a criticism of silly improbable novels and dull over-literal readers is not a rejection of the novel as a form—a point that none of the simpler burlesques make with any conviction. It is also an energetic assertion of the 'genius, wit and taste' that can be found in novels. But the narrator becomes increasingly enthusiastic in defending novels, and begins to take up the role of a too-consciously partisan novelist, defending her art a little too vehemently: the polemic seems at once to be serious and a self-parody. The novel is, we are told, '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'. The real ground for the defence of the novel must lie a little lower than the heights of these superlatives. Then, too, there is the implied need for some means of discriminating between novels: Cecilia can perhaps be more enlightening and more substantially entertaining than, say, The Castle of Wolfenbach. But on what basis, exactly, do we judge this? How, more particularly, does the naive reader learn to make the judgement?

For there is Catherine, herself a 'heroine', and one known to 'take up a novel'. Though the 'defence' has all the appearance of a digression into generalities, it is sandwiched between the first mention of the fact that Catherine and Isabella read novels, and an account of their pleasure in reading The Mysteries of Udolpho, and it is fair to ask how far the 'defence' connects with Catherine. In fact, she is something of an embarrassment to it: true, she does not scorn novels, true she does derive a great deal of the promised pleasure from reading them; but what of the high claims about 'the most thorough knowledge of human nature'? All Catherine herself claims, even for Sir Charles Grandison, is that it is 'very entertaining', and it is doubtful that the novels of Burney and Edgeworth, so eagerly praised by the narrator, would necessarily elicit a wider response from Catherine. Yet of course Catherine does take instruction from some novels: as with her means of finding entertainment in novels, though, she does it rather indiscriminately. Thus she rather credulously acquires a 'great store of information' about the ways of love, and the contours of French and Italian landscape, and the behaviour to be found in abbeys. But there is another complication, because, though she sometimes assumes that life is like literature, she has a firm-enough grasp, if not fully consciously, of the idea that literature is not like life. Her intense delight in 'Laurentina's skeleton', her insistence that she should not be told what is 'behind the black veil', both show that she clearly considers them to belong to the province of fiction and not reality. Similarly, when Henry offers for her terror and delight a pastiche Gothic novel it is clear that she at least half understands what he is about. And, when Isabella declares that, 'were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice', we are told that Catherine is as much struck by the 'novelty' of this utterance, as she is by the way it reminds her of 'all the heroines of her acquaintance'. What this seems most cogently to suggest is a need to consider the ways in which these complex half-perceptions can be made whole, and Catherine can become more fully aware of the confusing border between fiction and life—a border that has been teasing and perplexing the reader since the start of the novel.

So we return to Northanger Abbey as an education novel. This too is an incomplete form, and we have to take it in conjunction with the other forms. We are told that Catherine 'never could learn or understand anything before she was taught' and this has already been noted as the pillorying of a popular fictional convention. But it is also a statement of the empiricist contention that experience is the prime source of all knowledge, summed up in John Locke's famous notion of the tabula rasa. This notion underlies much of the novel. It is obvious that Catherine is handicapped by a lack of experience, and that, as her experience, direct and indirect, widens, so she begins to build, sometimes usefully and sometimes not, on her understanding. Isabella introduces her to the pleasure of Udolpho, a pleasure which she at first assumes to be universal. John Thorpe's brash and muddled assertions about novels persuade her to revise this assumption, and so she hesitates to mention this favourite topic to Henry because 'gentlemen read better books'. Henry's response, though she
does not fully understand it, persuades her to make yet another assessment.

But, then, the empiricist pattern, like all the others, does not hold completely, and Catherine is often moving, not always unprofitably, beyond the realms of her experience. Were she no more than the application of Lockean principles then there might be more justification than actually exists for those critics who find her 'dull', or who claim that her mind is a 'somewhat implausible blank', because then the development of her understanding could be a steady and mechanical progression, as experience widens and knowledge grows. But no such orderly structure exists. Catherine's relationship with Isabella is illuminating, here, because Isabella is four years older than Catherine, and 'at least four years better informed'—at least in the matter of balls, fashions, flirtations and quizzes. It is hardly necessary to warn the reader of the selfishness, the false intensification, the constant reliance on trick and deception, that make up Isabella's behaviour; but it is interesting to notice how the 'naive' Catherine responds. We might expect that she would tend to accept Isabella's version of the world, at least until experience proved it false, but in fact what happens is more complicated and less predictable. In their first long conversation in the Pump Room, she sometimes does respond unquestioningly, but at other times she is more critical, even if the criticism is not always quite consciously made. At some points, she rejects what Isabella says for reasons that are firmly based on her own experience, as when she questions Isabella's opinion of Sir Charles Grandison because she has herself read it. At others, though her criticisms are no less appropriate, they are much less the result of anything that she has experienced. This is most apparent when the talk turns to the interesting subject of young men. Henry Tilney's name is mentioned and Isabella offers some sisterly support but Catherine is able to reach something rather more profound than Isabella's gushing.

'Where the heart is really attached, I know very well how little one can be pleased with the attention of any body else. Every thing is so insipid, so uninteresting, that does not relate to the beloved object! I can perfectly comprehend your feelings.'

'But you should not persuade me that I think so very much about Mr Tilney, for perhaps I may never see him again.'

We know already that Catherine has been toying fancifully with the fact of Henry's absence, and this indicates the quite precise limits that she actually sets herself. And, though her only experience, in this area, comes from novels, she is not using that experience or she would more readily assume the inevitability of a happy ending. Even Harriet Byron, despite her much-prolonged doubts, does finally become Lady Grandison.

The arrival of John Thorpe brings another combinaton of possibilities and difficulties. It is easy not to like him, but it is worth noting how far Catherine moves towards an active dislike of him, since, as the narrator observes, she does not 'understand the propensities of a rattle'. Then, and it is another reminder of her vulnerability, her dislike is bought off by the fact that he is James's friend and Isabella's brother, and that he has offered himself as a partner for the evening, so there is a complex interaction of 'friendship' and 'flattery', of 'diffidence' and 'youth'.

With Henry, the links and the contrasts are most various. For Catherine, he is the desirable suitor, who is also a useful instructor, as well as being a habitual and sometimes puzzling wit. His delight in his own wit is frequently at odds with his functioning as a teacher, and both are sometimes complicated and compromised as he becomes increasingly a lover: there are also times when, though he seems to be reaching the heights of a narrator-like detachment, he is himself firmly under the ironic scrutiny of the narrator. Inevitably, critics have tended to see this either as further evidence of the incoherence of the novel, or else have tried to regularise and simplify his functioning. But he is actually an integral part of the process by which different patterns are made to exist simultaneously.
Catherine herself is not merely the ingenuous admirer of Henry. After their first dance, she finds him 'as agreeable as she had already given him credit for being. He talked with fluency and spirit—and there was an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by her'. This is entirely predictable from an open, good-natured and ignorant girl of seventeen: we need, it seems, only pause to note how similarly Catherine is quickly delighted with Isabella's friendship, and so to record how vulnerable this tendency makes her. Yet there is more. The distance between Henry and Catherine is never greater than when he gently but pointedly satirises the ways of Bath, which she is just beginning tentatively to understand, and uses a way of thinking and talking that is quite beyond the reaches of her experience. But she still perceives a good deal of his meaning, and, though she is uncertain, her impulse is to laugh with him. When he exercises his wit on a subject so well known to her as Mrs Allen, she can even wonder whether 'he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others', a view that is not entirely without justification, but is also probably coloured by the fear (not, perhaps, fully thought out) that, just as the quite unwitting Mrs Allen is being teased, so might she herself have been unwittingly amusing him. It is only later, when she is completely enthralled by him, that she more confidently, if a little confusedly, assumes that 'Henry Tilney could never be wrong. His manner might sometimes surprize, but his meaning must always be just:—and what she did not understand, she was almost as ready to admire, as what she did'. And, having thus discovered the beauty of his perfection, it is by an ironic reversal of the conventional love story that she is able, later still, to admit to herself the possibility, at least in theory, that he may have some minor flaws.

