

# An Unlikely Gothic Heroine

Catherine Morland in  
Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*



Jane Austen was one of the most prolific English writers of the nineteenth century, publishing six novels in total, which became well known for their romance and sharp critique of Georgian society. Her 1818 novel *Northanger Abbey* was her first work to be written but last to be published. *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of Gothic novels and follows a young woman named Catherine Morland who fancies herself to be in a Gothic romance when she is invited by her suitor Henry Tilney to his family home at the eponymous Northanger Abbey. By both invoking and subverting the tropes of Gothic novels, Austen uses Catherine Mor-

land's growth from a naïve girl to an observant woman to demonstrate the positive influence that reading novels can have on a young person's development.

*Northanger Abbey* has been called a female *bildungsroman*. *Bildungsroman* comes from the German words "novel of education" and is a genre of literature that follows the moral and psychological development of a young protagonist. Popular examples would be *Jane Eyre* (1847), *David Copperfield* (1850), and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), all of which were written after *Northanger Abbey*. The main purpose of these works was to provide a model for readers on how to properly behave in society. Emese Kunkli states, "The characteristic of the Bildungsroman is that it shows how certain people learn to control their emotions, instincts and desires so as to become respected and responsible citizens of their community" (191). Austen uses this story structure to frame Catherine's development. Catherine fits the mold of a *bildungsroman* protagonist as she is a young woman who learns a lesson over the course of the story. She is also away from her home and the protection of her parents for the first time, circumstances which make her very vulnerable and ready to learn a valuable life lesson. Kunkli also highlights a key distinction between a male and a female *bildungsroman*: "Initially, these novels had male protagonists, since completely different ideas about the education and development of women and men prevailed in the period under scrutiny: while men had to strive for rationality, women were expected to aspire to spirituali-

ty, thus not only redirecting their development but also limiting it." (191) Men and women were thus supposed to take away different lessons from their various *bildungsroman* stories. Erica Oliver likewise highlights how, because women were restricted from experiencing the world as fully as men could, "their primary access to worldly experience – notions of British society, individualistic philosophy, exemplars of powerful women – derived, by necessity, from reading material" (par. 3). This quote highlights how essential reading was to women because it taught them life lessons they would not have otherwise been able to learn. Reading also allowed women to access experiences that they wouldn't be able to access in their ordinary lives. When Catherine goes on a walk with Henry Tilney, she remarks that she cannot look at the river without, "thinking of the south of France" (Austen 102). Of course, Catherine has never traveled abroad, as she immediately tells Henry. Yet, she feels as if her reading has provided her with enough insight into what it would be like in foreign places, such as the south of France, for her to reminisce about them as if she had actually been there. This vicarious aspect of the *bildungsroman* is another reason why Catherine, as a young, sheltered woman without the financial means to travel outside of England, would be so invested in the world of books.

Learning through reading is especially important for Catherine's character development, as one of her defining features is that she loves to read. When

describing Catherine's childhood, Austen writes, "She read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives" (17). Catherine trains herself to be a heroine through reading and memorizing quotations from the works of Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray, and William Shakespeare. All of these writers were English, and more specifically, English men. The life lessons imparted through their writing would have fit within a patriarchal ideal, meaning that the women who read their works would have been encouraged to follow that ideal. While the aforementioned authors would have been typical reading material for an English person during this period, is it not their poems and plays that Catherine holds close to her heart, but the popular novels of her day, which were not yet considered typical valuable literature.

Novels were looked down on by most of society at the time because they were mostly read by women. As Catherine's would-be suitor John Thorpe so charmingly puts it: "Novels are so full of nonsense and stuff" (Austen 47). This view is like the modern view which holds literature, media, and music that are primarily consumed and enjoyed by women as being less sophisticated, and thus less valuable, than that primarily consumed and enjoyed by men. Even today, genres such as romance, which is primarily read by women, are often

scorned more than genres such as science fiction, which is primarily read by men, despite both genres being considered "popular fiction" and not "literary fiction." Austen first introduces the stigma novels faced during her time in a fiery tirade that takes up the better part of Chapter 5 when she discusses how Catherine and her newfound friend Isabella enjoy reading novels together. She breaks the literary fourth wall, directly and self-reflexively addressing her audience, "Yes, novels; – for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers" (Austen 36). The defensive language she immediately uses at the mention of novels demonstrates how reading them was something to be justified. The way Austen points out how it is often novel writers themselves who disparage novels, and that she will not follow that custom, is interesting because it encourages readers who might have had a negative view of novels as lowbrow literature to look at the current novel they're reading, *Northanger Abbey*, in a more positive light. Austen then argues that there is something valuable that could be learned from reading novels: "If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?" (36). Catherine looks up to the heroines in her novels as models and will later both learn from and

subvert the standards set up by them.

