

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

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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

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” (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
- Obsessed with finding a wealthy husband

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 Paradox
 - Her over-exaggerated manners→ 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



John Thorpe

Background:

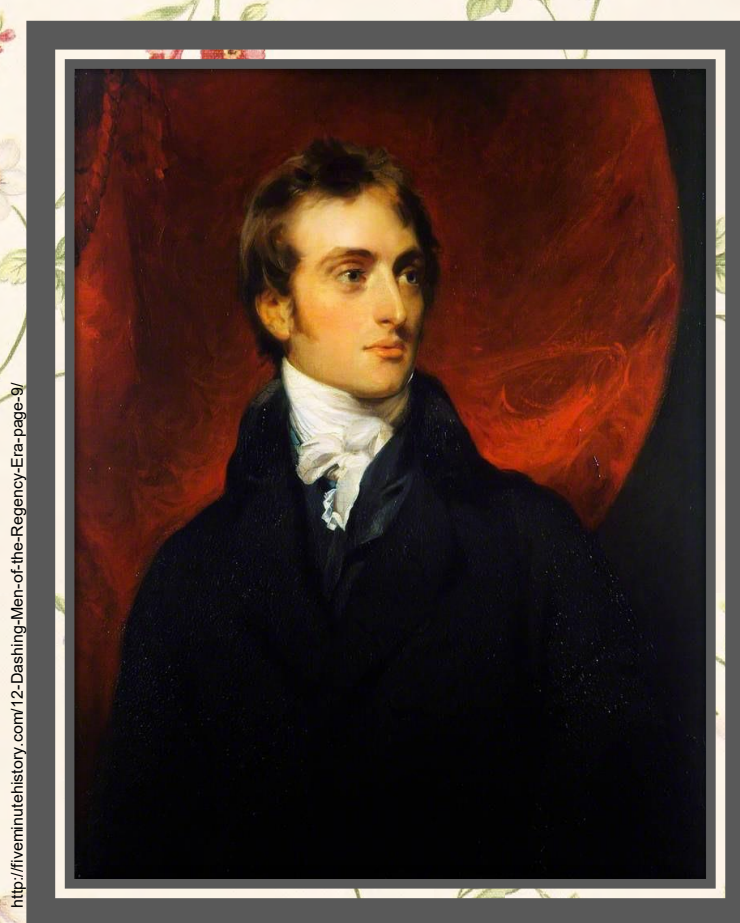
- Isabella’s older brother
- The foil of Henry Tilney
- Attempts to win over Catherine

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)
 - Thorpe’s social conditioning to scorn sentimental literature→ unsuccessful in romance



Henry Tilney

Background:

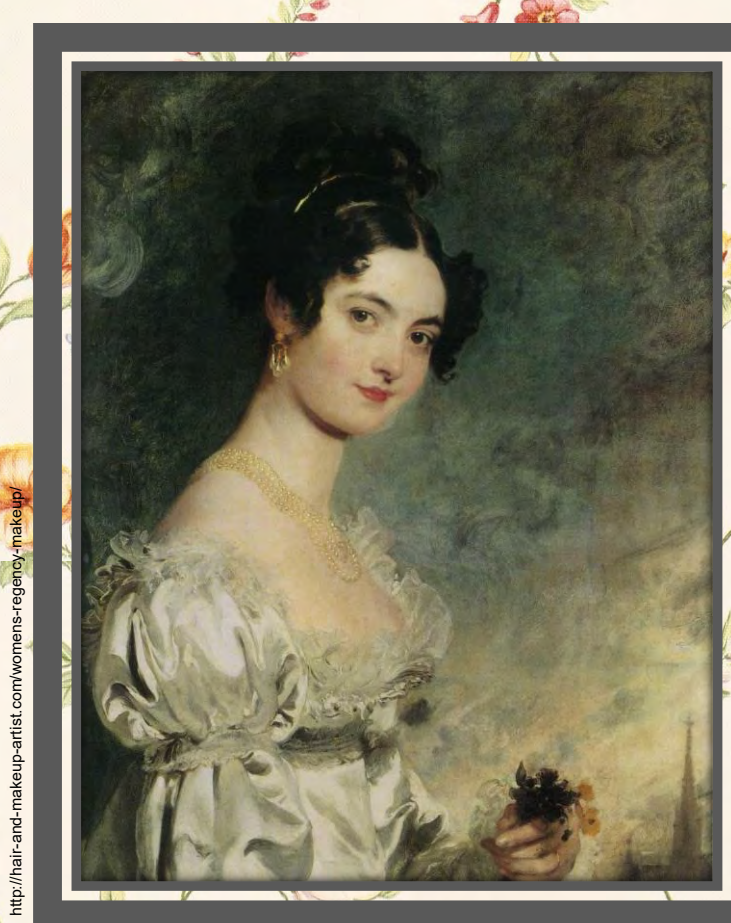
- Eleanor’s brother
- The object of Catherine’s affection
- The foil of John Thorpe
- Upper-class gentleman
- Formally educated

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 feminine reading or bounds of masculinity→ well-rounded readership
- The Flawed
 - Ready acceptance of British patriarchal system→ tendency to romanticize an unromantic past and inability to separate reality and imagination
 - Upholds an established literary hierarchy
 - Scholarly literature (history) > novels
 - Fact > fiction



Eleanor Tilney

Background:

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

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.