In himself, Henry stands for a succession of differing possibilities. In the early encounters with Catherine, he is obviously charmed by her frankness and innocence, but he is also highly amused by her, and will laugh secretly at her, for example, when he talks of the country dance as an emblem for marriage, and she insistently refuses to see an emblem as an emblem. But later at least some of the laughs are against him: on the walk round Beechen Cliff, for instance, the narrator dwells pointedly on the advantages to a young woman, at least if she is 'good-looking', of being ignorant, and then goes on to describe one of Henry's more serious attempts to lessen that ignorance by way of a lecture on the picturesque, 'in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in every thing admired by him, and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste'. Clearly each is, to a degree, unwittingly duping the other and the self. Yet it is also uncertain, at least for Henry, whether this is more than a momentary lapse, since he soon appears to be complete master of the conversation again, and he presides with a narrator-like amusement over the confusion generated by Catherine's vision of the unreal Gothic horror, and Eleanor's knowledge of the real violence of the Gordon riots or the Reign of Terror. Later still, just at the point when he begins to find her 'irresistible', the ironist in him is muted and may even be silent: when Captain Tilney asks Isabella to dance, and Catherine assumes that he is motivated only by kindness, Henry tells her that she is 'superior in good nature . . . to all the rest of the world', and it is not certain whether this is a very gentle reminder of his satirising powers, or whether these are the words of a young man who is beginning to be decidedly in love.

All of which suggests that the events at the Abbey, far from being a tiresome interruption, are a natural, indeed crucial, part of a complex whole, as the novel works to its conclusion. It is entirely appropriate to his diverse functions that Henry, who on the way to the Abbey delightedly fuels Catherine's Gothic expectations, should also be the one to ask her, insistently, what 'ideas' she has 'been admitting' when she subsequently takes things ludicrously too far. Catherine enters the Abbey in ignorance, but with high literary expectations, and at first assumes an easy access to the superficial trappings of the Gothic—bloody daggers and lost manuscripts. When that proves illusory, she makes the second but much more interesting mistake of actually trying to apply the psychology of the Gothic to the person of the General. She treats the Abbey as if it were something in a novel; her excited 'errors' are much more like those induced by 'Laurentina's skeleton' than anything she would actually feel if Northanger really were the place she imagines it to be. So, when the 'visions of romance' are over, when she is 'awakened', she has at last a firm hold on much that has previously been close to her understanding, but has never before been properly in perspective, about life and about novels. In this way she takes the decisive step into adulthood.
Or so it would seem. Certainly there is a lesson clearly learned, but how exactly is Catherine transformed? The novel does not, in point of fact, resolve its complexities quite so easily. Catherine sees through Isabella's letter and this might suggest an advance in her understanding, but it is one that is all but forced upon her by the fact that she already knows James's side of the story. And there is the moment when Catherine, having resisted all the Gothic blandishments of a stormy night, a late, noisy and unexpected arrival at the Abbey, and mysterious noises outside her bedroom door, finds that Eleanor has come to tell her that she must precipitously leave the Abbey, in what looks like the best Gothic tradition. Is this an intrusion of the Gothic as it might actually be found in real social life? We could then say that, though Catherine was wrong to think that the General had murdered his wife, she had actually fastened on to something ugly in his nature. But this will not quite do, since her ideas about him are based only subliminally on what could have been the useful evidence of the discomfort she feels in his presence, a discomfort which seems also to be felt by his children. Her thoughts derive much more from nonsensical pseudo-literary speculations about the General's relationship with his wife ('He did not love her walk:—could he therefore have loved her?'). Equally, it is possible to argue that the General exhibits no more than the social vice—about which there is nothing especially Gothic—of rudeness. If we believe that he is the dupe of John Thorpe, then the General will regard Catherine, such is the irony, as a kind of Isabella; and, given that he is irascible and forceful, his treatment of Catherine could almost be said to be reasonable. And there is Catherine's solitary journey home, which, since she survives unscathed, could be said to point to her newly acquired maturity, except that she seems too stunned by the suddenness of her departure to worry about its consequences, and the thing seems to point as much to the ordinariness of the everyday, or even to be an opportunity for the narrator, while seeming to apologise for the unnovelistic nature of the event, to make jokes about a 'heroine in a hack post-chaise'.

And so the matter of the exact change in Catherine finally evades us and comes to be something that we can merely speculate about, something that is still to be negotiated with a future that is outside the pages of this novel. The novel has examined ways of understanding the world, and the links between these ways as they exist in fiction and in reality, but it will not resolve itself into a too-easy aphorism about moral or psychological or social development that Catherine's progress could be said to demonstrate, and the reader who needs such a thing must devise his own. So, too, this novel about an ordinary unheroinely heroine ends, fully in the spirit of the opening pages, with the narrator deliberately reminding us that this is, itself, a novel shaped by art; it is not 'life'. The resolution of the difficulties of heroine and hero is so contrived as to be a joke about the clumsy unreality and the necessity of endings in fiction. Likewise there is a claim, for the 'perfect' future happiness of the hero and heroine, that can only belong to the fictional world. As a final joke at the expense of the reader, in the closing words of the novel's last sentence a spurious debate is initiated about what this novel can be said to 'recommend'.

**Criticism: Paul Morrison (essay date 1991)**


*[In the following essay, Morrison undertakes a feminist, post-structural analysis of gender-specific spaces and sensibilities in Northanger Abbey.]*

Notre avis est . . . que si les aventures rapportées dans cet ouvrage ont un fonds de vérité, elles n'ont pu arriver que dans d'autres lieux ou d'autres temps; et nous blâmons beaucoup l'auteur, qui, séduit apparemment par'esperit d'intéresser davantage en se rapprochant plus de son siècle et de son pays, a osé faire paraître sous notre costume et avec nos usages, des moeurs qui nous sont si étrangères.

—Laclos, *Les liaisons dangereuses*
Catherine Morland, the protagonist of *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen's gothic parody, is ultimately disabused of her gothic illusions:

“If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?”

The outrageous ideas that Miss Morland has admitted are clearly literary in origin: she has been reading of the exploits of another young woman, Emily St. Aubert, the protagonist of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Catherine's release from these ideas, moreover, is also implicitly literary (or socioliterary, as Henry quite properly argues for the imbrication of the literary and the social): the exhortation to remember the country and age in which she lives reminds us that gothic atrocities conventionally occur in another country and time; the exhortation to remember that she is Christian (read: Protestant) reminds us that the gothic is conventionally associated with a deviant Catholicism. The man who disabuses Catherine of her illusions no doubt shares her taste for *le genre noir*. "Gentlemen" may "read better books," genre may be gender specific as Catherine herself maintains, yet Henry openly admits to having read *Udolpho*, and he is too fully conversant with the conventions of the gothic to plead immunity to its charms.

I begin with Henry's scene of instruction because I accept his contention that an economy of visibility or light ("a country like this, where roads and newspapers lay everything open"), what I shall characterize as an ideology of the *heimlich*, is everywhere operable in *Northanger Abbey*. I do not share in his assumption, however, his ideologically comforting assumption, that the *heimlich*, the dispensation of light or enlightenment that is now and is England, is the symmetrical opposite of the carceral economies, the gothic spaces, of the other country and time.

Henry ultimately posits—his celebrated wit and charm, his thoroughly ironic relation to the discourse of others notwithstanding—a Manichaean world of stable oppositions, a victory of the domestic forces of light over the alien and archaic forces of darkness. Against Henry, however, or against his tendency to circumscribe interpretive possibilities, I shall argue for the presence of an "unheimlich" movement, both within *Northanger Abbey* and between *Northanger Abbey* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, subversive of the oppositions here/there, now/then, light/dark, open/closed, the various binarisms that structure his celebration of "a country like this."