With Austen's defense of novels in mind, readers will follow Catherine's example while reading *Northanger Abbey* in deciphering what could be learned from its heroine. The primary text alluded to in *Northanger Abbey* is Ann Radcliffe's 1794 novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a classic Gothic work that follows a young woman named Emily as she travels to a mysterious castle in Italy. Catherine's new friend Isabella sparks a conversation one morning by asking Catherine, "Have you gone on with Udolpho?" (Austen 38). During a walk, Henry Tilney teases her by saying, "When your friend Emily herself left poor Valancourt when she went with her aunt into Italy" (Austen 103), and teases her again on their way to Northanger Abbey by saying that at the abbey she will be "formally conducted by Dorothy" (Austen 150), an allusion to a creepy housekeeper character in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. All of these references show how ingrained into Catherine's world the novel is. She cannot escape it, and thus her worldview is influenced by the novel, or at least what she has read of the novel so far and what others are telling her about it. Yet the literary critic Oliver warns of strictly following the worldview encouraged by *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and others like it: "Catherine's early, male-centric reading, however, is the foundation of her learning process, and it introduces (with subtle allusions to Radcliffe) Austen's satire of the gothic, an indispensable tool for Catherine's eventual discovery of societal truth" (par. 29). This quote alludes to how Catherine will learn from her books by departing

from them. "Male-centric" is also a very important word. Oliver's reading suggests that Catherine will somehow derive from traditional Gothic heroines by developing in a way that doesn't entirely conform to the patriarchal standard. While *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is the main text referenced by Catherine and other characters in *Northanger Abbey*, it is important to note that at the time of Austen's pivotal plot points, Catherine has not yet finished reading Radcliffe's book. Any lessons she would have learned from it would have been distorted. As Helena Kelly states, "Catherine's 'indulgence' in *Udolpho* is only the match to a pile of literary and cultural fuel: what burns, what drives her behavior, are half-remembered episodes from English history, Shakespeare's plays, anti-Catholicism" (63). So, Catherine's growth is not informed solely by Gothic works, but also by traditionally patriarchal English works, both of which she only faintly understands.

Austen pokes fun of Gothic literature by subverting many of its tropes. This subversion is primarily seen through her choice of heroine. Austen starts *Northanger Abbey* by informing the reader, "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine" (15). Already she is subverting Gothic tropes by declaring her use of an unconventional heroine. She then describes Catherine by saying how, "She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features" (Austen 15). These features characterize Cath-



erine as plain when compared to the beauty standards of the time. Austen further states, "She was also 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" (15). Through this description Catherine can be seen as a kind of early tomboy, a characterization which further contrasts her to the traditionally feminine heroines found in Gothic novels. Austen lastly states, "She could never learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid" (16). Catherine is not as smart as one would expect a heroine of any genre to be. All of these qualities serve to differentiate her from other Gothic heroines of the era because most Gothic heroines were expected to be beautiful, intelligent to an acceptable degree, and skilled in feminine arts. Catherine's lack of these qualities is what makes her a subversive Gothic heroine on a surface level, but it is her actions later in the novel that truly distinguish her.

Catherine hopes to finally realize her Gothic fantasies when she is invited to Northanger Abbey by the Tilneys. When thinking about it she imagines how "its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memories of an

injured and ill-fated nun" (Austen 134). The use of the terms "damp passages," "narrow cells," and a "ruined chapel" evoke a traditionally spooky Gothic setting. The "injured and ill-fated nun" could be a reference to a nun character in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* who is dead by the novel's end. When Catherine reaches Northanger Abbey, she is disappointed to discover that it is a perfectly normal home: "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 153). The lack of heavy stone-work, dirt, and cobwebs characterizes Northanger Abbey very differently from the conventional Gothic setting. Another interesting characteristic that differentiates the abbey from other Gothic settings is that it is set in England and is home to an English family. During their confrontation in Chapter 24, Henry Tilney tells Catherine, "Remember that we are English, that we are Christians" (Austen 186). Most Gothic stories were set in foreign countries, such as how Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was set in Italy. This choice of setting provided a mysterious, unknown, and thus dangerous element for the genre's English readers. The mention of the Tilneys being Christians also shows how English people could have believed their primary denomination of Christianity, An-

glicanism, to be superior to other denominations, such as Catholicism, which prevails in Italy. Catholicism was seen during this time as the religion of superstition, something which English Anglicans looked down upon. A lot of Gothic works were thus set in foreign, Catholic countries, as Gothic authors relied on superstition to instill horror in their readers.

