

# Jane Austen's "Northanger Abbey" as a Parody of the Gothic Novel

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Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i  
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Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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## **Abstract**

*Northanger Abbey* is the first complete novel of the famous English author Jane Austen. Originally titled *Susan*, the novel was written in late 1700s and published in 1818. This novel is widely regarded as a parody of the Gothic novel. Jane Austen uses clichés of the Gothic novel to make her readers laugh and show how irrational they actually are. Her heroine, Catherine Morland, is an ordinary young girl that has very little in common with a typical heroine of the Gothic novel. She is so ordinary that the narrator has to keep reminding the reader that she is the heroine of the novel. Catherine likes to read Gothic novels and starts projecting her Gothic fantasies on people and places around her. *Northanger Abbey* is divided into two parts that take place in two different settings. The first part takes place in a village where Catherine was born and in Bath, a spa town in England where she is invited by the friends of her family, the Allens. That first part of the novel has hardly any characteristic of the Gothic novel and functions as a novel of manners. The second part of the novel takes part in Northanger Abbey, a family home of Henry Tilney, the man Catherine loves. In the abbey Catherine's imagination takes flight and she sees Gothic mysteries everywhere around her and hilarity ensues. Things that are horrifying in a Gothic novel here have a rational explanation and are used to make readers laugh.

Key words: Gothic novel, Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, parody

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## Introduction

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is widely considered as a parody of the Gothic novel, especially Gothic novels written by Ann Radcliffe. Those kinds of novels were extremely popular at the time when Austen was writing *Northanger Abbey*, especially among young women. All Gothic novels follow a particular formula. The main protagonist is a young woman who stumbles on a dark secret; she falls in love with a mysterious hero and some villain or villains try to come between them. The setting of those novels is always a Gothic castle with secret corridors, hidden rooms and a chapel nearby. Jane Austen satirizes those kinds of novels by making an incredibly ordinary girl into a heroine and sending her to stay in an abbey that is nothing like what is described in Gothic novels. Every time her heroine stumbles upon a secret like the ones that can be found in Gothic novels, they have a logical explanation and are there to make the reader laugh.

This paper will show what techniques Jane Austen used to make *Northanger Abbey* a parody of the Gothic novel. The first chapter is a short introduction to Gothic literature and offers an explanation for its extreme popularity. The second chapter introduces the protagonists of *Northanger Abbey* and shows how they fall under the categories of typical characters that can be found in Gothic novels and how in this novel they parody the genre. The focus is on Catherine Morland, Henry Tilney, Isabella and John Thorpe, and General Tilney as a villain of the novel. The third chapter will focus on the setting of the novel and how it corresponds to the settings of typical Gothic novels, while the fourth chapter will discuss some of the themes of *Northanger Abbey*.



## 1. The Gothic and Gothic literature

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1789 and published after Austen's death in 1818, is widely considered to be a parody of the Gothic novel. According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Gothic is a “phenomenon that originates in the late eighteenth century, long after enlightened Europeans put the era of Gothic cathedrals, chivalry, and superstition behind them—a phenomenon that begins, in fact, as an embrace of a kind of counterfeit medievalism or as a “medieval revival” (577). Andrew Smith considers that “cultivation of a Gothic style was given new impetus” at that point in history because of “the emergence of Enlightenment beliefs that extolled the virtues of rationality” and that “such ideas were challenged in Britain by Romantics [...] who argued that the complexity of human experience could not be explained by an inhuman rationalism” (2). Romanticism is a literary period that started roughly in 1785 and lasted until 1830. In that period England went through many changes. Romantics were influenced by two major revolutions, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. England went from being an agricultural to industrial country; people were moving to the large cities and abandoning the villages while the French Revolution brought on many discussions about basic rights of man. Romantics started to focus on individualism and celebrating the past in which, they considered, life was much simpler. Smith points out that “the Gothic is at one level closely related to these Romantic considerations” (2) while *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* states that Gothic gave Romantics “a way to describe accounts of terrifying experiences in ancient castles and ruined abbeys—experiences connected with subterranean dungeons, secret passageways, flickering lamps, screams, moans, ghosts, and graveyards” and after a while “became a label for the macabre, mysterious, supernatural, and terrifying” (577). According to Manuel Aguirre this “genre capitalizes on strategies associated with the Graveyard School of Poetry, the sentimental novel, and generally the valorisation of the non-rational (feeling, the passions, the Burkean Sublime)” (106).

Gothic literature started in 1764 when Horace Walpole, a son of the British prime minister, published his novel *The Castle of Otranto: a Story*. The word Gothic was not indicated in this edition, but, a year later, when the second edition of the novel was published, that changed. The novel was now titled *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story*. “For Walpole’s contemporaries the Gothic age was a long period of barbarism, superstition, and anarchy dimly stretching from the fifth century ad, when Visigoth invaders precipitated the fall of the Roman Empire, to the Renaissance and the revival of classical learning” (Clery 21). His novel featured “a haunted castle, an early, pre-Byronic version of the Byronic hero (suitably named Manfred), mysterious deaths, a moaning ancestral portrait, damsels in distress, violent passions, and strange

obsessions” (The Romantic Period 577). By the 1790s novels like *The Castle of Otranto* became extremely popular, especially among female readers. Some of the most prominent writers of the genre were also women, with Ann Radcliffe being the most famous one. Her “numerous imitators published under the auspices of the Minerva Press, a business whose very name acknowledged the centrality of female authors and readers to this new lucrative trend in the book market” and whose owner, William Lane, “set up a cross-country network of circulating libraries that stocked his ladies' volumes and made them available for hire at modest prices” (The Romantic Period 577). At this time and in that climate Jane Austen started to write *Northanger Abbey* and openly mock some of the characteristics of the Gothic novel.

