

Northanger Abbey
Professor Dr. Divya A. Dohss
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture 18
Gothic Reading and Mentor Figures

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Week 4: Northanger Abbey



LECTURE 4C: GOTHIC READING AND MENTOR FIGURES

IMAGE SOURCE: <https://ellenandjim.wordpress.com/2009/12/04/another-paper-on-the-gothic-in-northanger-abbey/>



Hello and welcome to week four's lectures on Northanger Abbey. In today's session, we are going to talk about the notion of Gothic Reading and Mentor Figures.

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Northanger Abbey



"Northanger Abbey anticipates a reader intimate with not only the conventions of Gothic and sentimental novels but also the fashionable periodical press, which took pains to make productive associations between novel reading and women's intellectual advancement as it began to flourish in the first decade of the nineteenth century".

(Wyett, 2015, p.262)

Image source: <https://steemit.com/literature/@rennoelle/northanger-abbey-the-gothic-in-text-and-film>



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productive associations between novel reading and women's intellectual advancement as it began to flourish in the first decade of the 19th century.”

There are two key points here, the first is that, Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*, expects a reader who is very intimate with the attributes of the Gothic genre and the sentimental novels. That is one thing. Austen knows that her readers would be very, very familiar with the tropes of the Gothic and the sentimental novel.

And secondly, there is an awareness of the periodical press. The periodical press is important because it makes very useful relations between the act of novel reading and women's intellectual progress. And this kind of association is something that was thought about in the first decade of the 19th century. So there is a kind of a relationship between novel reading and the expansion of the female mind in a positive manner.

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Women and Novel Reading



An 1806 "Extract of a Letter from a German Lady to her Friend," published in John Bell's *La Belle Assemblée: or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, claims that it is "inevitably necessary that women should read Novels, notwithstanding what has been said by professed moralists on that subject."

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An 1806 “Extract of a Letter from a German Lady to her Friend,” published in John Bell's *LaBelle Assemblée: or Court and Fashionable Magazine* claims that it is inevitably necessary, that women should read novels, notwithstanding what has been said by professed moralist on the subject. So very, very importantly we get a sense from a lady here whom I am using as an example, to kind of put forth the idea that it is important for women to read novels, regardless of what other moralist have been suggesting.

The moralist have been very, very unsympathetic to the idea of novel reading, especially for women and they believe that, novels had detrimental effect on the capacity for women to

process such reading material. Therefore, for the first time, there is a conviction on the part of women from polite society that it is essential to kind of read all these works of fiction. So novel becomes essential to a kind of a healthy frame of mind for women.

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Novel and the sparks of philosophy

The author recommends novels ability to deter women from less worthy pastimes such as "cards, scandal, and the toilet, " striking increasingly familiar notes on the ways in which novels illustrate "mild and noble sentiments . . . and even awakes in mind some sparks of philosophy."

(Wett, 2015, 262-263) | Image source: <https://www.amazon.com/Northanger-Abbey-Cultural-Jane-Austen/dp/0321202062>



Now let us talk about the idea of the novel and how it has sparked a philosophical bent of mind in women. So the same author, the German lady “recommends novels ability to deter women from less worthy pastimes, such as cards, scandal, and the toilet, striking increasingly familiar notes on the ways in which our novels illustrate mind and noble sentiments and even awakes in mind some sparks of philosophy.” So the argument is that, novel reading will take women away from worthless pursuits, such as an obsession with card playing, scandal mongering and overindulgence of the toilet.

And it was also believed that novels would put before the minds of women, an aspiration to mild and noble sentiments and it will also prompt and provoke a philosophical attitude towards our life in general. So you can see the usefulness of novel reading for women in the early 19th century and how there was an awareness that novels would be beneficial for the mind of women. So this note, this idea that we see expressed on the part of this German lady is something very, very important because it goes against the professed moralist who have been not advocating novel reading for genteel women.

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Novels and Imagination



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(Wyett, 2015, 262-263)



“Perhaps most significantly, the letter emphasizes how novels give an elevated zest to the imagination, thus encouraging the sort of absorbed, imaginative reading that had hitherto been characterized as so damaging to women.” So what we understand from this kind of attitude that we saw on that letter written by the German lady is that, for the first time imagination is appreciated because novel reading would inevitably mean prompting the imaginative capacities of women. And if novel reading is encouraged, then indirectly there is this advice that yes, imaginative reading is something that is welcome for women.

