**Background: Northanger Abbey** illustrates the effects of characters’ reading habits on their lives and emphasizes how literature contributes to the complexity of each character’s identity—notably, that of Catherine Morland and her friends, the Thorpes and the Tilneys—especially pertaining to social status, economic demographic, and personality.

**Catherine Morland**
- **Background:** 17-year-old protagonist and soon-to-be heroine
- **Comes from a middle class family**
- **Lacks formal education**
- **Grew up as a tomboy, loves the outdoors**

**Reading:**
- **Sentimental novels, especially of the Gothic subgenre**
- **Avoids mentally stimulating or morally educational literature**

**Roles:**
- **The ‘Female Quixote’**
  - Young ladies who read too many books, lose touch with reality, and... embody the cultural anxieties around the rise of the novel (Kolkkenen 48)
- **The Parody**
  - Mocks the connotation of sentimental literature as the basis of masculine fear
- **The Threat**
  - Honest, open-minded, complex→ result of women’s reading countering patriarchal expectations
- **Her ‘misreading’ of history** is an awareness of the failure of formal education to present complete, unbiased fact

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**Isabella Thorpe**
- **Background:** Isabella’s older brother
- **The object of Catherine’s affection**
- **The foil of John Tilney**
- **Upper-class gentleman**

**Reading:**
- **Sentimental novels**
- **Conduct books**
- **Aimed at the social education of and dictated “propriety”** for women in the Regency era
- **Religious/moral texts**

**Roles:**
- **The Adherent**
  - Highlights the patriarchal insinuation that women can best utilize their reading to attract a suitable husband
- **The Paradigm**
  - Her over-exaggerated manners→ she lacks the very sense of propriety she should be replicating
- **The Manipulator**
  - Blisters “feminine weakness” (sensibility, fickleness, coyness) into the basis of her deceptive nature in order to get what she wants

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**John Thorpe**
- **Background:** Isabella’s younger sister of John
- **The foil of Henry Tilney**
- **Attempts to win over Catherine**

**Reading:**
- **General ignorance of literature and misidentifies basic literary trivia (authors and genres)**
- **Declares novels other than Tom Jones and The Monk “the stupidest things in creation”** (Austen 71)

**Roles:**
- **The Fool**
  - Presents a stereotypically masculine, patronizing view of “feminine” novels
- **Lacks the basic understanding required to make a personal connection based on literature**
- **The Hypocrite**
  - Simultaneous rejection of novels and endeavor to praise Catherine’s favorite novelist
- **The Feminized**
  - Spouse-stalking, seeking his fortune by marriage, not work, hoping for financial rescue for his charms, not his worth” (Benedict)
- **Thorp’s social conditioning to scorn sentimental literature→ unsuccessful in romance**

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**Henry Tilney**
- **Background:** Eleanor’s brother
- **Eleanor’s favorite**
- **Upper-class gentleman**
- **Formally educated**
- **Reserved, well mannered, polite**

**Reading:**
- **Novels**
- **Historical fiction**
- **Pretty much anything**

**Roles:**
- **The Idealized**
  - He is “familiar with a wide range of texts and genres and possessed of a superior ability to synthesize this acquired knowledge” (Wyett 268)
- **The Free**
  - Uninhibited by stigmas of femininity→ endorses her perspective and role
- **Historical “brainwashing” with detrimental effects→ trapped” in social position**
- **The Flawed**
  - Operation acceptance of British patriarchal system→ tendency to romanticize an uxoromantic past and inability to separate reality and imagination
- **Mikhailian established literary hierarchy**
  - Scholarly literature (history)→ novels
  - Fact→ fiction

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**Eleanor Tilney**
- **Background:** Henry’s sister
- **Upper-class gentlewoman**

**Reading:**
- **Historical accounts, as she is fond of history—and is very well contented to take the false with the true** (Austen 123)

**Roles:**
- **The Follower**
  - Reads the mostly masculine-oriented narratives of a past lacking in portrayal of women
- **The Victim**
  - Reading further constricts her perspective and role
- **Historical “brainwashing” with detrimental effects→ trapped” in social position**
- **The Impaired**
  - Disconnect from fiction or imagination→ inability to imagine a life other than her own→ speaks to crippling nature of one-sided historical narratives and her privilege as an upper-class, educated woman

**Modern Connection:**

Throughout the novel, Austen raises the question of whether it is what one does or does not choose to read that influences how others perceive them. Together, Catherine, the Thorpes, and the Tilneys represent the role of reading and literature in younger generations’ pursuit of greater understanding, both of their place in society and of the world around them, in their personal experiences of youth and the struggle to discover and sustain their distinctive identities. **Northanger Abbey** demonstrates how literature, in any time period, in any country, in any culture, only ever possesses as much power to define, to inspire, to affect change, as it is given by its audience.