Darryl Jones defines Gothic parody as “a form of satirical criticism or comic mockery that imitates the style and manners of a particular writer, often employing, self-consciously and ironically, the narrative devices of the Gothic” (270-271). In *Northanger Abbey* this “comic mockery” is evident from the first page in Austen's description of her heroine's parents. Cathrine Morland's father and mother are described as follows:

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 anybody 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. (Austen 5)

Here Austen mocks several characteristics of Gothic novels. The first is that the clergymen are poor and not respected, she continues with mocking the names of the characters in those novels that are almost always foreign and exotic (e. g. Monsieur St. Aubert in Ann Radcliffe's *Mystery of Udolpho* or Don Lorenzo de Medina in Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk*) and finishes her description of Catherine's father by pointing out that he does not lock up his daughters, something that fathers in Gothic novels often do. Her mother is not an evil antagonist nor is she a feeble little woman who dies in childbirth and leaves her children orphaned. These are the first examples of Jane Austen using the characteristics of the Gothic novels in order to make her readers laugh. She will continue to do so throughout the entire novel using the setting, protagonists and topics typical to Gothic novels, especially Ann Radcliffe's *Mystery of Udolpho*.

## 2. The Protagonists

Every Gothic novel needs to have its heroine, a man she falls in love with and a villain or villains that want to keep them apart. In *Northanger Abbey* the heroine is Catherine Morland, her love Henry Tilney while the villains are Isabella and John Thorpe who deceive Catherine on everyday basis in order to keep her away from Henry. The main villain, however, would be Henry's father General Tilney. In his article "The Lessons of Northanger Abbey" Eric Rothstein states that "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" (20).

### 2.1. Catherine Morland

According to Elizabeth Widmark "there is always a heroine in the Gothic novel, and she is subjected to terrors unimagined. She is a young, timid creature who is unable to adapt to all the horrors she is exposed to. She lacks initiative and is therefore helpless in dangerous situations" (7). Widmark also states that the Gothic heroine is "a stereotype" and that she does "not show any development" (7). Jane Austen introduces her heroine in the first sentence of the novel and it is clear that Catherine is not a typical Gothic heroine. Austen shows her heroine in different stages of life and gives a description of a girl who is not "timid" or who "lacks initiative". As a child 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 boy's 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 rose-bush. Indeed she had no taste for a garden; and if she gathered flowers at all, it was chiefly for the pleasure of mischief—at least so it was conjectured from her always preferring those which she was forbidden to take. Such were her propensities—her abilities were quite as extraordinary. She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid. (Austen 5-6)

Heroines of the Gothic novels are supposed to be great beauties who are delicate and behave in a fashion that is considered appropriate for women of that time and age. They certainly do not play games intended for boys nor do they have an "awkward figure". It is also hard to imagine that any author of the Gothic novel would call his or her heroine stupid. Aurèlie Chevaleyre argues that Catherine "is supposed to look like Emily St Aubert from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* but they

clearly have nothing in common. Emily St Aubert is endowed with special gifts, for instance, poetry writing and drawing, whereas Catherine is not able to draw anything and certainly cannot write” (15). Emily does not change throughout the novel while the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* describes Catherine at different ages in her life and in the end Catherine grows intellectually and morally. At the age of ten Catherine “was moreover noisy and wild, and hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house.” (Austen 7) She also despises playing music, drawing and reading, everything that a proper young lady of that time ought to excel at. Things change a little bit when Catherine turns fifteen because, as the narrator says: “she is in training for a heroine” (Austen 7). Catherine starts to read a lot and even though she reads authors such as William Shakespeare and Alexander Pope she truly loves to read Gothic novels. Her love for the genre can be seen on her journey to Bath. Catherine is seventeen years old and a couple that lives near the Morlands, Mr and Mrs Allen, invite Catherine to join them in staying in city of Bath. In the description of their travel to Bath Catherine's overactive imagination can be seen for the first time. The narrator gives the reader an insight into Catherine's expectations by saying that the journey

...was performed with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero. Nothing more alarming occurred than a fear, on Mrs Allen's side, of having once left her clogs behind her at an inn, and that fortunately proved to be groundless. (Austen 11-12)

In this excerpt Austen not only exhibits her heroine's expectation of the world but also mocks the Gothic novel because the most exciting thing that happens on the journey is an old lady forgetting her clogs.

The narrator describes the seventeen-year-old Catherine as follows:

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. (Austen 10)

In the last part of the sentence the narrator emphasizes how ordinary Catherine is; she is just like any other seventeen-year-old girl, and yet she is a heroine. Precisely because there is nothing extraordinary about her, the narrator keeps calling Catherine a heroine throughout the novel so that the reader would recognize her as such. The narrator is not the only one who thinks that Catherine is a heroine; Catherine sees herself as one, too. She likes to imagine herself as a heroine of a Gothic novel like the ones she reads about. Her passion will eventually put her in a difficult situation as she starts to project her Gothic fantasies on the people around her, mainly on

