

## Northanger Abbey

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Lecture 17

Gothic Terrors and the Education of Catherine Morland

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## Week 4: Northanger Abbey

LECTURE 4B: GOTHIC TERRORS AND THE EDUCATION OF  
CATHERINE MORLAND

Image source: <https://aqua-regia009.tumblr.com/post/164868936576/catherine-morland-reading-the-myst>



Hello and welcome to week four's lectures on Northanger Abbey. In today's lecture session, I am going to talk about Gothic Terrors and the Education of Catherine Morland that happens through her Gothic experiences in this novel.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:31)

## The English and the Gothic



\*Austen draws the line between the gothic novels of the 1790s

(usually set centuries in the past, in continental Europe) and England in the 1790s when Henry reminds Catherine that she should "Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians... Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?" By the end of the novel, Catherine has at last learned not to take novels (or herself) so seriously.'

Source: <https://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2014/12/jane-austen-and-the-very-horrid-northanger-abbey.html>



Now, Austen draws a line between the Gothic novels of the 1790s, usually set in the past in continental Europe and England in the 1790s when Henry reminds Catherine that she should remember the country and the age in which we live. "Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Does our education prepares us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?" By the end of the novel, Catherine has at last learned not to take novels or herself so seriously.

So this is a very interesting moment in the novel when Henry Tilney chastises Catherine Morland for imagining Gothic horrors in his father's house that is Northanger Abbey. And in this comment of Henry Tilney, we can see Austen dividing the Gothic novels of the 1790s from the England of the 1790s. So if you remember, the spatialities that we come across in the Gothic novels in the 1790s are usually from continental Europe and we can see how that contrast between England and the other is established through Gothic narratives.

So, what is significant here is that those spaces in continental Europe are supposed to be spaces of atrocities. And what Henry Tilney is trying to communicate to this English woman, to this English girl, Catherine Morland is that we are Christians, we are English, our laws are better laws, are righteous laws and therefore, you should not imagine all these nightmarish scenarios to be taking place within an English structure, domestic structure. So when Henry Tilney is taken to

task, these ideals are communicated to Catherine Morland and to the English readers who are reading the pages of this novel. So by the end of the novel, apparently, Catherine Morland has learned her lesson and at last she has also learned not to take novels or herself so seriously.

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## Consumerism



"Isabella Thorpe, when she recommends the seven horrid novels to Catherine, admits that she hasn't read them herself but has in turn been given the list by Miss Andrews. Isabella's interest seems to be more that she keeps up with the fashion and is able to make these recommendations than in her own enjoyment of novel-reading."

Source: <https://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2014/12/jane-austen-and-the-very-horrid-no-horrible-abbey.html>

Image source: [https://Stocks.com/actors/isabella\\_thorpe](https://Stocks.com/actors/isabella_thorpe)



Now, there is another side to this concept of Gothic novels, which were very popular in England in the late 18th century and that idea is Consumerism. Isabella Thorpe, when she recommends the seven horrid novels to Catherine, admits that she has not read them herself but has in turn been given the list by Miss Andrews. Isabella's interest seem to be more that she keeps up with the fashion and is able to make these recommendations than in her own enjoyment of novel-reading.

So as you can see, there are several related ideas here. One is that it was fashionable to read horrid novels, in other words, Gothic novels in those times and Isabella is keeping up with this fashion. And even without reading those novels, she pretends to have read them and she passes the list to Catherine Morland herself. So what is interesting here is that, in polite society, people do what other members of that society are doing and Isabella here is imitating the fashionable trajectories of the people around her, and she is kind of introducing Catherine Morland too into that polite society who has been reading these kind of novels as well.

So, one very clear thing that gets apparent in this comment is that fashionable society read these fiction, they were consumed by this fiction. And so in order to kind of participate in that group's interest, one has to have read these works. So this is something that we have to keep in mind. While Henry Tilney argues that England is different, its laws are different, its culture is different, it should not be compared to the heinous crimes that take place in continental Europe. These kind of hypocritical trajectories are also ongoing where there is a consumption of a lot of novels of this kind by impressionable young girls.

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## The Novel and Female Enlightenment



"Terry Castle labels *Northanger Abbey* "a comedy of female enlightenment" in which Catherine Morland is educated out of the sentimental, Gothic tradition. After her time in Bath and her courtship by Henry Tilney, Catherine realizes that she can think independently; she has learned to relish her intellectual freedom. Despite her initial naiveté and lack of reason and understanding, she becomes an unlikely "thinking woman's" heroine."