Before proceeding, however, a word or two about my use of the word "subversive," which is now something of a staple in the critical lexicon: I in no way mean to suggest that the subversion of a binary opposition, which is currently the most routine of critical gestures, is necessarily subversive in any broader ideological or political sense. In Freud's "Das Unheimliche," for example, which will figure prominently in what follows, the uncanny is both "a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite," and a return of the repressed, something that occurs "either when infantile experiences which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed." And an uncanny effacement of the binary, or an uncanny return of the repressed, does indeed render unstable the opposition between the primitive and the
civilized that is everywhere operable in Henry's ethnocentric ideology of the *heimlich*. Yet if the instability of the opposition subverts Henry's ethnocentricism, it nevertheless remains the basis of the sexual politics of "a country like this," of the power Henry wields over Catherine and Eleanor, for *Northanger Abbey* is everywhere given to a gender specific version of the modality of power that Foucault, who will also figure prominently in what follows, terms "panoptic" or "disciplinary." And panoptic power, like the Freudian "uncanny," also involves the "return" of the "repressed," the recovery of "primitive" technologies of the carcerai, the gothic dungeon, in the civilized or enlightened mode of "compulsory visibility." *Northanger Abbey*, I shall argue, reinscribes the gothic carcerai as the carcerai positioning of the reading subject, a fully gendered subject, in relation to the literature of the carcerai. "I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible," Catherine tells Henry, and therein lies the principle of her claustration: in the panoptic hold of a gender-specific intelligibility or legibility from which there is no escape. But this is to anticipate much of what follows, and I want only to warn against too easy an identification of the subversion of the binary with subversion in a broadly political or ideological sense.

The oppositions that govern Henry's celebration of "a country like this" are perfectly explicit in his rebuke to his "Dearest Miss Morland": Catherine lives here, not there, now, not then; she is therefore disqualified from true participation in (as opposed to the mere literary perusal of) gothic surmises, gothic horrors. But what Henry does not realize, although it is implicit in the fact that he is the source of the rebuke, is that Catherine's surmises do conform to at least one of the requirements of the legitimately gothic, which is the temporary absence of an authorized male presence or aesthetic principle. For Catherine indulges in wild speculation at a time when she is effectively outside parental or paternal control, when she is in essence nobody's daughter, and when she is not yet effectively under Henry's control, when she is in fact nobody's wife. And as her speculations are in error, gothic surmises, Catherine's "dreadful" ideas, are associated with but a negative order of freedom, a respite from male standards of probability and propriety to which she will yet revert. "What have you been judging from?" asks Henry, the answer to which is not only *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or *The Romance of the Forest*, those narratives of other times and places, but from a female sensibility that is itself apparently incapable of judging properly. Yet it is precisely these other narratives, or these narratives of other times and places, that identify the gothic as an excess of female sensibility and that are therefore implicit in the very rebuke that seeks to argue their irrelevance.

Emily St. Aubert, for example, indulges in wild speculation (which, at least as it touches upon supernatural phenomena and certain aspects of her parents' marriage, is no less erroneous than Catherine's) at a time when she too is effectively outside parental or paternal control, when she can no longer be defined as anybody's daughter, and when she is not yet effectively under Valancourt's control, when she is not yet anybody's wife. Catherine is rebuked retroactively for her dreadful surmises, and Emily is warned proleptically of the dangers of sensibility. Both, however, simply deviate from a norm; both are placed, put in their place, in relation to male standards of propriety and proper representation:

"Above all, my dear Emily," said he, "do not indulge in the pride of fine feeling, the romantic error of amiable minds. Those, who really possess sensibility, ought early to be taught, that it is a dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance. . . . We become the victim of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them. . . . I know you will say, that you are contented sometimes to suffer, rather than to give up your refined sense of happiness, at others; but, when your mind has been long harassed by vicissitude, you will be content to rest, and you will then recover from your delusion."

These words of paternal advice possess both the authority of the deathbed and the power to reverberate throughout the entirety of Radcliffe's narrative: "When your mind has been long harassed by vicissitude, you will be content to rest, and you will then recover from your delusion" reads very much as an economical summary of the adventures Emily has yet to experience and, hence, as an implicit warning against the danger
that is *The Mysteries of Udolpho* itself. Emily is explicitly enjoined by her dying father not to read certain documents: "These papers you must burn—and, solemnly I command you, without examining them." She is also implicitly instructed, as it were, how not to read the novel in which she figures.

Emily, however, "unremembers" the paternal injunction ("forgets" seems too active a word for this, the most passive of all possible heroines) and proceeds to extricate every possibility for emotional identification from every situation:

As she gazed, the light died away on its [the fortress of Udolpho's] walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped by splendour. . . . As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend.

Emily weaves dreamscape and landscape in an absorption that unites them psychologically, not a mimesis that divorces them aesthetically: her "poetic" might be rather broadly characterized as "Longinian." Her father, however, had implicitly advocated something resembling Aristotelian standards of probability and objectivity, and *Udolpho*, in finally rationalizing its supernatural phenomena, capitulates to the paternal preference. It is significant, of course, that the preference is paternal and, hence, socially authorized. The implicit connection between social and aesthetic propriety works negatively as well as positively, and Radcliffe is eager to exploit the former once the latter has been established. Emily is first found in polite if rather limited society, comfortably at home in her parlor; she is then transported to the "other country," isolated from the familiar social conventions that would both temper misjudgment and allow her to distinguish the projections of excessive sensibility from the legitimately threatening. It is not accidental that Emily constructs her Longinian reverie or nightmare at a time when she is effectively neither daughter nor wife, when she is exiled from the domestic parlor of her father and when she has not yet recovered that parlor with Valancourt. Social and aesthetic indeterminacy are here one and the same: both are analogous to the theological explanation of evil as *defectus* or deficiency, evil as the simple absence of the good. The absence is that of an authorized male presence or aesthetic principle.

The very existence of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* seems, then, predicated on a determinate distance that separates the world of Emily and her father from the world of Emily and Montoni. The very existence of *Northanger Abbey*, moreover, seems predicated on a determinate distance that separates the world of Catherine and Henry from the world of Emily and Montoni. Henry can release Catherine from her gothic illusions, however, only by invoking the ideological standards that are themselves the staple of the gothic, which suggests that the distance between texts will not hold. And it may be that the distances within the text of the gothic proper are equally unstable, for it is precisely the distance that separates the world of Emily and her father from Emily and Montoni—which is also the epistemological space that separates "male" discourses of the objective and probable from "female" discourses of the subjective and psychological—that *Udolpho* cannot maintain.

La Vallée, for example, Emily's paternal home, is initially characterized in terms of its seclusion, concealment in its benign form. St. Aubert retires to "this remote corner of the earth," as Madame Quensel contemptuously calls it, out of a principled weariness with the world. Indeed, the intrusion of the Quensels into this world, with their talk of court intrigues and secret treaties, only confirms the view that the world has been well lost to the Auberts. Here the *heimlich* or "homely" participates only in what Freud characterizes as "two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight." Yet what is first presented as difference without contradiction soon dissolves into nonfunctional differences, the *heimlich* as the *unheimlich*, the "homely" as the other country, the other country as home.
Emily in Montoni's clutches, for example, in the gothic portion of *Udolpho* proper, is both literally concealed and the victim of concealed motives and machinations. Emily herself, however, conceals her presentiments of her father's impending death in the opening scenes of the novel, and knowledge of her aunt's fate is concealed from her, the meaning of which it will take her much of the novel to discover. Geography distances the pastoral retreat of La Vallée from the political intrigues of Paris, as it distances Emily's domestic parlor from Montoni's gothic fortress. Yet what geography divides, an economy of secrecy and concealment unites. The world of Montoni is posited as foreign, deviant, as half the product of a female sensibility in want of properly male standards of objectivity and probability (Radcliffe shows us Udolpho through the eyes of her protagonist, which means that the precise nature of the danger that confronts Emily is never fully specified). The ostensibly deviant, however, proves to be little more than a gothic fortress in which women characteristically retire to the chambers above, while below port-drinking men decide the fate of the world. It is a fully recognizable picture of eighteenth-century domestic life. It is also an implicit suggestion that the unspecified danger that confronts Emily is the world of her domestic parlor. Emily does experience the *unheimlich* as what Freud calls the "gloomy," the "dismal," the "ghastly." But as Freud's study of the uncanny is at pains to show, and as Radcliffe's narrative perhaps unwittingly suggests, the *unheimlich* does not function as the symmetrical opposite of the familiar or the congenial.