So there is a turnaround to this relationship between novels and the idea of women reading them. So previously it was condemned because the imagination that kind of was provoked by reading these novels were detrimental to women, but now that same imagination is considered as being useful because it would kind of increase noble sentiments in women's minds. It would kind of make them more philosophical and more sophisticated. So you can see how views are changing at the turn of the century.

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Catherine Morland's Reading



“Catherine Morland is often cited as a too-susceptible reader of Gothic fictions whose lackluster reading abilities must be reformed by the mature reader, Henry Tilney”.

(Wyett, 2015, 267)



Now let us talk about Catherine Morland's reading. “Catherine Morland is often cited as a too-susceptible reader of Gothic fictions whose lacklustre reading abilities must be reformed by the mature reader, Henry Tilney.” So in *Northanger Abbey*, there is this impression that we derive about Catherine Morland. That is, Catherine Morland is not a great reader, she is too susceptible, she is too still impressionable. She takes for granted. She believes in the material that she reads and therefore her reading is considered to be lacklustre, not something that is worthy of admiration.

And so, since we have this bad reader, then we need a mature reader, the perfect reader, and that reader is Henry Tilney, who must come into the picture to correct the mistakes of this young heroine.

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Impact of the Gothic



"While Henry Tilney represents an idealized reader, one familiar with a wide range of texts and genres and possessed of a superior ability to synthesize this acquired knowledge, we must also recall that he finished Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) "in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time," indicating his absorption in the text."

(Wyett, 2015, 268)

Image source: <https://austenprose.com/2008/01/18/northanger-abbey-our-hero-henry-tilney/>



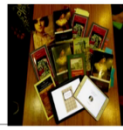
While Henry Tilney represents an idealized reader, one familiar with a wide range of texts and genres and possessed of a superior ability to synthesize this acquired knowledge, we must also recall that he finished Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in two days and he says, "my hair standing on end the whole time" indicating his absorption in the text.

So Henry Tilney is an idealized reader because he is able to make a distinction between what is reality and what is fiction. He is not impressionable as Catherine Morland had been. But he was also one of the readers who had been really taken in by the impact of novel such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. He also kind of admits to Catherine Morland that he read this novel in two days, which means he had not been able to put this novel down and he was really affected by the dramatic twists and turns in and the novel.

So his absorption is interesting because he admits that even men were affected by this kind of writing and the fact that he admits it to Catherine Morland also indicates that there is no hypocrisy on his part. So that is one thing. So we understand that even though he is an idealized reader, he is also affected by the nature of this genre, while Catherine Morland is not an idealized reader, she does not read the novel properly because she is kind of applying what she has read to the world around her. And therefore, she is not able to make a distinction between truth and fiction.

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Gothic reading



"Certainly Henry read quickly, but his immersion in that novel and the knowledge he boasts of "hundreds and hundreds" of others inform his ability to recognize and enjoy Gothic tropes. His playful authoring of a Gothic tale for Catherine during the carriage ride to Northanger has been interpreted as pedantic toying or an indicator of his inability to recognize Catherine's susceptibility."

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Image source: <https://jasact.wordpress.com/category/jane-austen-novels/northanger-abbey/>



"Certainly Henry read quickly, but his immersion in that novel and the knowledge he boasts of hundreds and hundreds of others inform his ability to recognize and enjoy Gothic tropes. His playful authoring of a Gothic tale for Catherine during the carriage ride to Northanger has been interpreted as pedantic toying on indicator of his inability to recognize Catherine's susceptibility." So there are several things going on in this point that had been raised by Wyett.

Firstly, Henry Tilney is widely read. He boasts of hundreds and hundreds of Gothic fiction that he had read and he is able to recognize and enjoy Gothic tropes for what they are. He is not able to kind of apply what he has read on to real life. That is one thing which is on the surface of this particular comment.

