

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*
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Please read in preparation for our discussion. Meanings of words and knowledge of historic events as well as social rules were very different and are unknown to most people today.

Semantics:

As you all know, every word in Austen is significant. Some have vastly different meanings now than they did during her lifetime. (An annotated edition, or one with explanatory notes, is best to read).

nice: Ch. 14—as Dr. Johnson defines it in his *Dictionary*: precise, “accurate in judgment to a minute exactness.” Henry Tilney corrects Catherine’s misuse/slang use of “nice” during Catherine, his sister Eleanor, and his stroll on Beechen Cliff above the resort city Bath:

picturesque: a specific term in travel and landscape design. William Gilpin, whom Austen read, wrote popular books on the subject: *On Picturesque Beauty*; *On Picturesque Travel*; and *On Sketching Landscape: with a Poem, on Landscape Painting*.

“Picturesque” scenery is beautiful but very rough and wild, even terrifying; the Alps, for example. Some British travel writers and landscape designers borrowed the concept from 17th century Italian landscape paintings by Salvator Rosa, Claude le Lorrain, and Nicholas Poussin, mainly. Some travel writers—Gilpin, most famously—taught tourists to judge a landscape according to how rugged and irregular it was.

Picturesque scenery in the extreme was the setting for Gothic romances—remote, mountainous places in northern Italy, for example.

However, by the time Jane Austen wrote and later edited to some extent *Northanger Abbey*, the picturesque as a standard for judging English landscapes was out of fashion in Britain. It was replaced by appreciation of the “Englishness” of scenery.

verdure: what Catherine admires from the parlor windows at Henry’s parsonage Woodston; she is more interested in looking out than admiring the room—the “verdure” is what captivates her, “though only over green pastures” (but why “only”?).

Catherine’s color is green, the color of verdure, so she herself is implicitly associated with nature, new life—fertility. Even Catherine’s hat is green. As a child she loved “rolling down the green slope” behind the rectory.

complaisance, Ch. 4—civility, showing a wish to please others

amiable: ch. 1 —not only pleasing manners but also how Mr. Knightley defines it to Emma Woodhouse: consideration for others’ feelings and situations. Amiable in this sense is what Frank Churchill is not, nor are the Thorpes....

quizzing, Ch. 8: to “quiz” someone is to look at them in a way that embarrasses them; to make fun of a person by giving them odd looks or just staring rudely. John Thorpe is guilty of it.

History that Austen's contemporaries knew—and lived. Two examples:

In her novels the history of estates implies something significant about their current owners. Even now, many great British estates are former Catholic monasteries and convents, which Henry VIII “dissolved” when he broke with the Pope so he, Henry, could divorce (and behead some of) his wives. Northanger Abbey is one such place.

The “something horrid” Catherine alludes to as about to become publicly known is only another Gothic novel, and Henry has to explain to Eleanor that Catherine is not alluding to any real political crisis because there were riots from time to time all over England.

When Henry Tilney lectures Catherine after catching her in his dead mother's bedroom, he mentions how “every neighborhood” has “voluntary spies.” Britain did—it was for years under threat of a French invasion. He also says that because “we are English” we do not let husbands lock up and murder their wives. (But they did.)

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To read and consider before we meet to discuss them: As you read or re-read *Northanger Abbey*, pay special attention to the first chapter.

I. How is Catherine Morland defined?

First, the narrator implies that she is *not* like the heroine of the Gothic romances that she loves to read and fantasize about. A Gothic heroine always has to be rescued from a villain; she is passive. The narrator tells us that had we seen Catherine in childhood, we would not have expected that she “was born to be an heroine” [of a Gothic romance].

Later, we discover that Gothic romances—“horrid” meaning horrifying—are nearly the only books Catherine reads for pleasure—NOT the “real solemn history,” which she dislikes, as she tells Henry and Eleanor. What exactly does she dislike about history books? Is she justified at least partly in not liking them?

Later, over the course of the novel, Austen defines Catherine by who she truly *is*. Note every part of this description because it affects our understanding of the rest of the novel.

II. On another plane, Northanger Abbey is a novel about long fiction itself—the romance, the novel. The British novel was increasingly based on real people in realistic contemporary situations. Austen was a major creator of realism in the novel. Gothic tales were called “romances,” and “romance” did not mean what it means to us. It meant that they were *not* based in reality. Ann Radcliffe's Gothic stories were “romances.”

We need to know what she is making fun of and why: Gothic romances? Maybe not. Or only people who confuse Gothic romance characters and situations with real life?

The Austen family, Jane included, read and enjoyed them, much as some of us today enjoy page-turner mysteries.

III. Dancing is courtship thinly disguised. What does the banter between Henry and Catherine as they dance for the first time tell us about each of them?

IV. Houses and estates and tourist destinations—what the owner values about them and does to them both say a lot about him.

What changes has the General made to Northanger Abbey, the building? How does Henry Tilney's new parsonage at Woodston contrast with it?

Beechen Cliff: Why do Henry and Eleanor "reject" the view from it? What exactly does Catherine admire about the view? Beechen Cliff lies south of Bath, an ancient inland spa city developed by the Romans. It is the summit of a steep hillside covered with trees. Today it is part of Alexandra Park.

V. **The comedy and the near-tragedy:** What in this novel did you find amusing? [read a bit re Mrs. Allen; John Thorpe; Isabella chasing stranger men...]. Serious?

VI. **Characters:** As we all know, Austen creates characters whose speech and behavior, even their clothes, contrast with one another.

(1) How does Catherine's innate common sense and her parents' upbringing affect her growing unease with Isabella Thorpe and her brother John?

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(2) How is Catherine, despite her minimal book-learning, more perceptive about people than her brother James, a student of theology at Oxford University?

(3) When Catherine is taken to visit Woodston, Henry's new rectory or parsonage and its grounds (the farm and the cultivated area around the house), what does she pay most attention to?

How does his scene connect with our very first impression of her as a girl—the first two pages of the novel? With her response to the view from Beechen Cliff? Ch. 14 of Vol. 1

(4) How does Mrs. Allen differ in character and interests from Catherine? Note how Henry, despite being a Church of England minister, makes fun of Mrs. Allen. Is Henry a perfect hero for this comic courtship novel?

(5) How is Catherine different from Eleanor Tilney?

(6) What attitudes towards society and social conventions do Catherine and Henry share?

(7) How does Catherine differ from Isabella? From what or whom does Isabella get her notions about men?

(8) How does Henry differ from John Thorpe? From Henry's own brother Captain Frederick Tilney (who as older son will inherit Northanger Abbey estate)?

(9) How does General Tilney differ from Catherine's father, a Church of England rector, and Mrs. Morland in what they value and how they treat their grown children?

(10) After Henry and Catherine are engaged, what does Catherine conclude about her first impressions of the General? Was she so wrong about him, after all?