General Tilney, but according to Jodi L. Wyatt her reading also has its advantages as it is “a significant part of the social process” and “serves as a touchstone for sociable intercourse throughout novel” and that it “becomes a conversation opener for Catherine in almost all of her social interactions, figuring prominently in her exchange with not only Isabella and John Thorpe, but also Henry and Eleanor Tilney” (271). Catherine’s relationships with Isabella, Henry and Eleanor will teach her valuable lessons and for that she will be changed for good. Throughout the novel Catherine shows an independent spirit and even though she is not a typical heroine of a Gothic novel she is the main protagonist of this novel: “Catherine is the archetype of the Gothic heroine in the sense that she represents the perfect victim. She is a young, naive girl from a family of ten children, the daughter of a clergyman from the countryside. She meets greedy villain, thirsty for her fantasized fortune such as the Thorpes and ends up trapped in the abbey by the ultimate villain” (Chevaleyre 19). One thing she also has in common with a typical Gothic heroine is that marriage is her ultimate goal in life and “she obtains security and safety when she marries” (Widmark 8). But the main difference between Catherine and for example Emily St Aubert is, as Aurèlie Chevaleyre points out, that Catherine “does accomplish heroic acts” like avoiding certain “traps: she does not become superficial like Mrs Allen, she defeats the villains embodied by the Thorpes and the Tilneys and eventually gets married with the man she loves” (19). Avril Horner also notes that is important to mention that “Austen's novel offers a bridge between early Gothic fiction, in which the heroine is threatened by external forces, and later gothic novels in which drama moves more into the mind of the heroine” (117). By this logic Catherine Morland is the predecessor to later Gothic heroines like Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, Catherine Earnshaw and so on.

## **2.2. Henry Tilney**

Every heroine needs her hero and in this case it is Henry Tilney, a young clergyman from “a very respectable family in Gloucestershire” (Austen 24). He has “a brown skin, with dark eyes, and rather dark hair” (Austen 39). Catherine meets Henry in Bath where she was invited by Mr and Mrs Allen. Catherine was excited to visit Bath but eventually she gets bored. While attending pomp-rooms with Mrs Allen, a popular social activity of that time, the master of ceremonies introduces her to Henry Tilney. This is how Catherine perceives him:

He seemed to be about four or five and twenty, was rather tall, had a pleasing countenance, a very intelligent and lively eye, and, if not quite handsome, was very near it. His address was good, and Catherine felt herself in high luck. There was little leisure for speaking while they danced; but when they were seated at tea, she found 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. (Austen 18)

In their conversation Henry turns out to be a very charming young man with a great sense of humour. He turns an ordinary conversation about boring pleasantries into a lively discussion and manages to make Catherine laugh. He also shows great respect for women when he says, in regards to writing, that “excellence is pretty fairly divided between sexes” (Austen 21). Not a lot of his male contemporaries would agree with him. Henry also shows great knowledge of fabrics, especially muslin which impresses Mrs Allen and makes Catherine laugh again. They danced once more time and “parted, on a lady's side at least, with a strong inclination for continuing the acquaintance. Whether she thought of him so much, while she drank her warm wine and water, and prepared herself for bed, as to dream of him when there, cannot be ascertained” (Austen 23). Henry and Catherine are attracted to each other but it is not love at first sight, a meeting of destiny like in the Gothic novels. Henry is sensible and sensitive but he is not like Valancourt from *Mystery of Udolpho*. He does not follow Catherine home and lurks from the forest nearby like Valancourt does, nor does he get shot by bandits so that the heroine has to take care of him. He is neither a hero-villain so often found in Gothic novels who “bears the dual makings of both villain and a victim” (Stoddart 112) nor is he a tortured Byronic hero. After the lovely day they spent together Henry even leaves Bath for a while. Catherine is not sure whether she likes Henry in a romantic way but she did “with more than usual eagerness [...] hasten to the pump-room the next day” (Austen 25). For next few days Henry is nowhere to be seen, nobody knows much about him and Catherine’s imagination takes flight: “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, and increased her anxiety to know more of him” (Austen 31). Catherine is slowly falling in love with him and it is easy for the readers to sympathise with her and her joy the next time she sees Henry. It is again at the pump-room and in this scene it is obvious that Henry is not indifferent towards her either. He enters the room with his sister Eleanor under his arm and immediately smiles at Catherine. All three of them agree to go for a walk but the Thorpe siblings have other plans. They lie to Catherine in order to prevent her from seeing the Tilneys because John Thorpe wants Catherine for himself. Catherine is devastated when she learns about the deception and desperately wants to make amends to the Tilneys. She sees Henry at a play the next day and in the midst of Catherine making her apology the reader gets a first glance at Henry as a romantic hero.

"But indeed I did not wish you a pleasant walk; I never thought of such a thing; but I begged Mr Thorpe so earnestly to stop; I called out to him as soon as ever I saw you; now, Mrs Allen, did not—Oh! You were not there; but indeed I did; and, if Mr Thorpe would only have stopped, I would have jumped out and run after you."

Is there a Henry in the world who could be insensible to such a declaration? Henry Tilney at least was not. With a yet sweeter smile, he said everything that need be said of his sister's concern, regret, and dependence on Catherine's honour. (Austen 101)

Henry cannot stay indifferent to this kind of statement and sits next to Catherine in order to ease his mind and for the first time he shows real affection for her. They agree on another walk and this time no one can prevent Catherine from going. On this walk they discuss books, especially Gothic and historical novels:

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 parenthesized 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. (Rothstein 18)

This is where Henry's role in Catherine's life changes a little and he becomes almost her teacher, a mentor of sorts. Ran Zhao argues that Henry "is the first of a peculiarly-Austen series of lover-mentors in sense that he is "like Knightley", in Austen's *Emma*, "whose Emma is sixteen years younger," and "like Edmund," in *Mansfield Park* "whose Fanny had her mind formed by him as a child in his house" and just like them "Henry acquires early a formidably psychological advantage over his heroine" (75). He often teases Catherine over her reading comprehension in order to educate her in some way. His "psychological advantage of the old over the young, the strong over the weak, again dates back to the Gothic" (Zhao 75).

