“Happiest Delineation:” Literature, Reading Habits, and Characterization in Austen’s Northanger Abbey

Emily Crider
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Elizabeth Tasker Davis
SFASU Department of English and Creative Writing

Background:
In response to the strictly gendered society of Regency England, Jane Austen’s 1817 Gothic parody novel Northanger Abbey offers insight to the nuances of gender disparities. As such, the use of a gendered and historical critical approach throughout the project allows for a more comprehensive view of the societal expectations and taboos of 18th-century reading.

Thesis:
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

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 (Kukkonen 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

Isabella Thorpe

Background:
- 21-year-old "antagonist"
- The younger sister of John
- Comes from a poor family, lacks fortune
- Becomes friends with Catherine

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

Roles:
- The Adherent
  - Highlights the patriarchal insinuation that women can best utilize their reading to attract a suitable husband
- The Paradox
  - Her over-exaggerated manner she lacks the very sense of propriety she should be replicating

Isabella’s older brother

Background:
- Thelma’s object of affection

Reading:
- General ignorance of literature and misidentifies basic literary trivia (authors and genres)

Roles:
- The Fool
  - Presents a stereotypically masculine, patronizing view of “feminine” novels
- Lack of basic understanding required to make a personal connection based on literature

The Victim
- Historical ignorance as "[she is] fond of history—and she very well contented to take the false with the true" (Austen 123)

Thelma’s older brother

Background:
- Eleanor’s brother
- The object of Thelma’s affection

Reading:
- Novels
- Histories
- "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 reading or bounds of masculinity well-rounded reader

The Fiancé
- Historical accounts, as "[he is] fond of history—and is] very well contented to take the false with the true"

John Thorpe

Background:
- Eleanor’s brother
- The victim of Catherine’s affection
- The foil of Henry Tilney

Reading:
- 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 Paradox
- Her over-exaggerated manner she lacks the very sense of propriety she should be replicating

The Manipulator
- Distorts "feminine weakness" (sensitivity, fickleness, coyness) into the basis of her deceptive nature in order to get what she wants

Henry Tilney

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

Reading:
- Religious accounts, as "[he is] fond of history—and is] very well contented to take the false with the true"

Roles:
- The Fiancé
- Reads the mostly masculine-oriented narratives of a past lacking in portrayal of women
- The Victim
- 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

Eleanor Tilney

Background:
- Henry’s sister
- Upper-class gentlewoman
- Formally educated
- Reserved, well-mannered, polite

Reading:
- Histories
- "Pretty much anything"

Roles:
- The Fiancé
- Reads the mostly masculine-oriented narratives of a past lacking in portrayal of women
- The Victim
- 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.