(Source: Miller 2010)



Now let us talk about the idea of the novel and female enlightenment. "Terry Castle labels *Northanger Abbey*, a comedy of female enlightenment in which Catherine Morland is educated out of the sentimental, Gothic tradition. After her time in Bath and her courtship by Henry Tilney, Catherine realizes that she can think independently; she has learned to relish her intellectual freedom. Despite her initial naiveté and lack of reason and understanding, she becomes an unlikely "thinking woman's" heroine."

This comment is significant for several reasons. One, this novel is perceived as a comedy of female enlightenment. It is a comedy because Catherine Morland makes a lot of errors when she spends time in *Northanger Abbey*, for that reason, it is a comedy. And secondly, it is a novel of

female enlightenment. We did approach this concept of female learning in relation to the idea of heroinism. Please remember that in the previous lectures, we compared the Male Bildungsroman to the Female Bildungsroman, in which heroines, such as Emily St. Aubert undergo a kind of growth trajectory and reach maturity at the end of the novel.

So similarly, just as in the Gothic fiction, such as *Mysteries of Udolpho*, we have a kind of a Bildungsroman, which is ongoing for Catherine Morland in this particular novel. And if you go back to that previous slide, you can see how Morland is being taught by Henry Tilney. Henry Tilney becomes the educator here, in some respects for Catherine Morland and he reminds us of Mr. Knightley, the hero of *Emma*, the person that Emma marries at the end of the novel. So that similarity is there. A female being educated by an ideal male. So that is something we need to keep in mind here, which kind of sets this novel apart in this kind of study of Gothic novels.

The other point that has been raised here is that Catherine Morland seems to be kind of educated out of the sentimental Gothic tradition that she has completely kind of rejected that Gothic tradition at the end of the novel. That is something which is debatable if you read the novel very, very carefully. And Catherine also undergoes a kind of a growing up process and by the end of it, of course, she can think independently, despite her initial naiveté and her impressionable nature, which just kind of takes and believes in whatever appears to her in polite society. So at the end of the day, she becomes a thinking woman's heroine, because of her strength of character and courage.

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## Catherine and the Gothic Novel



"Catherine reads lurid Gothic thrillers, such as novels by Ann Radcliffe and M. G. Lewis. Of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, she says, "Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it! I assure you, if it had not been to meet you [her friend Isabella Thorpe], I would not have come away from it for all the world" (23). Her desire never to leave the text places Catherine at risk; she begins to script her life and her interactions with people as though she were living in a Gothic novel, instead of in reality."

Source: Miller 2010, my emphasis. Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9ubwD0Cg>



Now, Catherine does read a lot of lurid Gothic thrillers, such as novels by Ann Radcliffe and M. G. Lewis, Matthew Gregory Lewis. Of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, she says, "Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it! I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, that's her friend, Isabella Thorpe, I would not have come away from it for all the world." Her desire never to leave the text places Catherine at risk; she begins to script her life and her interactions with people as though she were living in a Gothic novel, instead of in reality.

So you can see two aspects in this set of ideas, one is these Gothic novels are immensely gripping. It is difficult to kind of put these books away even to socialize, but of course, Catherine Morland makes an exception for her friend, Isabella Thorpe. And the second is that because of her immersed experiences, immersed experiences in such novels, she kind of sees the world around her through those lenses, the settings, the characters, the plots of Gothic fiction.

And therefore she is kind of scripting her experiences as if she were living in a fictional world, as if she is a heroine, who is kind of navigating the traps set for her by Gothic villains. So the reality takes a backseat and fictionality kind of comes to the fore and that has detrimental effects up to a point for Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*.

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## Gothic Imagination



"Catherine, her Gothic imagination is given full rein in the environment of Northanger Abbey. One of the most memorable and well-crafted scenes in the novel involves many of the most familiar tropes of late eighteenth-century Gothic: a dark and stormy night, a sealed chest, and a very excited and impressionable heroine. When the morning dawns and readers find Catherine let down by the 'secret' of the sealed chest, which contains little more than a laundry bill, Austen clearly illustrates the humorous dangers of an excess of Gothic imagination."

(Source: Miller 2010)

Image Source: <https://northangerlibrary.wordpress.com/northanger-abbey/catherine-morland-gothic-heroine-or-naive-romantic/>



Let us talk about Gothic imagination. Catherine, her Gothic imagination is given full rein in the environment of Northanger Abbey. One of the most memorable and well-crafted scenes in the novel involves many of the most familiar tropes of the late eighteenth-century Gothic: a dark and stormy night, a sealed chest, a very excited and impressionable heroine. When the morning dawns and readers find Catherine led down by the secret of the sealed chest, which contains little more than a laundry bill, Austen clearly illustrates the humorous dangers of an excess of Gothic imagination.