### 2.3. The Villains

Besides a heroine and a hero every Gothic novel needs its villain or villains. The villain wants to prevent the happiness of the young heroine and the man she loves. Isabella Thorpe and

her brother John fall under this category, but the main villain of the novel is Henry's father, General Tilney.

### **2.3.1. Isabella Thorpe**

Catharine meets Isabella Thorpe the same way she meets Henry Tilney, in Bath's pomp-room. Isabella is the oldest daughter of Mrs Thorpe, Mrs Allen's school friend. She is also her mother's favourite since she is "the handsomest" of her daughters. Catherine and Isabella become friend immediately because the Thorpes know Catherine's brother James. By the second time they meet at the theatre, the two young women are the closest of friends. From there on their friendship continues to grow.

The progress of the friendship between Catherine and Isabella was quick as its beginning had been warm, and they passed so rapidly through every gradation of increasing tenderness that there was shortly no fresh proof of it to be given to their friends or themselves. They called each other by their Christian name, were always arm in arm when they walked, pinned up each other's train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set; and if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up, to read novels together. (Austen 32)

Catherine has been lonely in Bath and is thrilled to have a friend that she does not notice that Isabella is full of contradictions. During one of their visits to the pomp room Isabella notices two young men looking at her. She claims that she does not want to have anything to do with them but she keeps her eye on them anyway. When Catherine notices that they are gone, on pretence of wanting to show Catherine a hat in a store, Isabella follows the two young men whose attention she supposedly does not want into the churchyard. She also notices that one of them is handsome. While walking behind those two young men, the two young women come across their brothers. Isabella obviously flirts with Catherine's brother James which raises the question whether she met and befriended Catherine by accident or did she know exactly who Catherine was even before they were introduced. After James' arrival to Bath, Isabella barely notices Catherine anymore even though she claims otherwise. She continues showering Catherine with compliments while spending very little time with her. When all four of them go riding in the gigs, Isabella goes with James while Catherine has to go with John. On a ball that all four of them attend Isabella spends all of her time away from Catherine. When she does speak to Catherine she is as sweet as ever by saying things like: "My dear creature, I am afraid I must leave you, your brother is so amazingly impatient to begin; I know you will not mind my going away,



and I dare say John will be back in a moment, and then you may easily find me out” (Austen 51-52). Catherine is too innocent to see through Isabella's lies and refuses to doubt Isabella even when she lies about Tilneys abandoning Catherine and not honouring their appointment just so that Catherine could spend more time with her brother John and maybe fall in love with him so that two of them can get to Morlands’ supposed fortune. Isabella’s materialistic tendencies come to light after she finds out that James Morland, now her fiancé, does not have as much money as she previously thought. When she receives a letter from James in which he informs her of the sum his father can afford to give them, Catherine sees a little bit of real Isabella for the first time. Isabella is clearly disappointed but keeps the pretence in front of Catherine.

It is not on my own account I wish for more; but I cannot bear to be the means of injuring my dear Morland, making him sit down upon an income hardly enough to find one in the common necessities of life. For myself, it is nothing; I never think of myself... As to that, my sweet Catherine, there cannot be a doubt, and you know me well enough to be sure that a much smaller income would satisfy me. It is not the want of more money that makes me just at present a little out of spirits; I hate money; and if our union could take place now upon only fifty pounds a year, I should not have a wish unsatisfied. (Austen 149-150)

Everything that Isabella claims proves to be false. In James’ absence she begins to flirt with Captain Tilney, Henry’s older brother who will one day inherit his father’s fortune. She simply uses people around her for her own selfish wishes. As Chevaleyre points out, “it is Isabella who introduces Catherine to Gothic literature. She is thus the reason why Catherine becomes so obsessed with novels. It seems to me that she gave Catherine a forbidden fruit, a Gothic novel, the source of Catherine's future illusions and confusions” (40). In the end Isabella is punished as she is deceived by Captain Tilney who used her in the same way she used James.

Isabella can be considered as a Gothic figure because of the fascination she exerts on Catherine, her sexual drives which causes her to lose her fiancé and her responsibility as regards Catherine's misreading and misunderstandings. One can also consider that, like Catherine, she was lured by Gothic novels and that it is her misreading of them that led her to believe that she could manipulate the people around her. (Chevaleyre 41)

### **2.3.2. John Thorpe**

John Thorpe is Isabella’s brother and a great friend to Catherine’s brother James which is why Catherine is civil to him even though she does not feel comfortable around him from the start.

He was 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. (Austen 42)

He is also always too pleased with himself and he is always bragging about what he perceives as accomplishments. He knows horses better than anyone; he can dance better than anyone else and so on. Catherine sees him for what he truly is the day he deceives her about the Tilneys going somewhere else when they had an arrangement to see her. Catherine finds out about his lies when she sees Henry and his sister on the way to visit her and begs Mr Thorpe to stop his carriage but he simply does not care:

"Stop, stop, Mr Thorpe," she impatiently cried; "it is Miss Tilney; it is indeed. How could you tell me they were gone? Stop, stop, I will get out this moment and go to them." But to what purpose did she speak? Thorpe only lashed his horse into a brisker trot; the Tilneys, who had soon ceased to look after her, were in a moment out of sight round the corner of Laura Place [...] Mr Thorpe only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on; and Catherine, angry and vexed as she was, having no power of getting away, was obliged to give up the point and submit. (Austen 93)

Here Catherine sees his true nature and does not feel comfortable around him anymore and even starts to avoid him. According to Eric Rothstein this moment can also be seen as a parody of a Gothic novel because "a lie from John Thorpe succeeds in snatching Catherine from the amiable Tilneys, in a parody of the stock abduction scene" (22). John Thorpe wants to take Catherine away from Henry by any means necessary and only because he believes that she will inherit Mr Allen's money which makes him a villain of sorts. As Aurèlie Chevalere puts it "He is not a nasty character in the sense that he does not hurt Catherine but his intentions are not innocent. Like Isabella, he is a predator who wants to get Catherine's money" and by staying away from him "Catherine seems to be escaping him like a prey would escape his predator" (34). Even though John Thorpe commits certain atrocious acts he is not a murderer or a criminal of any kind and therefore he is not a real threat to Catherine which means that he is not a true Gothic villain.