Emily's retreat into the world of Longinian reverie, her "unremembering" of the paternal injunction, cannot, in other words, be fully distinguished from all things objective, the realities of patriarchal culture. The gothic can thus be seen as the literalization of subjective experience, the actualization in the object world of dreams, fears, and desires, or the deliteralization of objective experience, the projection of contemporary social experience as dreams, fears, and desires. It cannot be seen, however, as the symmetrical opposite of the domestic. Emily "writes" the text of her life at a time when she is effectively neither daughter nor wife, she writes it as distinctly gothic. There is a sense, however, in which her own "writing" only serves to expose the fact that the world has already been written for her, by fathers and husbands, as gothic. The opposition between discourse as objective representation and subjective projection, a fully gendered opposition, will not hold. And from the collapse of this opposition is born the gothic *unheimlich*: "An uncanny effect," as Freud argues, "is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes."

Now all this is not implicit in Henry Tilney's rebuke to Catherine Morland, although much of it is to be found in Austen's implicit rebuke to Henry, who in fact is not permitted the last word on the gothic. For if Henry enjoins Catherine to consult her sense of the probable, Austen implicitly enjoins the reader to do the same:

> To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen, is to do pretty well; and professing myself moreover convinced, that the General's unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience.

General Tilney is manifestly innocent of Catherine's happiness: the tendency of the work is altogether to reward filial disobedience, not to recommend parental tyranny. But if the general is innocent, Austen is not, and it is with good grace that she admits culpability in the affair: for a woman of no significant fortune to begin perfect happiness at the age of eighteen is not only to do "pretty well," it is to do improbably well. Austen is fully aware that her novel is in no meaningful sense a parody of romance—she manages only to distinguish her own "white" romance from *le genre noir*—and that even this is accomplished not by disabusing her protagonist of gothic illusions but by releasing her novel from the standards of novelistic probability.
It is a release that is most blatantly engineered for the sake of Eleanor Tilney, who is the beneficiary of the eleventh-hour introduction into the narrative of "the most charming young man in the world." And the part unwittingly played by "this most charming young man" in Catherine's most alarming adventures, in her wildly improbable gothic fantasies—"this was the very gentleman whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing-bills"—cannot be distinguished, at least on the crucial basis of probability, from the part he plays in Austen's allegedly realistic discourse, in her wildly improbable every-Jill-shall-have-her-Jack conclusion. In one sense, realistic discourse frames Catherine's delusions. In another sense, however, it is indistinguishable from them. And it is this conflation of alleged opposites that recalls Radcliffe, the world in which reverie cannot ultimately be distinguished from socially mimetic discourse. Indeed, had Austen remained in the mode of novelistic probability, the very real evils of her father's home would have claimed Eleanor, and *Northanger Abbey*, at least from the perspective of one of its characters, would have been rather more dark than white romance. Austen advises the reader early in her work that she will not "adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding." She might have warned the reader late in her work that she will not adopt an unequally ungenerous and impolitic custom, that of degrading romance writers while she herself is adding to their numbers.

Austen's early promise of solidarity or sorority with her precursors needs to be emphasized, for we are indeed given an "ungenerous" and "impolitic" assessment of Radcliffe: "Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for." The dismissive attitude toward Radcliffe is almost universally read as an index of Catherine's new-found maturity and, hence, as a reflection of Austen's own "impolitic" (from the perspective of any feminist attempt to rethink the dynamics of literary history) reading of her precursor. Certainly the new contempt represents a radical change from the Catherine who, under the influence of Isabella, read *Udolpho* with pleasure. But it may be that the "mature" Catherine has learned little more than to ape the opinions of Henry, who is something of a self-appointed arbiter of literary good taste within *Northanger Abbey*, but hardly an adequate spokesperson for Austen herself. It is difficult to know, for example, how that oft-quoted statement—"It was not in them [Mrs. Radcliffe's 'charming' works] . . . that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for"—can constitute a critique of Radcliffe, as Radcliffe is herself at pains to posit as foreign or Other the evil she represents. (Emily St. Aubert lives in the south of France, not the midlands of England, but even for her, evil is allegedly always elsewhere.) Indeed, the critique may be directed not against Radcliffe but against Catherine's new acceptance of Henry's reading of Radcliffe, the paradoxical critical enterprise that seeks to discredit the gothic by adopting an ethics of the positional (here, not there; now, not then) that is itself an ideological staple of the gothic.

Stuart M. Tave argues [in *Some Words of Jane Austen*, 1973] that it is Catherine's refusal to generalize beyond her own limited experience that is the index of her newfound maturity. She lives in the "midland counties of England" (a specification that seems at once geographical and ethical), and she quite properly substitutes her observation of what is passing around her for the extravagant improbabilities of Radcliffe's gothic. Certainly Catherine has learned to adopt the "middle position" that is said to be the characteristic English genius, and she carefully and quite comically eschews "extremities" ("Catherine dared not doubt beyond her own country, and even of that, if hard pressed, would have yielded the northern and western extremities") of all varieties:

... in the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land, and the manners of the age. Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist. Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were not mixed characters. There, such as were not as spotless as an angel, might have the dispositions of a fiend. But in England it was not so; among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad.
There can be no doubt that this sounds judicious—the original owner of my edition, obviously a student of E. M. Forster, has written in the margins: "round characters, not flat, Catherine has grown"—but is it in fact an accurate reading of "a country like this"? It may be comforting to learn that Catherine will not be "surprized" should some "slight imperfection" eventually manifest itself in Henry and that her life will no longer be subject to the criteria of heroine and villain that dominate her sojourn at Northanger. But even as she utters this commitment to the admixture of good and evil that is now and England, she defeats herself both by her assumption of absolute guilt and by her refusal to assign guilt absolutely.

For Catherine's dismissal of Radcliffe is prefaced by the inaccurate remark that her gothic "reading" of Northanger "had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion," when in fact she has little more than "literalized" the plot provided for her by Henry, the association of women with the literal or literalization being the most familiar of cultural constructs. And Catherine's dismissal of Radcliffe concludes with the tepid observation that General Tilney is "not perfectly amiable," a characterization that both contradicts our own observations of what has passed around Catherine and that is superseded by her own later and better judgment: "Catherine, at any rate, heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty." There is nothing judicious about this—the margins of my edition now read: "flat characters, not round, Catherine has indeed grown"—but it is strictly and disturbingly accurate. Here, in the midlands of England, there is an indigenous Montoni, a character as evil in his own way as anything to be found in Radcliffe's novel. And Catherine comes to this conclusion not by piously aping the opinions of Henry Tilney but by accepting the gothic as a legitimate, if highly circuitous, mode of comprehending contemporary sociopolitical reality. "Grossly injurious suspicions," gothic surmises Catherine "must ever blush to have entertained," now scarcely sin against the person in question: this in no way validates the opinion that, "charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works," they are irrelevant to "a country like this."

Neither does it validate Henry's reprimand to Catherine nor the critical readings of *Northanger Abbey* derived from that reprimand, here represented by Tave's spirited defense of Henry:

Henry's admonition to Catherine, which may seem terribly parochial, or even blindly self-satisfied, as though a happy exemption from serious moral problems were granted God's Englishmen, is, rather, an active direction that she rouse herself to the reality of moral problems. It is she who has been blind, not seeing what is before her, unable to make judgments; she has imposed a single mode of explanation upon her experience, deriving it not from the complexities of life around her but from a much simpler fiction, outside of time and space, requiring no effort.

Because Tave's defense of Henry rehearse rather than reads Henry's own vocabulary of blindness and insight, darkness and light, it necessarily participates in the blindness of Henry's insight. Insight, because Catherine does function within an economy of visibility, in which even the most mundane mechanisms of culture and power (the "roads and newspapers that lay every thing open") serve the interests of a generalized visibility. Gothic atrocities, which characteristically involve the withdrawal of a female subject from visibility, cannot be perpetrated "in a country like this." But also blindness, for Tave's celebration of this economy remains blind to the gendered nature of its operations, to the sexual politics of an economy that reinscribes the gothic claustration of women in the mode of visibility. The point here is not simply that General Tilney recovers romance villainy in the realm of manners; rather, the realm of manners, the domestic parlor, reinscribes gothic incarceration in and as a generalized economy of surveillance.