So, while the abbey lacks a Gothic appearance and possesses none of the qualities that would mystify an English person, Catherine still tries to spin a Gothic tale out of it when she concludes that Henry's father General Tilney murdered his late wife. She begins to truly suspect Tilney after a conversation with Eleanor, "Could it be possible? - Could Henry's father? - And yet how many were the examples to justify even the blackest suspicions!" (Austen 176). While Catherine is wrong in believing General Tilney to be a murderer, she is right in suspecting him of having a sinister nature, as he initially refuses to let Henry marry Catherine because of Catherine's lower social status, and even abruptly evicts Catherine from the abbey. Catherine wouldn't have had these suspicions if it wasn't for her reading, as a dark family secret is a common Gothic trope. Voicu states: "Fiction developed her instincts and awakened her sense of danger, helping her figure out a truth she needed to know, but which no one could tell her" (189). This quote exemplifies how Catherine's reading informed her ability to see the underlying natures of people.

Catherine's suspicions of General Tilney lay bare her greatest weakness and her greatest strength: her fanciful imag-

ination and her astute observation of human nature, respectively. While she has always had a lingering understanding of human nature through reading novels, that understanding deepens when she is thrust into real-world situations and forced to not only understand human nature, but confront it in accordance with her observations. This aspect can be best seen in how she reacts to reading her now former friend Isabella's final letter: "Such a strain of shallow artifice could not impose even upon Catherine" (Austen 203). The use of the word "even" is used to contrast this reaction to Catherine's earlier inability to notice Isabella's scheming nature. Before, she failed to notice Isabella's dissatisfaction at Catherine's brother James's lack of funds and "endeavored to believe that the delay of marriage was the only source of Isabella's regret" (Austen 130). But now Catherine knows what kind of person Isabella really is. As Oliver states: "Catherine's newfound ability to read deeply corresponds with her improved reading of society's flaws" (par. 25). Not only does reading novels help Catherine read people, it also helps her apply that reading in solving problems. Ana Voicu says, "Fiction came in to help her make sense of the world and ultimately shape it" (189). Catherine has finally been able to read Isabella and take charge by choosing to no longer be friends with her.

Catherine comes to this dismissal of Isabella without having to consult a man, which is important because a key trait of Gothic heroines is that they

often were only able to escape their precarious situations with the help of a man. By choosing not to respond to Isabella's letter, Catherine escapes the precarious situation of Isabella's false friendship through her own means. Oliver explains, "As Catherine's education advances, Austen, in place of a heroine who is quickly rehabilitated by a man's influence, deliberately molds a heroine capable of implementing her own rehabilitation." (par. 18). Catherine differs from traditional Gothic heroines in this aspect because she comes to her own rescue when she could have easily asked her love interest Henry for advice. As Oliver also states: "Catherine is presented in opposition not only to romantic heroines – who too often, intentionally or not, embody the dominant discourse – but also to the cultural ideal of 'woman'" (par. 21). The "cultural ideal of 'woman'" that Oliver refers to is one who must depend on solely on a man. Catherine subverts this ideal because she solves her own problems with Isabella.

While Catherine is now able to better understand people, she is also able to maintain another one of her key strengths: goodness of heart. That goodness of heart was told to the reader in the beginning: "Her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind" (Austen 19). It is stated again at the end when Henry tells Catherine, "Your mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity, and therefore not

accessible to the cool reasonings of family partiality, or a desire of revenge'" (Austen 205). This goodness is a quality that is celebrated in Catherine and differentiates her from less savory characters such as Isabella and General Tilney. The fact that she is able to learn from her mistakes while still maintaining her innate goodness and become a respectable member of society by marrying Henry Tilney is also what makes *Northanger Abbey* a female bildungsroman. It is ultimately this growth that makes Catherine an unlikely Gothic heroine since she is not just plain, unrefined, and unintelligent, but she takes charge of her circumstances. Not only does this growth differentiate her from Gothic heroines, it also aligns her with the protagonists of male bildungsromans, whose use of rationality allowed them to triumph in the end.

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* makes full use of Austen's signature wit in the way it both satirizes and appreciates Gothic literature. Despite being set up to be an unlikely heroine and having never finished key Gothic texts such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Catherine Morland was still able to learn important life lessons through her reading. Those of us who might find ourselves lost in the world of books would be able to relate to the character of Catherine and would find both inspiration in her development and solace in how she uses her love of literature to interpret the world around her.

## References:

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