### 2.3.3. General Tilney

Even though *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of the Gothic novel it has a true Gothic character in General Tilney, Henry and Eleanor's father, "a terrible patriarch, who controls his children with an iron hand" (Widmark 6). The first time Catherine sees General Tilney, is

described like a scene from a Gothic novel. While dancing with Henry she sees a mysterious man looking at her from across the room:

Soon after their reaching the bottom of the set, Catherine perceived herself to be earnestly regarded by a gentleman who stood among the lookers-on, immediately behind her partner. He was a very handsome man, of a commanding aspect, past the bloom, but not past the vigour of life; and with his eye still directed towards her, she saw him presently address Mr Tilney in a familiar whisper. Confused by his notice, and blushing from the fear of its being excited by something wrong in her appearance, she turned away her head. But while she did so, the gentleman retreated, and her partner, coming nearer, said, "I see that you guess what I have just been asked. That gentleman knows your name, and you have a right to know his. It is General Tilney, my father." (Austen 84-85)

At that moment Catherine does not have any other opinion on him except that he and Henry make a handsome family. The next time she sees him it is in the theatre where he is watching her again but this time he is also speaking to John Thorpe which makes Catherine afraid that the General does not like her but Mr Thorpe assures her that that is not the case and that the General is even admiring her. The first time she actually speaks to him, he is nothing but wonderful to her and even invites her to visit his children in his home. Catherine does so and notices that something is wrong. Henry and Eleanor are pleasant but not like they have been before:

Instead of finding herself improved in acquaintance with Miss Tilney, from the intercourse of the day, she seemed hardly so intimate with her as before; instead of seeing Henry Tilney to greater advantage than ever, in the ease of a family party, he had never said so little, nor been so little agreeable; and, in spite of their father's great civilities to her—in spite of his thanks, invitations, and compliments—it had been a release to get away from him. It puzzled her to account for all this. It could not be General Tilney's fault. That he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry's father. He could not be accountable for his children's want of spirits, or for her want of enjoyment in his company. (Austen 141)

It is interesting that with this passage Austen starts the first chapter of the second volume of the novel: "The first part of *Northanger Abbey* takes place in Bath and is an *Evelina*-esque comedy of manners in which the naive heroine, Catherine Morland, is initiated into the pains and pleasures, thrills and disappointments, embarrassments and triumphs of the courtship plot in the fashionable world of Bath" (Baudor 330). The second part is where Catherine's Gothic fantasies take a life of their own. General Tilney invites her to spend few weeks with them in their family

home, the Northanger Abbey. Catherine is beyond excited because she imagines the abbey as a fascinating place where various adventures can happen. After all, old abbeys are the perfect settings for all those Gothic novels she likes to read. Once there, her imagination starts to get the best of her. Even though General Tilney has been nothing but nice to her, after he generously walks her through almost the whole abbey but refuses to take her in the part of the building where his late wife's room is situated, Catherine's imagination goes into overdrive. Her delusions are magnified after hearing that his wife has passed away and that Eleanor was not there when her mother died. Catherine misleads herself into thinking that the General has murdered his wife or after he informs her that he will stay up long after they are all sleeping to get some work done that Mrs Tilney is still alive and the General is keeping her locked up in the part of the abbey she is not allowed to visit. Catherine starts to project characteristics of a Gothic villain like Montoni in an Ann Radcliffe's novel onto the man who has shown her nothing but kindness:

Catherine's interest in the deceased Mrs. Tilney augmented with every question, whether answered or not. Of her unhappiness in marriage, she felt persuaded. The general certainly had been an unkind husband. He did not love her walk: could he therefore have loved her? And besides, handsome as he was, there was a something in the turn of his features which spoke his not having behaved well to her. (Austen 200)

Hearing that the General did not like the portrait of his wife and that he gave it to his daughter, gives Catherine another reason to suspect him: "Here was another proof. A portrait—very like—of a departed wife, not valued by the husband! He must have been dreadfully cruel to her!" (Austen 200) But of course General Tilney is not a murderer nor does he imprison his wife, but he is a villain. The General's kindness towards Catherine comes from him believing that she is a rich heiress. Once he finds out the truth, it becomes clear why his children are afraid of him. He gives Catherine an hour to pack and to leave his home. But he does not tell her that himself but rather sends his daughter to do it for him. Catherine is left to her own devices; nobody is allowed to accompany her on her travel home nor is she given any means to pay for her journey: "The expulsion of the young guest Catherine from Northanger Abbey by the General is an action so remarkable that everybody is horrified" but "Catherine wins out over the patriarchal General Tilney and shows that she is no simpering heroine who faints through the cruelty of a typical villain" (Widmark 17). In the end the villain is punished and the good triumphs over evil as Henry defies his father and marries Catherine.