So you can see how Austen kind of harnesses, exploits the Gothic attributes, such as a dark and stormy night. We do have storms, if you remember the previous lectures, about Frankenstein, the storms have massive significance in relation to the idea of the Gothic. There is a sealed chest and of course, there is this very excited and curious heroine who wants to kind of know, get to the depths of the mystery in Northanger Abbey. When you get hold, when she hold of a piece of paper, she thinks it might contain something horrible about the past of Northanger Abbey, but she realizes that it is just nothing more than a laundry bill.

So when she reads that she is kind of disappointed and through that moment in the novel, Austen kind of illustrates, the excesses of the Gothic imagination on the part of Catherine Morland and even for the readers perhaps, because and some readers reading the novel for the first time would

have anticipated some dark secrets to come to the surface, when Catherine lands on that piece of parchment and it is just a bill.

So you can see how Austen takes Catherine Morland to task for her excessive imagination and excessive imagination is a central trope of Gothic fiction. You can see how, Emily St. Aubert also does possess kind of a wild imagination at certain moments and all these kind of ideas about letting one's imagination run riot is an attribute and that is what is kind of driving these Gothic plots as well. If there is not a kind of such an imagination, then the narrative energy will also be lost. So what Austen does is she kind of picks up on that, gives energy to the narrative and then kind of, kind of busts the expectation of the readers.



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## True Danger

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happiness are present in the text, too, especially when she concocts a Gothic explanation for the death of Mrs. Tilney. After Henry Tilney chastises Catherine for believing that General Tilney may be akin to a Radcliffe-ian villain, the narrator tells us of Catherine's state:

(Source: Miller 2010)

Image source: <http://www.jimandellen.org/austen/gothicna.html>



Yet there are true dangers to the happiness of Catherine in this novel too. Especially when she concocts a Gothic explanation for the death of Mrs. Tilney. If you remember the novel, General Tilney wife is dead and therefore, Catherine kind of imagines that she could have died due to some kind of role on the part of General Tilney. So Tilney's son Henry Tilney gets to know about the thoughts of Catherine Morland and he chastises, scolds Catherine, tells her off of believing that General Tilney maybe akin to a Radcliffe-ian villain, and the narrator tells us of Catherine's state.

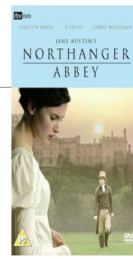
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## Catherine's Romance and Gothic

"The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry" (159).

(Source: Miller 2010)

Image source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northanger\\_Abbey\\_\(2007\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northanger_Abbey_(2007_film))



“The visions of romance were over. And this is a quote from the novel, Catherine was completely awakened. Henry’s address shot as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies that all their several disappointments had done, than all the several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry. “

So Henry’s narrative, the brief narrative kind of shatters all the fancies of Catherine Morland, which she had been developing in her mind because of her book reading, Gothic fiction reading. And the impact of this kind of novel reading is on their romance, at least, when it comes to the relationship between Catherine and Henry Tilney and the way Catherine sees that relationship. For her everything is over because Henry is disappointed and she is humbled and she thinks that that romance is no longer there and most bitterly did she cry over that grave mistake. So Gothic has an impact on the happiness of the heroine but in a very, very different way to the other Gothic fiction that were very popular in the late 18th century.

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## Gothic and Romantic jeopardy



"Catherine has neglected to consult [her] own understanding, [her] own sense of the probable" (159) and, consequently, has allowed what she has read, rather than the evidence of her own eyes to script her vision of life. This failure to exercise reason, alongside her imagination, jeopardizes her potential romance with Henry and the fulfillment and joy such union may bring."

(Source: Miller 2010)



So "Catherine has neglected to consult her own understanding, her own sense of the probable and consequently, has allowed what she had read, rather than the evidence of her own eyes to script her vision of life. This failure to exercise reason alongside her imagination, jeopardizes her potential romance with Henry and the fulfillment and joy such union may bring."

So what is being criticized by Austen in this moment is Catherine Morland's inability to exercise reason alongside her imagination. So she had not been rational in judging her experiences at Northanger Abbey. So it is this inability to be reasonable, puts her romantic relationship with Henry Tilney into great danger. And she is worried that there could be no fulfillment and joy, because that union between them could not possibly happen.

So, you can see how Austen celebrates the utility of reason against excessive imagination, excessive imagination is condemned, excessive romantic principles are also condemned in Austen for example, if you think back to *Pride and Prejudice*, you can see how Lydia is criticized. So, excess is always kind of criticized by Austen in her works.