Certainly Henry's celebration of "a country in which every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies," in which social interaction is one with the possibility of surveillance, suggests the modality of power that Foucault terms "panoptic":

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The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.

This is Foucault on Jeremy Bentham's plan for the Panopticon, a circular prison disposed about a central watchtower in which fully visible prisoners are supervised by unseen guards. In this through-the-looking-glass reversal of the principle of the dungeon, incarceration assumes the form of a "compulsory visibility," a reversal that is neatly symbolized by Bentham's architectural innovation but that is in no way restricted to it. This is because disciplinary power is characterized precisely by its diffusion beyond obviously disciplinary institutions, by its capacity to infiltrate the minutiae of social life. Roads and newspapers are very much the instruments of panoptic power, a power that regulates by laying open, controls by making visible, a power that by virtue of the very banality of its operations seeks to disguise its identity as power. Henry assures Catherine that the parlor is to the dungeon as light is to dark, that the country in which she lives is itself proof against gothic atrocities. And Henry entirely misses the point: far from being opposed to the dungeon as darkness is to light, the parlor reinscribes gothic claustration in the mode of light or visibility, all the more effectively for eschewing the obvious mechanisms and paraphernalia of gothic enclosure. "I use the verb 'to torment,'" Henry tells Catherine in the context of a discussion of Udolpho, "as I observed to be your own method, instead of 'to instruct,' supposing them to be now admitted as synonimous." Henry concedes the synonymy or continuity between the practices of the gothic and the domestic only ironically. The novel in which he figures, however, does so in earnest.

Catherine, of course, conceives of the carcerai only in the most highly "gothicized" sense: she is thus mortified when her search for evidence of the fate of Mrs. Tilney culminates in the discovery of the famous "inventory of linen," the most mundane and domestic of all possible "texts." Gilbert and Gubar, in a reading that is now largely canonical [in The Madwoman in the Attick, 1979], suggest that Austen is pointing to the "real threat" to women's happiness when she describes her heroine finding this list. And doubtless this is so. Yet there is a sense in which the "real threat" is more extensive, more diffuse, than Gilbert and Gubar allow. For as with the figure of General Tilney, the point is not simply that a specific dimension of domestic life reconstitutes the gothic in the realm of manners; rather, the realm of manners is already and always structured as a through-the-looking-glass form of the gothic. Thus, if the specific content of the inventory suggests the recuperation of the gothic carcerai in terms of the workaday world of a domestic female lot, the inventory itself, the principle of an inventory, suggests a generalized economy of surveillance, an economy that encloses precisely by its ability to note, to render visible or legible, each and every of its operations. Catherine's greatest fear is that Henry will discover the nature of her suspicions and the mortifying nature of her discovery. There is a sense, however, in which the latter virtually guarantees the former: to discover a hitherto lost or hidden inventory of dirty linen is necessarily to suggest that all dirty linen will be aired in public. Catherine assumes that the chest that contains the inventory is locked. She learns in her attempt to return the inventory, however, that it always was open. And therein lies the principle of her claustration: not in an economy of gothic secrecy, but in a domestic sphere, at once social and psychological, in which there are no secret spaces, in which there is no escape from an openness that encloses.

An openness that encloses, a visibility that incarcerates: the oxymorons of panoptic power find architectural expression in the building from which Austen's text derives its name, in the "enlightened" or "panoptic" renovations "suffered" (Catherine herself might have chosen the word) by the once "venerable" abbey:

With the walls of the kitchen ended all the antiquity of the Abbey . . . . All that was venerable ceased here. The new building was not only new, but declared itself to be so; intended only for offices, and enclosed behind by stable-yards, no uniformity of architecture had been thought necessary. Catherine could have raved at the hand which had swept away what must
have been beyond the value of all the rest, for the purposes of mere domestic economy.

"No uniformity of architecture had been thought necessary": the renovated portion of the abbey is built not to be seen (Catherine would "willingly have been spared the mortification of a walk through scenes so fallen," of an architecture so unresponsive to the demands of ostentation), but to render visible those it shelters. The general insists on the "mortifying" tour with the alleged motive that "to a mind like Miss Morland's, a view of the accommodations and comforts, by which the labours of her inferiors were softened, must always be gratifying," and Catherine, despite her contempt for the "purposes of mere domestic economy," finds herself "impressed, beyond her expectation." Beyond her expectation, however, might better read beyond her comprehension, for General Tilney again proves himself innocent of concern for the comfort or happiness of others. The purpose of the "mortifying" tour is not to "view the apartments" (again: the renovated abbey is unresponsive to the demands of visual consumption) but to view how the apartments place those they shelter on view: "The number of servants continually appearing, did not strike her [Catherine] less than the number of their offices." The labor of domestics is not "softened" in or by these accommodations; rather, it is subjected to a coercive visibility. Concern for the comfort of inferiors provides the alibi of a benign or enlightened intentionality, which is thoroughly characteristic of a power that would pass unnoticed or be known by another name. Yet the purpose of the tour, the source of the general's delight in the tour, belongs to an altogether different order: it is in fact less a tour than a "slight survey," less an exercise in enlightened concern than in panoptic power. Catherine's suspicions that there are "many chambers secreted" survives her chaperoned tour; when the opportunity arises, she sets out alone to view the apartments of Mrs. Tilney, to discover the dark secret of the abbey. The unauthorized tour, however, only succeeds in putting Catherine's own secret suspicions, her "dirty linen," on view. As edifice, Northanger Abbey is an amalgamation of gothic foundations and modern renovations. As text, *Northanger Abbey* thematizes the reinscription of the gothic carceral in the mode of panoptic discipline.

Thus, in the climactic scene of instruction, Catherine is enjoined to consult her own observation of what has passed around her only after she has been observed by Henry: in attempting to read a story of gothic incarceration, of violence directed against a woman, Catherine finds that she is herself read by a man, "incarcerated" in the panoptic hold of visibility. The journey to Northanger begins with a threat to Catherine's "new writing desk," to her status as an autonomous writing subject; and long before she arrives at the abbey, she is effectively "shut up" in Henry's prose, reduced to a character in a story not of her own devising. Catherine implicitly protests against this narrative form of the carceral by augmenting Henry's "plot": she "writes," with the help of Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*, the story of the incarcerated or murdered Mrs. Tilney, the signs of which she then attempts to read. Even this highly attenuated protest, however, proves ineffectual, as the unexpected encounter with Henry effectively repositions Catherine as an object of male scrutiny, as a character to be read and not as a subject who reads. In her chaperoned tour of the abbey, Catherine catches a "transient glimpse" of a staircase that she suspects "might well have favored the barbarous proceedings" of the general. The staircase down which she suspects Mrs. Tilney has been conveyed, however, is the staircase up which Henry ascends: the search for a woman withdrawn from visibility by a man only serves to reveal Catherine's secret suspicions to a man. The principle of gothic incarceration is reversed, but its essential function is reinscribed. Visibility or, better, legibility is a gender specific trap.

This reversal is nothing if not symmetrical, and the effective repositioning of the female reading subject as an object of male scrutiny is clearly one of the ambitions of a gender specific economy of surveillance. Yet as an instance of the operation of a power that is best characterized by its fluidity, by its refusal of any obvious or singular agency, the reversal is altogether too symmetrical, too overt. Panoptic power desires to see without itself being seen, and Henry, in the very act of adumbrating the mechanisms of surveillance, risks subjecting surveillance to surveillance. Yet if it requires an uncharacteristically frank exercise and explanation of panoptic power for Catherine to realize her radical accessibility, her openness before the male gaze, it requires but one. Henry maintains that "teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing," and by his own standards he is indeed blessed in the woman who is to be his wife. For not only does Catherine learn her
lesson, she assumes, in the aftermath of Henry's instruction, responsibility for the principle of her own subjection.