### 3. The Setting

“The setting in Gothic novel plays a pivotal role, since, it not only creates the eerie atmosphere but it also projects the deterioration of the world. Thus, it functions as a microcosm of the wider society” (Ramjheetun 3). But since *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of a Gothic novel it actually takes action on four different places: Fullerton, Bath, Northanger Abbey and Woodston. Each of those places signifies an important stage in Catherine’s life and in her journey of becoming a heroine.

#### 3.1. Fullerton

Fullerton is a village in Wiltshire where Catherine was born and has spent wonderful years of her childhood. Catherine is happy there with her family but thinks that there is something missing in her little village, something that prevents her from being a heroine.

There was not one lord in the neighbourhood; no—not even a baronet. There was not one family among their acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door—not one young man whose origin was unknown. Her father had no ward, and the squire of the parish no children. 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. (Austen 9)

Fullerton is not a sort of place that would be exciting for a young girl like Catherine, a young girl who wants to be a heroine of Gothic novels. Her notions of what would make Fullerton more thrilling all come from the novels she reads and are formulaic to the Gothic fiction. Catherine is ecstatic when the Allens invite her to Bath because she is tired of a quiet country life, but when she finally spends some time there and after the events that take place at the Tilney residence, that same, boring Fullerton proves itself to be the only place that Catherine can rely on. She will always be welcomed there.

Her father, mother, Sarah, George, and Harriet, all assembled at the door to welcome her with affectionate eagerness, was a sight to awaken the best feelings of Catherine's heart; and in the embrace of each, as she stepped from the carriage, she found herself soothed beyond anything that she had believed possible. So surrounded, so caressed, she was even happy! In the joyfulness of family love everything for a short time was subdued... (Austen 262)

Fullerton is also the place where Catherine's dreams come true as Henry Tilney comes after her and they get engaged there. In the beginning of the novel Fullerton seems like a dull place but in the end it is that dull place that brings happiness to Catherine and not a Gothic castle. Woodston,

the place where Henry's parish is situated can be compared to Fullerton as it is also a quiet, small village where Henry and Catherine will live, presumably happy, for the rest of their lives.

### **3.2. Bath**

Staying in Bath is the first time Catherine has been away from home. There she expects great adventures but Bath is an endless parade of social gatherings, superficial conversations and shallow people: "Bath is the setting for the novel's principal social misunderstandings, whose unfoldings are made possible by the abeyance of established community networks and lines of communication. This condition was inextricable from Bath's identity as the quintessential eighteenth-century British spa-town: Bath was a city of strangers, its population constantly shifting as visitors came and went" (Benis 182). In Bath Austen shows what society of her time looked like and what the members of that society valued most. Mrs Allen is a true representative of that society. She is superficial and only interested in appearances which can be seen through her obsession with fabrics and dresses:

Mrs. Allen was one of that numerous class of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough to marry them. She had neither beauty, genius, accomplishment, nor manner. The air of a gentlewoman, a great deal of quiet, inactive good temper, and a trifling turn of mind were all that could account for her being the choice of a sensible, intelligent man like Mr. Allen. In one respect she was admirably fitted to introduce a young lady into public, being as fond of going everywhere and seeing everything herself as any young lady could be. Dress was her passion. She had a most harmless delight in being fine; and our heroine's entree into life could not take place till after three or four days had been spent in learning what was mostly worn, and her chaperone was provided with a dress of the newest fashion. (Austen 12-13)

"Bath is also the hunting-grounds of the Thorpe family, Isabella and John. They play the role of villains in directing the plot. They batten on Catherine, because Isabella has chosen Catherine's brother James as a likely partner" (Widmark 14). The episode in Bath is almost a novel of manners that provides Catherine an education in terms of who people truly are. None the less, Catherine likes Bath because it brings something new to her life and an opportunity to meet people like Henry and Eleanor. Bath is also the place where Catherine's passion for reading Gothic fiction, under the influence of Isabella Thorpe, increases and prepares her mind for her visit to Northanger Abbey.

### 3.3. Northanger Abbey

Northanger Abbey is the home of Henry, Eleanor and General Tilney. The second part of the novel mostly takes place there after the General invites Catherine, thinking that she is a rich heiress, to stay with them for a few weeks. Catherine is euphoric at the prospect of staying in a place like the ones she reads about.

Northanger Abbey! These were thrilling words, and wound up Catherine's feelings to the highest point of ecstasy. Her grateful and gratified heart could hardly restrain its expressions within the language of tolerable calmness. To receive so flattering an invitation! To have her company so warmly solicited! Everything honourable and soothing, every present enjoyment, and every future hope was contained in it... (Austen 153)

Catherine is almost frantic and cannot stop thinking about the abbey and the time she will spend there, investigating “its narrow cells and ruined chapel” (Austen 154-155). She starts projecting her Gothic fantasies onto the place she has never seen before. She imagines what the abbey must have been like:

...a richly endowed convent at the time of the Reformation, of its having fallen into the hands of an ancestor of the Tilneys on its dissolution, of a large portion of the ancient building still making a part of the present dwelling although the rest was decayed, or of its standing low in a valley, sheltered from the north and east by rising woods of oak. (Austen 155)