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## Catherine's Horror



Catherine realizes that the "horror" of her surrounding society is not that men directly murder their wives, but rather the far more commonplace truth that people marry for money and make their spouses miserable. Once she understands General Tilney's real motivations, his "social secret," she feels morally justified in pursuing a romantic relationship with Henry, despite his father's initial objections: "the General's unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving both their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment" (205).

Image source: <http://www.jimandellen.org/austen/gothicna.html>



But there is a different kind of horror in *Northanger Abbey* with relation to General Tilney, let us see what that is. Catherine realizes that the horror of her surrounding society is not that men directly murder their wives, but rather the far more commonplace truth that people marry for money and make their spouses miserable. Once she understands General Tilney's real motivations, his social secret, she feels morally justified in pursuing a romantic relationship with Henry, despite his father's initial objections. "The General's unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it by improving both their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment."

So let us take the first point that had been put forth by the critic. Here, the first point that Miller puts forth here is that there is not perhaps a Gothic horror in *Northanger Abbey*, but there is a social horror. And what is that social horror? The horror is that people marry for money and they make their spouses miserable. So this kind of nightmare is there within domesticity, and that perhaps is there in General Tilney's household too. And once she realizes that General Tilney threw her out because she was not rich enough to marry her son, his social secret became apparent and Catherine feels that she has every right to pursue a romantic relationship with Henry, despite the objections of his father.

So, when they are separated and that separation also kind of leads to a better understanding between Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney and this father figure, General Tilney had been conducive to their happiness, felicity means happiness instead of completely preventing it. So you can see how the Gothic horror gets represented as societal horror in Austen's novel.

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## Montoni-style?



"As Richard Lansdown notes, just when both the heroine and the readers have learned "to recognize and dismiss Gothic imaginings. General Tilney returns to the scene in a towering rage and throws Catherine Morland out of his house, Montoni-style-though Montoni himself is more given to locking women up than evicting them" (61-62).

(Source: Miller 2010)

Image source: <http://www.jimandellen.org/austen/gothicna.html>



“As Richard Lansdown notes, just when both the heroine and the readers have learned to recognize and dismiss Gothic imaginings, General Tilney returns to the scene in a towering rage and throws Catherine Morland out of his house. Montoni-style-though, Montoni, though Montoni himself is more given to locking up a women rather than evicting them.”

So what we see is that Catherine Morland is thrown out of Northanger Abbey when General Tilney realizes that she is not very rich, that she cannot bring a very healthy dowry to the marriage. He gets rid of her and this act of General Tilney reminds the readers of Montoni's behavior, who kind of operates on the idea of money, money becomes the driving principle for all his acts in that novel. So this kind of attitude of General Tilney makes us compare him to Montoni himself but the critic very humorously points out that Montoni had a habit of locking up women, whereas General Tilney just kicks them out. So you can see there are symbolic

comparisons between Montoni and General Tilney in the way they kind of put money before anything else.

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## Gothic tropes



"Consequently, readers see that as Austen parodies the Gothic, she remains entrenched in some of its tropes. Yet her reliance on the Gothic, even after she claims to abandon it, also indicates that reason alone cannot provide a full and adequate understanding of human contact."

(Source: Miller 2010)

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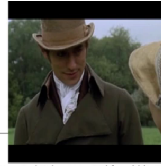


Consequently, readers see that as Austen parodies the Gothic, she remains entrenched in some of its tropes. Yet her reliance on the Gothic, even after she claims to abandon it, also indicates that reason alone cannot provide a full and adequate understanding of human contact. So what becomes apparent in *Northanger Abbey* is that even though Austen parodies it, she also kind of retains the tropes of the parody in order to kind of make her point. So the reliance on the Gothic is essential to kind of illustrate the triumph of romance in this particular novel. The reliance on the Gothic is useful to kind of exhibit the social horrors that are undercurrent in this novel.

And this kind of shows us that imagination cannot be completely rejected from this kind of fictional universe, reason alone cannot provide a full and adequate understanding of human contact. Instead, there needs to be a kind of an imaginative discourse in order to drive home the point about rationality and reasonable and proper human relationships.

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## Social Education



"For example, feelings such as those associated with as romance cannot be completely accounted for within social education; they have a more individual, imaginative component that may even conflict with social demands. Hence, although the novel concludes with Catherine's realization of social, rather than personal secrets, the text also ends with the revelation of Henry Tilney's deeply personal secret-his love for Catherine."