It is this assumption of responsibility that finally structures Catherine's relation both to Eleanor, who is the recipient of a letter from Catherine after the latter's unceremonious dismissal from Northanger, and Isabella, who gains access to Northanger only in the form of her letter to Catherine:

I have not been to the Rooms this age, nor to the Play, except going ¡n last night with the Hodges's, for a frolic, at half-price: they teased me into it; and I was determined they should not say I shut myself up because Tilney was gone. We happened to sit by the Mitchells, and they pretended to be quite surprized to see me out. . . . Anne Mitchell had tried to put on a turban like mine, as I wore it the week before at the Concert, but made wretched work of it—it happened to become my odd face I believe, at least Tilney told me so at the time, and said every eye was upon me; but he is the last man whose word I would take. I wear nothing but purple now: I know I look hideous in it, but no matter—it is your dear brother's favourite colour.

I quote from Isabella's letter at such length because it is in the essence of Isabella to go on at length, or at least to occupy as many positions as are available to her in a given space. This is not to suggest that she enjoys an opportunity for self-definition that is denied Catherine, for she too occupies a space already structured by the male gaze. The letter from which I quote, for example, is only nominally addressed to Catherine, as Isabella intends her letter to reach the eyes of James, albeit through the mediation of Catherine. Yet Isabella is not simply defined by the male gaze; she herself actively solicits it, as Catherine does not; she is willing to occupy virtually any position vis-à-vis that gaze on the single condition that she appear either reluctantly visible or visibly reluctant. Thus, she positions herself in the Pump Room at Bath in a seat that commands "a tolerable view of every body" for the professed reason that "it is so out of the way"; she withdraws from the gaze of "two odious young men" only to pursue them through the streets of Bath ("One was . . . very good-looking") under the pretext of showing Catherine a new hat. Isabella clearly wishes to be seen, indeed needs to be seen (the marriage market at Bath is a highly competitive economy of gendered visibility), but only as someone who wishes not to be seen. In brief, the male gaze seeks to fix the female subject in knowledge, and Isabella resists fixity. She thus constitutes a threat to the very gaze that she solicits, although perhaps only Catherine and James are sufficiently naive to be taken in. (The threat to Catherine is, of course, in the order of a bad example, not a romantic entanglement, although the break with Isabella is the implicit precondition of her marriage to Henry.) In any case, the threat Isabella poses in the public spaces of Bath is effectively exorcised in the private spaces of Northanger.

For in her letter to Catherine (or to James via Catherine) that is her only means of access to the abbey, Isabella's attempt to stage the conditions under which she is seen is for the first time seen through: Catherine realizes that it is not because her brother prefers purple that purple it is, that it is not only fear lest her withdrawal from visibility be misinterpreted ("I was determined they should not say I shut myself up because Tilney was gone") that motivates the evening at the theater. Isabella continues to attempt to "stage" the conditions under which she is seen, but as a subject now "shut up" in textuality, her "inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood" become apparent "even" to Catherine, although apparently even this is not sufficient. That is, Catherine must not only see through her erstwhile friend, she must be seen to see through; she must not only know Isabella for what she is, it must be known that she now knows. Thus, Catherine functions as an amanuensis not to James, as Isabella intends, but to Henry, to whom she reads the "most material passages" of Isabella's letter. The earlier reluctance "to expose a friend," to share with Henry and Eleanor the knowledge of Isabella gained from James's letter, has disappeared. But perhaps here Catherine is but conceding the inevitable, for even the initial desire to protect Isabella, to deny Henry access to private communication, proves futile. Even as Catherine reads James's letter, Henry's eyes are "earnestly watching her"—her distress is clearly "visible"—and there is again no space in which the female reading subject is free
from surveillance. For "privacy" Catherine retreats into the drawing room to reflect on James's letter (her own room is occupied by servants), only to find that "Henry and Eleanor had likewise retreated thither." And although the room is temporarily conceded to her (it is at this point that she resolves not to expose Isabella), Henry already begins "to suspect the truth" when he again meets Catherine in the breakfast room, and he in fact guesses the content of the letter before it is surrendered to him. Private communication is here an oxymoron, as the private is itself structured as the already read or the generally legible, a point Catherine doubly concedes: Not only does she abandon the futile attempt to keep private communication private, she herself composes a letter to Eleanor when in exile from Northanger, informed by the possibility of Henry's perusal, "a letter which Eleanor might not be pained by the perusal of—and, above all, which she might not blush herself, if Henry should chance to see." Henry's access to the letter is merely a "chance" possibility, but his power over Catherine is not thereby diminished. This is because in a panoptic economy the efficacy of power, its constraining force, passes over to what Foucault calls "the other side—to the side of its surface of application," in this case, to Catherine herself. "Shall I tell you what you ought to say?", Henry asks Catherine when they first meet. By the time of her letter to Eleanor, however, what Catherine "ought to say," what she thinks Henry thinks she "ought to say," has become a thoroughly internalized knowledge and compulsion. Indeed, the letter represents the final triumph of panopticism, for in merely assuming the possibility of Henry's perusal, Catherine accepts responsibility for the principle of her own subjection. Even as she writes to a woman, she defines herself as already read by a man: clearly she no longer poses any threat to an economy of gendered legibility.

But if not Catherine, what of the novel in which she figures? Is it too complicit in a coercive economy of openness? Here it is not a question of the novel merely reflecting a panoptic order as an aspect of the "real" but of itself producing, creating in the very process and conditions of its consumption, reading subjects subjected to a coercive legibility.

Now readings of Northanger Abbey that merely rehearse Henry's scene of instruction, that merely celebrate his celebration of "a country like this," do participate in the paradox of an openness that encloses: like the roads and newspapers he invokes as proof against Catherine's "dreadful" suspicions, Henry himself serves to foreclose "dreadful" or deviant interpretive possibilities. And if Henry can be said to read or interpret Northanger Abbey for the reader, it is in the most literal sense that he reads Udolpho to his sister: "Yes," added Miss Tilney, "and I remember that you undertook to read it [Udolpho] aloud to me, and that when I was called away for only five minutes to answer a note, instead of waiting for me, you took the volume . . . and I was obliged to stay till you had finished it." The conditions under which Eleanor is read Udolpho effectively replicate the content of the novel she is read: by abducting the text, "by running away with the volume, which, you are to observe, was her own, particularly her own," Henry rehearses the act of abduction thematized by Udolpho. True, Udolpho is concerned with the abduction of a woman by a man and Henry only abducts a text by a woman from a woman. The difference, however, is for the sake of similarity: the atrocity about which Eleanor reads is repeated, albeit in a different modality, in her experience of reading. Here, however, Henry's "reading" of Udolpho, his relation to the text of Udolpho, must itself be read, not merely rehearsed.

Henry apparently shares Eleanor's enthusiasm for Radcliffe, yet his own experience of Udolpho differs significantly from hers. It is at once uninterrupted (he claims to have read the novel in two days, without pause or break), thoroughly private or privatized (unlike Eleanor, he has a "room" or establishment of his own), and unmediated (he reads the novel to himself; it is not read to him). Henry thus constitutes himself as a reading subject by taking a temporary leave from the world, by a voluntary withdrawal into textual space. It is when Eleanor is called away to answer a note, however, when the obligations of her domestic existence literally impinge on her reading experience, that Henry abducts the text that is "particularly her own." For the "liberal" reading subject as he is conventionally constituted, the gothic may not speak to a "country like this." Certainly Henry fails to find in its thematics of the carceral an image of the freedom that he enjoys as a reading subject (although there is something circular in his position: he voluntarily withdraws from the world in order to read Udolpho, yet complains that Udolpho fails to address the world from which he is withdrawn).
The point, however, is that the liberal reading subject is a "he," that his privileges are gender specific. Neither Eleanor nor Catherine enjoy these privileges. Neither, therefore, can be expected to share Henry's reading of the gothic.