Catherine's time spent at the abbey is where Austen's parody of the Gothic novel is the most obvious. Everything that Catherine knows about the abbey comes from the novels she had read and they do not depict reality. Henry knows that and teases Catherine mercilessly on their way to the abbey by inventing stories that fit to the formula of the Gothic novel. The first time in the Abbey sequence Austen pokes fun at the Gothic fiction is when Catherine does not even notice that she has entered the gates of an abbey. There are no oaks in front of it, no massy grey stone of the abbey rising from those oaks nor is the sun reflecting on high Gothic windows. But the building is standing low, there are no trees just a “smooth, level road of gravel” (Austen 178), nor is there sun reflecting on the windows, just boring rain. Catherine has waited so long to see an abbey but in the moment when that actually happens she is only worried about the state of her new straw bonnet. The insides of the abbey are different than what she has expected as well. The furniture is quite modern; there are no carvings of former times on the fireplace that is decorated with the English china. Not even those Gothic windows live up to her expectations. Even though they have the right form “but every pane was so large, so clear, so light! To an imagination

which had hoped for the smallest divisions, and the heaviest stone-work, for painted glass, dirt, and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing” (Austen 179). Here Austen obviously mocks the old castles with secret passages that are settings for a typical Gothic novel. Catherine is shown to her room that is also not like something from a Gothic novel. The room was not “unreasonably large, and contained neither tapestry nor velvet. The walls were papered, the floor was carpeted [...] and the air of the room altogether far from uncheerful” (Austen 180). But this is an abbey after all and as an experienced reader of Gothic novels that depict reality, Catherine knows that there must be some kind of a secret lurking nearby. In her room Catherine notices an old chest in the corner of the room and immediately that chest holds some wonder that she has to discover. There must be something really important in it because the chest is hidden in the corner. She promises to herself that she will open it no matter what. She examines the chest carefully and, even though her hands are trembling, manages to open it. Just as she is about to look inside Miss Tilney's maid knocks on her door. Catherine steps away from the chest for a little while in order to get dressed but she cannot contain herself from knowing what it is inside. She runs to the chest, opens it and in it finds a white cotton counterpane. Miss Tilney arrives and sees Catherine next to the chest and explains how that chest has been in their family for generations and that she kept it in order to store hats in it if she ever needed to. They keep the chest in the corner so it would not be in anyone's way. Here Austen is clearly depicting the atmosphere of a Gothic mystery that a heroine must uncover. She is slowly building suspense with the description of Catherine's thoughts, trembling hands and overall excitement over an old chest. However, there is nothing mysterious about that chest; it does not contain some important scrolls or a dead body, just some linen. The greatest laughs come from Miss Tilney's pragmatic explanation of why the chest is there in the first place (to hold her hats) and why it is in the corner. After a pleasant dinner with Henry, Eleanor and the General, Catherine goes back to her room, but her mind is not done with seeing Gothic mysteries all around her. A storm starts outside and the sounds of that storm in the abbey thrill Catherine:

Catherine, as she crossed the hall, listened to the tempest with sensations of awe; and, when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time that she was really in an abbey. Yes, these were characteristic sounds; they brought to her recollection a countless variety of dreadful situations and horrid scenes, which such buildings had witnessed, and such storms ushered in; and most heartily did she rejoice in the happier circumstances attending her entrance within walls so solemn! (Austen 184)



The storm has started playing tricks with Catherine's imagination to that extent that the next morning Henry even has to assure her that she is safe from “midnight assassins and drunken gallants” (Austen 184). But in the evening the wind is still blowing and Catherine, still ashamed of her episode with the chest, notices a black cabinet across the room. Catherine has already heard about a cabinet like that on her way to the abbey. While taking her to Northanger, Henry Tilney teases Catherine with a story of what she will find in the abbey. His story is filled with clichés that are found in Gothic novels: a heroine, Catherine herself, is situated in a room that is away from the rest of the family and in which somebody died many years ago, she goes through the furniture, finds an old chest that is hard to open, finds a portrait of handsome young warrior above the fireplace, she is fascinated by his good looks, her maid informs her that the castle is haunted and that would not be a single domestic within call, there will also be a storm outside, a division in the tapestry of the room which will lead to a secret room that leads to a chapel, in that room there is blood or a dagger or a torture device, but she will return to her room and find there a black cabinet that is hard to open but when she does, in it will be a secret manuscript that is a memoir of a girl named Matilda. Here Henry represents the author's thoughts on the formulaic nature of Gothic novels. It is obvious that he finds them ridiculous. Catherine is ashamed of being so drawn into his story but when she sees a similar black cabinet in her room she cannot stop herself from looking for a hidden manuscript inside. She even fails to notice that there was an old chest in Henry's story and that she has already found a chest like that and that it contained nothing of significance. She tries to open the cabinet and it is locked but she refuses to let it go. Her fantasies have taken over her and once again her hands are trembling, she gets weak in the knees, her heart is beating fast and her cheeks are pale. While there is nothing in the drawers of the cabinet, in one of the compartments she finds a manuscript. Just like in a Gothic novel a strong wind raises, the lamp in her room expires and she hears footsteps in the hallway. Catherine is so frightened that she hides in her bed. This part of the novel coincides with the Gothic clichés that Henry was making fun of, but what makes it laughable is what the found manuscript contains. The manuscript is not a manuscript at all, but actually some laundry bills. However, Catherine still has not learned her lesson, and, based on a few circumstantial evidence, she starts to suspect General Tilney of murdering or imprisoning his wife. As mentioned before, Mrs Tilney passed away and since then no one was allowed into her room. One evening Catherine makes her way to the forbidden part of the abbey but finds nothing important in late Mrs Tilney's room. Once again she is frightened by the footsteps outside the door. This scene points to Gothic novels once again as Austen cleverly builds suspense but it is clearly a parody because once again there is a rational explanation for everything. Outside the door is Henry

Tilney who has just returned from a journey and passing by his mother's room is the fastest way he can get to the house. Catherine admits her suspicions to Henry and he is appalled. He tells her that he was present in the house on the day his mother died and explains the circumstances of her illness and death. There was nothing illicit about it. He scolds Catherine about her fantasies and reminds her that they are in England and that they are Christians and that plots of her favourite novels do not happen in a country like that. Here Henry shows just how irrational plots of Gothic novels actually are and that they do not represent reality. The episode in *Northanger Abbey* clearly shows that this novel is a parody: "That it is a parody of the gothic is clearly indicated as you have a tendency to laugh instead of shuddering. There is no real danger in *Northanger Abbey* and the setting is only partly Gothic. It is only Catherine's imagination that turns it into a gothic scenario" (Widmark 6).