(Source: Miller 2010)

Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JA-tSwBDQVs>



For example, feelings such as those associated with romance cannot be completely accounted for within social education; they have a more individual, imaginative component that may even conflict with social demands. Hence, although the novel concludes with Catherine's realization of social than personal secrets, the text also ends with the revelation of Henry Tilney's deeply personal secret-his love for Catherine.

So what the critic is here arguing is that imagination cannot be completely removed from emotion such as romance, because those kind of relationships and emotions does have a more individual imaginative component, which may even kind of be in contradiction with social demands. So you can see how General Tilney has this social demand for money from Catherine Morland, which she cannot provide. All she has is her affection, her romance for his son, General Tilney's son Henry.

So what we understand from Northanger Abbey is that yes, Catherine Morland undergoes a kind of an education. She does learn to read reality through her own experiences. She does kind of use rationality to assess people at the end of the day, by the end of the novel. But romance and imagination cannot be completely removed from this kind of society because, ultimately

romance and imagination are essential to kind of assert the importance of rationality itself. And it all it is also useful to bring to the surface other secrets.

For example, Catherine realizes the deeply personal secret of Henry Tilney that he is in love with her. So, there should be a kind of realization that imagination is important and in this novel, Austen uses the imagination that she derives from a Gothic fiction. She kind of harnesses a lot of Gothic tropes in order to drive home the point that, one should not lead lives based on the plots and setting and characters of Gothic fiction.

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Rhetoric of the Gothic



"Catherine must become attuned to the social sphere, but Henry must admit the existence of feelings in opposition to that sphere. Thus, the rhetoric of the Gothic, which is allied with the world of the individual imagination, is still present at the end of Austen's text and retains an important educative function."

(Source: Miller 2010)  
Image source: <http://www.jimandellen.org/austen/gothicna.html>



So “Catherine must become attuned to the social sphere, but Henry must admit the existence of feelings in opposite to that sphere. And thus, the rhetoric of the Gothic, which is allied with the world of the individual imagination is still present at the end of Austen’s text and retains an important educative function.”

So there is an educative function, we understand that Austen educates Catherine Morland out of her obsession with Gothic novels. The readers are indirectly told not to look at the real world through Gothic eyes, and there is this sub-text as well, which is that England is not continental Europe, English Christians are not like the Catholics that one finds in continental Europe that is



represented in Gothic fiction. England's laws are better laws. So, all these concepts are educated through this novel and Catherine Morland becomes the figure through which all these ideas are communicated to the audience. So that is one thing.

The other point is that there is romance, which is kind of carried out using this discourse of Gothic by Catherine Morland. She goes to Northanger Abbey because she is fascinated by that house and that kind of introduces her further to the world of Henry, to the mind of Henry. So Gothic has its detrimental effects to Catherine Morland, but Gothic is the means by which she also kind of reaches a happiness ultimately with Henry Tilney.

So Gothic tropes cannot be completely set aside and rejected, as sometimes as some critics argue that this novel completely exorcizes the Gothic ideas from this novel. But that is not true, because and the Gothic here is also used to capture the social horrors and the domestic horrors that are present in all societies, not just in continental, but in English society. So that is the radical idea that Austen is communicating here in this novel. We do not have the kind of villains who lock up women demanding their property, but we do have father figures who kick women out of their realm because they do not have the adequate financial status to enter.

So in that regard, England is not much different from the continental villains that you can see in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. So General Tilney can be a perfect Montoni figure, but not in the ways he really kind of carries out his evil plans. But you can see the kind of oppression that he can bring into the lives of people who are under his influence. For example like his son Henry Tilney, so, and the way he kind of unceremoniously kicks out Catherine Morland, asks her to leave the house is something evil and cruel and these attributes are symbolically associating Henry Tilney with Count Montoni.

So money is the driving motive for the villains that you see in all these Gothic romances from set in continental Europe and the same factor is also kind of motivating figures such as General Tilney. He maybe a General and not a Count, but that does not make him entirely different from the other Gothic villains. So what Austen is consciously or unconsciously illustrating to us is that, despite all these facades, there is a connection between English father figures and Italian

patriarchs. So that there might be a bit of a difference in terms of the setting, in terms of perhaps the loss, but the reality, the ground reality is entirely different and it does have a lot of effect on the happiness of young women.

So Gothic tropes are fascinating because they are malleable, they can be applied, used, exploited, harnessed in different ways in all these fiction. So even a parody, even a parody which *Northanger Abbey* is considered to be, even a parody does make use of the Gothic tropes to drive home the point that patriarchs must not control the happiness of young people such as Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland and that money should not be the most important concern for these figures in arranging marriages. So these kind of education is also being carried out in this novel. So Gothic is an extremely useful mode to kind of drive home all these points about a society.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.