So when he also authors, he comes up with a Gothic narrative for the benefit of Catherine during the ride to Northanger, his father's house. So that narrative that he creates is interpreted as a kind of a toying, he is playing with Catherine Morland and he is kind of enjoying the fact that he is able to kind of excite her as well as care her.

The other thing that is also a hidden in this comment is that, he is unable to recognize Catherine's susceptibility, the fact that she is impressionable. But the subtext that I want to bring up here is that, while he is making up, while Henry Tilney is making up a Gothic narrative in order to have some kind of communication with Catherine Morland, it is a kind

of a very strange courtship that he is having with her by kind of conjuring this Gothic narrative.

Catherine Morland is doing something similar, she also kind of conjure the Gothic narrative in relation to Northanger Abbey. So we can see that, these two characters are similar in that respect whereas Catherine takes it to the extreme and Henry Tilney stops while he could and in a very brief manner. So, there are parallels, in fact there are, you can even go so far as to say that Catherine and Henry are mirroring one another.

In this respect, the ability to conjure Gothic narratives for the benefit of the other, but in Catherine's case, she kind of really believes that this General Tilney had done something evil to his wife.

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Henry's gothic script



"But Catherine's absorption is precisely what goads Henry to continue "writing" in this scene. Her joy stems from her willingness to suspend disbelief, exemplified by her response: "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful!—This is just like a book!—But it cannot really happen to me."

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So this is the reaction that Catherine had to that a brief narrative of Henry Tilney that he writes to kind of pass the time and he kind of narrates to Catherine on the ride to Northanger Abbey. So he enjoys the fact that he is getting an excited reaction from Catherine Morland, and you can see how she is taken in by that narrative. And she says that, Oh, this is just like a book, but it cannot really happen to me. I do not think it will affect me, but strangely she kind of takes this narrative further when she stays in Northanger Abbey. So you can see how

Henry Tilney is crucial to continuing Catherine Morland's faith, beliefs and gullibility in this kind of Gothic narratives.

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Bad reading and Mentors



"On the basis of such guileless enthusiasm, many have deemed Catherine Morland a "bad reader," some letting that simple description stand and others qualifying it by determining what a bad reader is and what sort of reform needs to take place to make her a good reader. I contend that by providing Catherine Morland with no entirely adequate mentors—Henry is too smugly satirical, her parents are too provincial, Mrs. Allen is too concerned with muslin—Austen positions Catherine's quixotism as the only means by which she comes to know and understand her social world and the motives of those within it."

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“On the basis of such guileless enthusiasm, many have deemed Catherine Morland a bad reader. Some letting that simple description stand and others qualifying it by determining what a bad reader is and what sort of reform needs to take place to make her a good reader. I contend that by providing Catherine Morland with no entirely adequate mentors, Henry is still smugly satirical, her parents are too provincial. Mrs. Allen is too concerned with muslin, Austen positions, Catherine's quixotism as the only means by which she comes to know and understand her social world and the motives of the within it.”

So the guileless enthusiasm is a Gothic trope. You can see many Gothic heroines being simultaneously excited and worried by the strange things that happen around them, to them, and Catherine Morland seems to act like one such Gothic heroine. However, there was this argument that she is a bad reader because she reads all the cues, social cues wrongly during her time at Northanger Abbey and since she is a bad reader, she needs to be reformed and there is a lot of criticism as to how the reformation is to take place and how Henry Tilney is changing her from a bad reader to a good reader.

But we also should realize something that, Catherine Morland, according to why it has no adequate mentors, no guardian figures who can guide her, Henry is satirical, he is very smug, condescending, and he is not really very helpful as you can see. In fact, he also comes up with a Gothic narrative, which he knows will affect her, perhaps and it does affect her

because Catherine sees her interiors, the interiors in her room and through the lens of Henry Tilney's Gothic narrative.

So you can see the effect that Henry has on Catherine Morland. So he is not an ideal mentor. Her parents are very provincial. They do not have any experience of the urban. Mrs. Allen is too concerned with fine material, cloth and Austen positions, Catherine in such a way that we understand that Catherine has to learn the way around the society, by kind of making mistakes and kind of recovering from them. That is the only way she can learn maturity and experience of the world. So, the Gothic is the way in which she finds her way.

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