#### 4. Themes

Some of the major themes of *Northanger Abbey* include reading, coming of age, Gothic novels, social etiquette, love, imagination and money. Some of these themes have been covered in previous chapters, so in this chapter the focus will be on reading and coming of age.

##### 4.1. Reading

Reading novels and the comprehension of the same are a great part of *Northanger Abbey*. Besides the obvious obsession Catherine has with Gothic novels, *Northanger Abbey* contains parts that discuss the nature of reading and types of readers and writers. Catherine's passion for Gothic novels is most apparent when she is in Bath; it is a passion she shares with Isabella Thorpe. On rainy days the two of them lock themselves inside and read novels. The first novel they discuss is Ann Radcliffe's *Mystery of Udolpho* and after that Isabella gives Catherine a list of novels that resemble *Udolpho* and that they will read together:

"I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocketbook. Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries. Those 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." (Austen 36)

Here is one more important aspect of Gothic novels and that is that they are read mostly by women. When Catherine asks John Thorpe if he has read *Mystery of Udolpho* he is insulted just

by the question. He does not read anything intended for women and especially nothing written by a woman. That would be beneath him. Another type of reader in the novel is Eleanor Tilney who enjoys reading about history. She knows that perhaps certain parts of those books are fiction but she does not mind and enjoys them tremendously. But neither one of them is a perfect reader. The perfect reader is Henry Tilney who enjoys both novels and history books. When Catherine expresses her dislike of historical books he warns her that they are an important part of every child's education. Henry's supremacy over one genre readers like Catherine and Eleanor can be seen when all three of them are on a walk and Catherine informs Eleanor about something horrid that is about happen in London. Catherine is talking about a new Gothic novel that is about to be published while Eleanor, the realistic one, understands it as that something terrible, a riot is going to happen in London. Henry, the perfect reader, understands the confusion and mockingly explains to Catherine and Eleanor their misunderstanding. Henry is the proof that one kind of literature is not better than the other one and that all of them are worth reading.

#### **4.2. Coming of Age**

*Northanger Abbey* can be understood as a Bildungsroman since it follows Catherine Morland from her infancy to womanhood. Catherine is described in different stages of her life. When she goes to Bath she is a seventeen-years-old girl who is naïve and innocent and who only sees the good in people. Her visits to Bath and Northanger Abby, as well as the people she meets there help her to grow up and learn more about other people and about herself. The Allens show her a whole new world; Isabella Thorpe helps her navigate that world, shows her how to behave in society, what books to read and ultimately teaches Catherine the difficult lesson that people are not always what they appear to be. John Thorpe helps her realise what kind of men she does not like. Her visit to Northanger Abbey teaches Catherine the most valuable lesson of her life: life is not always like it is in the books and it of utmost importance to distinguish real life from a fantasy. Once she gets rid of Gothic illusions Catherine finally grows up. She manages to travel home all by herself after she is thrown out of the abbey by General Tilney and learns that she is capable of surviving the humiliation as well as being on her own. When she returns to Fullerton, she is a changed person:

...for soon were all her thinking powers swallowed up in the reflection of her own change of feelings and spirits since last she had trodden that well-known road. It was not three months ago since, wild with joyful expectation, she had there run backwards and forwards some ten times a day, with an heart light, gay, and independent; looking forward

to pleasures untasted and unalloyed, and free from the apprehension of evil as from the knowledge of it. Three months ago had seen her all this; and now, how altered a being did she return! (Austen 266)

Catherine has lost her naiveté but she has not lost her kindness. Everything that has happened to her prepares her for her future life with Henry, the love of her life. In the end she gets the happy ending that a kind-hearted person like her deserves and her coming of age story has reached its conclusion.

## Conclusion

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of the Gothic novel. While following the patterns of the Gothic novel, Austen frequently makes her readers laugh. Her heroine is a regular girl and she constantly has to remind the reader that she is the novel's heroine. The fact that this is a parody is evident from the first page in Austen's description of her heroine's parents. Her father does not lock up his daughters and her mother did not die in childbirth. That sort of thing would happen in a Gothic novel and Jane Austen uses it to make her reader laugh. Her heroine is naïve and obsessed with Gothic novels herself. She reads and talks about Ann Radcliffe's *Mystery of Udolpho* a lot because, "The plot in itself is a parody of Radcliffe's plot. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Montoni wants the family's properties. In Catherine's case, everybody wants the money she has not" (Chevaleyre 51). The parody reaches its peak when Catherine visits Northanger Abbey. She projects her Gothic fantasies on the building and people living in it. The abbey looks nothing like the castles from the novels she likes, so she starts creating Gothic scenarios where there are none. The old chest she finds in her room contains only white counterpane, a mysterious black cabinet in her room hides not a secret manuscript but only a laundry bill and her host, General Tilney, did not murder or imprison his wife. Austen has successfully used the clichés of the Gothic novel to make her readers laugh and to illustrate how unrealistic those novels actually are and has thus magnificently parodied the Gothic genre.

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