Yet this is precisely Henry's expectation, or the expectation implicit in his tendency to "triangulate" or mediate relationships, be they between women or between women and texts. Catherine, for example, remarks that she has heard that "something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London," which Eleanor, to whom the remark "was chiefly addressed," takes to mean impending political violence. Henry intervenes with the "correct" reading—"Shall I make you understand each other?" he asks, a question that in itself associates understanding with compulsion—and Catherine's unspecified "something" is revealed to be "nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern—do you understand?" In the most obvious sense—and for all his irony, Henry is invested in an ideology of the obvious—he construes the meaning of Catherine's words accurately: her unspecified "something" does refer to a new gothic thriller not to impending political violence in the streets of London. Yet in specifying Catherine's meaning correctly, Henry paradoxically "opens" the text to multiple and contradictory meanings, to "dreadful" or deviant interpretive possibilities. He intends, of course, only to correct Eleanor's misreading of Catherine's words, which he does by mocking her fears: the vision of political violence he conjures up, the unlikely scenario in which the "Bank [is] attacked, the Tower threatened," is intended to suggest the absurdity of his sister's misgivings. The vision, however, alludes to the very real violence of the Gordon Riots of 1780, which hardly substantiates the absurdity of Eleanor's fears, and it is everywhere informed by the generalized political turmoil of the 1790s. The Henry who would "make" or compel understanding between Catherine and Eleanor succeeds only in confirming the wisdom of Eleanor's initial (mis)understanding, a (mis)understanding born of an unmediated or untriangulated reading of a woman by a woman. "Something dreadful" has indeed come out in London, and Eleanor is thoroughly justified, if only by virtue of Henry's attempt to prove her in error, in construing this something as domestic political violence. In the very act of specifying or "laying open" meaning, Henry opens *Northanger Abbey* to the interpretive possibilities that he seeks to guard against.

Henry is to *Northanger Abbey* as the roads and newspapers he invokes are to "a country like this": the analogy is significant if only because it is precisely the analogy that Henry himself implicitly seeks to deny. I mean by this that he invokes the circumstances of "a country like this," the circumstances that inhere in Austen's novelistic world, as purely external phenomena, as the rather mundane realities of life in the Midlands of England. And in one sense, so they are. In another sense, however, the roads and newspapers to which he alludes, the technologies of surveillance and regulation that he invokes, are indistinguishable from the power he enjoys both in narrative and as narrative. In narrative, because even as he enjoins Catherine to contemplate the regulatory mechanisms of the society in which she lives, he himself performs a regulatory function, precisely in rendering visible or legible the "dreadful" nature of her suspicions. But also as narrative, for the regulatory function he performs is inseparable from the narrative he authors, the gothic plot in which he places Catherine, the better to reduce her to the condition of legibility. The world Henry invokes as fact is thus inseparable from the world he produces as a discursive or textual effect. He frankly (manfully?) acknowledges the former but strategically disavows the latter. The facts thus appear simply as the facts, ideologically innocent, gender neutral, ostensibly untouched by the discursive strategies that constitute them as such.

For Austen, however, or at least the Austen of the concluding moments of *Northanger Abbey*, the "facts" are rather more problematic than Henry allows. If, for example, the part played by the "most charming young man in the world" in Austen's allegedly realistic discourse, in her patently improbable distribution of husbands, fortunes, and titles, cannot be distinguished, at least on the crucial basis of probability, from the part he plays in Catherine's most alarming adventures, this same young man does serve to distinguish Austen's thoroughly ironic relation to the standards of realism from Henry's unproblematic recourse to the same. Certainly the eleventh-hour introduction into the narrative of the viscount necessarily suggests that he has no prediscursive
reality "in the world," no existence innocent of the narrative strategy that requires and constitutes him. The point may seem obvious enough, but the point is not simply that *Northanger Abbey* is fiction rather than fact, for if Austen is only ironically committed to the convention that the facts exist independently of the omniscience that notes and records them, her irony reminds the reader that it is a convention, and one replete with its own ideological significance.

Now there is a sense in which omniscience is nothing more than panopticism by another name, or the formal analogue of a panoptic economy. The operations of an omniscience that seeks to divorce its power to know and see from its power to construct, however, seeks to deny this analogy precisely by mystifying the relation between the "facts" and the discursive strategies that constitute them as such. Thus, D. A. Miller argues in *The Novel and the Police*, the tendency of nineteenth-century omniscient narrators to lament the unhappy fate of their characters is credible only in the context of an arrangement that keeps the function of narration separate from the causalities operating within the narrative: "The knowledge commanded in omniscient narration is thus opposed to the power that inheres in the circumstances of the novelistic world." In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry, who functions as something of an omniscient narrator within an omniscient narrative, tends to mock rather than lament, and Catherine's fate, as long as she remains committed to a "gothicized" reading of her world, is rather more embarrassing than unhappy. But like the conventional laments of the nineteenth-century narrator, Henry's mockery is credible only in the context of an arrangement in which knowledge is divorced from power, and *Northanger Abbey* refuses to distinguish between the knowledge commanded by Henry's omniscience and the power that inheres in the world he invokes. He enjoins Catherine to consult her own observation, for example, yet fails to note that his own powers of observation collude with the technologies of surveillance that he invites Catherine to survey. Austen, however, brings the most charming young man in the world "instantly before the imagination of us all" as a frankly discursive requirement or construction—his introduction into the narrative, as Austen is at pains to note, conforms to "the rules of composition"—as the product of her power over and within narrative.

And in conspicuously defining the "facts" in relation to standards of probability and propriety that belong exclusively to the order of discourse—or at least the singular and unexpected "fact" that is the discovery of a husband for Eleanor—Austen necessarily broaches an issue that Gerard Genette argues is characteristically encoded in silence: "The relationship between a plausible narrative [le récit vraisemblable] and the system of plausibility [le système de vraisemblance] to which it subjects itself is . . . essentially mute: the conventions of genre function as a system of natural forces and constraints that the narrative obeys as if without noticing them, and a fortiori without naming them." Because the system of plausibility to which the narrative is subjected is little more than a historically determined structure of *bienséance* or "propriety" (a word that tends to figure prominently in studies of Jane Austen), the strategic silence of the plausible narrative can only be an attempt to render "natural" or ahistorical its own historical determinants. To speak the word "plausibility" would be to acknowledge the possibility that mimesis, the representation of the real, is little more than the reinscription and reproduction of received ideas about the real. And the "plausible" narrative is characteristically unwilling to entertain any possibility that refuses to distinguish between its knowledge of the world and the operations of power within that world. Yet in *Northanger Abbey*, the strategic silence that governs the inscription and perception of plausibility is broken: in the climactic scene of instruction, Henry invokes the standard of plausibility or probability in its explicitly historical context ("Remember the country and the age in which we live. . . . Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable"). In the "tell-tale compression" of the concluding moments of her novel turned romance, moreover, Austen explicitly invokes the "rules of composition," the purely narrative structure of *bienséance*, to which she subjects her "fable." Clearly the relationship between *le récit vraisemblable* and *le système de vraisemblance* does not remain "mute." It is in fact susceptible to various, but ultimately limited, formulations.

For example, it might be argued that as disturbing as are all the works of Mrs. Radcliffe, as disturbing as are all the works of her imitators, it is nevertheless in them that a country like this, even in its midland portions, is to be seen through a gothic glass darkly. Or it might be argued that as charming as is the conclusion of
Northanger Abbey, as charming as is every flight from standards of mimetic probability, it is nevertheless not in it that a country like this, even in its midland portions, is to be looked for. To argue, however, as Henry Tilney argues, to maintain that the "real" is the simple antidote to "dark romance," is but to rehearse the most ethno- and androcentric ideology of the real. Again, Henry is quite right in arguing the imbrication of the literary and the social and exactly wrong in formulating their relationship. In enjoining Catherine to observe the world around her, he unwittingly provides an argument not for the irrelevance of the gothic carceral but for its reinscription in the mode of panoptic visibility or legibility: horror, like charity, begins at home.

**Northanger Abbey, Jane Austen: Further Reading**

**Bibliography**


Comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary materials published through 1975.

**Biography**


Exhaustive biographical and critical work noted for its detailed treatment of Austen's life and works.

**Criticism**


Advances *Northanger Abbey* as an example of Austen's belief in the "inherent absurdity of the novel" as a genre.


Analyzes *Northanger Abbey* as a "socio-moral" novel, one that attempts to define "proper moral behavior in the face of a largely immoral world."


Suggests that the parodic sections of *Northanger Abbey* were added four years after the composition of the rest of the novel.


Argues that *Northanger Abbey* is a comedy of thematic significance rather than simply a literary burlesque.

Explores connections between Catherine Morland's maturation in Northanger Abbey and John Locke's theory of knowledge as stated in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.


Describes the way in which the light-hearted parody of Northanger Abbey hints at more serious social themes.


 Regards Northanger Abbey as structurally unified and historically significant.


Features a comparative analysis of Catherine Morland and Jane Austen, while maintaining that Catherine "embodied Jane Austen's values."


Claims that Northanger Abbey demonstrates Austen's belief in the power of the novel to educate.


Considers Northanger Abbey as a satire of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelistic conventions.


Examines Austen's handling of style in Northanger Abbey to suggest "the power of minor incidents to suggest major issues."


Argues that Northanger Abbey lacks significant depth of theme.


Discusses the influence of Samuel Johnson's style on that of Northanger Abbey.
Additional coverage of Austen's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: *Concise Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol 116; Dictionary of Literary Biography 1789-1832; Discovering Authors; Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism, Vols. 1, 13, 19, and 33; and World Literature Criticism.*

**Analysis: Form and Content**

In the tradition of the late eighteenth century sentimental and gothic novels which it parodies, *Northanger Abbey* presents its heroine with a series of increasingly difficult trials that she must overcome in order to achieve self-knowledge, knowledge about the world, and the hand of her true love. Yet Catherine Morland is an atypical heroine, and her adventures are less than heroic.

The novel covers a period of approximately two months, six weeks of which are spent in the resort town of Bath, where the seventeen-year-old Catherine goes with Mr. and Mrs. Allen, her well-meaning but ineffectual chaperones. After an initial period of discomfort and loneliness, Catherine meets Henry Tilney, who immediately charms her with a parody of the affectations of Bath society. Catherine’s happiness is increased by meeting Isabella Thorpe, who quickly becomes her intimate friend. The girls passionately share opinions on novels, thoughts on fashion, and gossip. Then Catherine’s brother, James, and Isabella’s brother, John, arrive in Bath. Even though Catherine discovers that John is not entirely pleasant, she becomes part of a foursome established by Isabella and James. To complicate matters further for Catherine, Henry Tilney introduces her to his sister, Eleanor, with whom Catherine also desires friendship.

Catherine is pulled between these two quite different sets of friends. Henry and Eleanor offer Catherine intelligent and reasonable companionship, guiding her mind and her social sensibility. On the other hand, she finds herself easily coerced into doing things with her brother and the Thorpes because of her affectionate nature and her desire for adventures. Repeatedly, Isabella and John manipulate Catherine into breaking engagements with the Tilneys in order to “chaperone” Isabella on her encounters with James. One such venture is a proposed trip to Blaize Castle, the source of great fascination for Catherine. While she strongly desires to satisfy her imagination with this trip to a “real castle,” she has already made plans with the Tilneys. Despite the violent arguments used by her brother and the Thorpes, Catherine breaks away from them and joins the Tilneys on a walk in the countryside above the town. They discuss the merits of reading history, which exercises both the imagination and the reason, and of reading fiction, which exercises only the imagination.

Catherine, who has been learning important social and literary lessons, now has that education put to the test. First, she is puzzled and concerned as she witnesses Isabella turn cool toward James and begin a flirtation with Colonel Tilney, Henry’s brother. She knows that Isabella is acting with impropriety, but she is unable to influence her. Second, she is invited by Eleanor to visit Northanger Abbey, an invitation which fantasy-prone Catherine excitedly accepts. On the way to the Abbey, Henry playfully tells Catherine a gothic tale of mystery and mayhem about his home. Catherine discovers, however, that the Abbey is more an ordinary home than a truly gothic abode and that the tantalizing chest and cabinet in her room contain only linens and a laundry list. Still desiring to solve a gothic mystery, Catherine seeks to unravel the obscure circumstances of Mrs. Tilney’s death, believing that General Tilney, like a true gothic villain, murdered his wife.

Catherine’s last days at the Abbey are unpleasant ones. She learns that Isabella has been a false friend. Then, when he learns of her sleuthing, Henry chastises the mortified, and incorrect, Catherine for her speculations. Finally, the general, who has heard that Catherine is not an heiress, unceremoniously forces her out of his house. She is sent home, abject, penniless, and alone. In the end, however, Henry comes to the wiser and more mature Catherine and proposes. The novel happily closes with the promise of their impending marriage.
Analysis: Places Discussed

Fullerton

Fullerton. English parsonage in Wiltshire, about eight miles from Salisbury, that is home to seventeen-year-old Catherine, whose father is the local rector. The family is relatively prosperous, and Catherine is introduced as rather attractive, but “ignorant and uninformed.”

*Bath

*Bath. Resort city in western England famous for its hot springs and Roman ruins. Catherine visits Bath for several weeks at the invitation of the Allens, owners of Fullerton. At first, Catherine experiences the discomfort of being in such a crowded place without knowing anyone else there; however, she has Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novel to occupy her mind as she begins to meet people. A whole new world opens to her at Bath; she is delighted with the social life of the colony. There, she meets the more worldly Isabella Thorpe, who takes it upon herself to instruct Catherine in the ways of society. Isabella also introduces Catherine to her brother, John Thorpe.

Northanger Abbey

Northanger Abbey. Old country home of the Tilneys, who invite Catherine to come for a visit. Catherine is thrilled because reading Radcliffe’s novel makes her expect to find subterranean tunnels, haunted rooms, and medieval furnishings in the abbey. Her overnourished imagination moves her to begin her stay by trying to open old cabinets in her room and imagining the medieval manuscripts she may find. Her host, General Tilney, is a widower and an unsympathetic character, and Catherine builds a fantasy of the unhappy life of his former wife, leading her to suspect that the woman died under painful circumstances—perhaps even that the general himself did away with her. Catherine also imagines that Tilney’s wife may still be living—imprisoned somewhere within the abbey. However, when Catherine actually visits the former Mrs. Tilney’s bedroom, she is surprised to discover how pleasant and modern it is; indeed, it is one of the most attractive rooms in the abbey. She subsequently learns the prosaic truth about Mrs. Tilney’s illness and death and is embarrassed by her own wild imaginings. The truth destroys most of her fantasy-based ideas about Northanger Abbey.

Northanger Abbey is an amusing parody of gothic novels, with their mysterious castles and abbeys, gloomy villains, incredibly accomplished heroines, sublime landscapes, and supernatural claptrap. Austen’s satire is not, however, pointed only at such novels; the exaggerated romantic sensibility of the gothic enthusiast is also a target. Northanger Abbey is a comic study of the ironic discrepancies between the prosaic world in which Catherine lives and the fantastic shapes that her imagination, fed by gothic novels, gives to that world. Throughout the novel, the author holds up the contrast between the heroine’s real situation and the gothic world she fantasizes.

Analysis: Context

By the end of the eighteenth century, the novel came to be seen as primarily a middle-class, female genre, written by women for women who had the leisure time to spend reading. This fiction included sentimental novels; gothic romances, such as Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794); and novels of adolescence, such as Frances Burney’s Evelina (1778). Such works were seen as exerting a powerful influence on their readers: They could be useful educational tools for young women, or they could dangerously encourage overactive imaginations and produce insatiable desires for romance and adventure. In Northanger Abbey, Austen draws on both of these convictions about novels. Woven into the narrative of Catherine’s adventures, and against the background of sentimental and gothic conventions, are the threads of
Austen’s comments on female education, novel reading, and oppressive social conventions.

In an important way, *Northanger Abbey* is about female education and reading: There are numerous comments, from both the characters and the narrator, about reading and novels in terms of entertainment and social value. The novel is a kind of rational corrective to the sorts of books which it parodies. Readers—Catherine included—learn the importance of giving precedence to judgment rather than imagination and to reason rather than fancy.

More significantly, reading in this novel entails interpreting correctly other people and social situations. Trained only by the books that she reads, Catherine is unprepared for the actual social dangers that she encounters. She learns that life is not as frightening as it is in gothic novels, but the lessons that she learns about human nature are frightening in some ways: Beautiful expressions of friendship and sentiment can hide a shallow, manipulative nature; men can be cruel and abusive; and a young woman’s position in the world is rather precarious. Catherine must learn how to judge character and to make the right decisions if she is to survive in the world.

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