

Preliminary note: In “Northanger”, the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* puts the stress on the second syllable; Wikipedia says it’s on the first. Pick your trusted source...

THE CONTEXT

Austen born 1775. An impoverished branch of a family of merchants; her father an Anglican minister and former Oxford student: an educated middle-class family of moderate if not limited means.

First draft of the novel written 1798-99, revised 1803, 1809, 1816 (no one knows exactly to what extent). Published posthumously by her brother, who wrote the Biographical notice at the beginning — NB: the latter is not actually part of the novel, despite its position *after* the title page (p. 1) in our edition, and we shan’t study it.

Regency England c. 1795 (officially 1811) to 1820: often presented as an era of refinement and culture, but also of pleasure and frivolity (for the elite at least). The fashionable spa of Bath with its hot springs, Georgian architecture, and social life is one of the archetypal images associated with it (see p. 249 n. 2 & 4 e.g.).

The First Industrial Revolution (the textile industry) saw the rise of the bourgeoisie and an increased importance of the landed gentry (as opposed to the aristocracy or even the nobility). Social stratification / financial stratification: somebody’s position in the social hierarchy (and thus marital eligibility) was no longer so immediately apparent.

Among the working class, social unrest, even riots — not only the Luddites — foreshadowed in a way the 19th c. Many feared a contagion from Revolutionary France (and the US independence) seen as a threat to the kingdom, Christianity, etc.

LITERARY PRECEDENTS: THE SENTIMENTAL NOVEL

Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768); or in France Rousseau for example: the genre of the sentimental novel is closely associated with the rise of the modern novel. The marriage plot was both a narrative *topos* and way to engage the reader’s emotions (see below).

The novel was essentially aimed at a female public, with a didactic function: the novel of conduct. Virtue rewarded (moral education) but also a model for social relations and love (sentimental education). Also the birth of the Bildungsroman: the evolution of the protagonist into an adult man and especially woman.

This can also be subverted: already with Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724), then Fielding’s burlesque *Shamela* (1741), or *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782)... not to mention John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* or Sade. Either playful or satirical parody or a deliberate counter-model, libertine or proto-feminist.

LITERARY PRECEDENTS: THE GOTHIC NOVEL

A type of sentimental novel in a way, but the emotion targeted is terror. Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is generally considered the first example. A huge commercial success at the end of the century with

especially Anne Radcliffe — *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Italian*, etc. — but also many other writers: in this specific genre, the authors as well as the intended readers were mostly women. Those novels were often seen — at the time but even more so during the 19th and 20th c. — as popular, low-quality potboilers, the pulp fiction of the day, not worthy of serious readers. See Maurice Lévy, *Le Roman "gothique" anglais* (1995) — available in the school library.

The term “Gothic” stems (mainly) from the archetypal settings: mediaeval or Renaissance castles and convents, preferably in Italy or Spain. The titular Abbey in *NA* is enough to evoke the genre, and Catherine’s fantasies about hidden manuscripts, haunted rooms, and murdered wives are *topoi* of it. Typical plot: the villain, an evil / amoral old man, tries everything to marry the heroine, an innocent, beautiful young ingénue, either because he’s after her money, out of lecherous desire, or for the mere pleasure of being evil. Catherine may be reminiscent of a Gothic heroine, as Gen. Tilney and John Thorpe are to some extent of Gothic villains.

THE MARRIAGE PLOT

NA ends with Catherine and Henry’s marriage as well as Eleanor’s, with Captain Tilney and John Thorpe having been her suitors to various extents, and Isabella’s broken-off engagement being part of the plot.

Centering a novel around a couple of lovers, their courtship, and the final overcoming of the obstacles to it appears as a recurrent, even characteristic feature of Austen’s novels; but she was not the only one: it is a major characteristic of many if not most novels in the 18th (Richardson *et al.*: see above) and part of the 19th (*Jane Eyre*, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, etc.) centuries, leading to the phrase “the marriage plot” as a scholarly concept.

A literary *topos*: obviously and by definition an essential part of romantic novels (or modern rom-com films), including Gothic novels, and a powerful tool for having an emotional impact on readers — whether in the most “literary”, artistic, highbrow way or in the most formulaic, trite, tear-jerking one.

But it’s also linked to a social and historical phenomenon: the profound transformations of the British society of the time (the growing role played by the commoners and the middle class, and loss of influence of the aristocracy, in an industrial, capitalist economy and a parliamentary system) meant that marrying well — with all that an advantageous match could bring in terms of financial comfort and social status — was more and more crucial. It could be for example a path to social ascension (marrying into the nobility, e.g.), a means to salvage a ruined name and estate thanks to new capital, or a way to consolidate a flourishing business. The literary trope can be seen as reflecting a social question.

There is also a gender issue — which might arguably be connected with the number of female writers who used it (and still do: see today’s “chick lit”). Not only were women subjected to male domination, but they now more widely found themselves in the role of a financial asset to be sold to the best buyer. Also, marrying was the only way to gain some kind of independence (financial at least) and find some social status. What else can Catherine Morland do with her life anyway, let alone if she hopes to escape the mundane provincial life she seems destined for? In that light, marrying Henry may be seen not so much as finding an ideal husband but as securing the least of several evils... This may have a strong bearing on how one judges the character of Henry Tilney. (See Austen’s own love life — or what we know of it?).

Critical questions & issues

What is the exact link between the two parts of the novel (the Bath section, the Abbey section)? Are they both parodies / burlesques of a literary genre? if so, is it in the same way and to the same extent? is there a satirical dimension to it?

Who or what exactly is the butt of the irony (or the satire)? Who or what are the narrator on the one hand, Austen on the other hand, making fun of, and to say what? What's Austen's discourse / message / opinion on Gothic novels? on novels in general? on her heroine? How can one assess the overall tone of the book: in the end, is it light-hearted or serious?

How should one judge the different characters: Catherine (how risible is her naïveté)? Isabella (how indefensible is she)? Henry Tilney (is he such a positive character)? General Tilney (how bad is he: some critics even call him evil and talk of a "gratuitous act of cruelty")? How is the reader's judgement about each of them brought about?

Should *NA* be called an 18th- or a 19th-century novel, the product of the Age of Enlightenment or an early Romantic work? Is it more about sense or about sensibility? Consequently, what would be its ideological (literary, moral and political) stance?

BOOKS V. REALITY: QUIXOTISM & BOVARYSME

If, as many readers and critics have said, *NA* is above all a novel about novels, and if Catherine's main feature is that she sees the world in terms of novelistic plot and archetypes (or clichés), then it's difficult not to see a parallel with the earlier *Don Quixote* and the later *Madame Bovary*. Quixote literally (psychotically) sees giants where there are windmills because he has read too many chivalric romances; Emma Bovary the escapist wishes life were more exciting, as in a sentimental novel. Two pathologies, one diagnosis: novels are bad for your health. A commonly held belief already in Austen's time — especially for men: it is a truth universally acknowledged that women have to find *some* way to occupy their time, since they're unfit for serious business anyway...

But can Catherine really be compared to Don Quixote or Emma (the other Emma)? Does it really apply to the first part (the Bath part) of the novel? The title of *NA* puts the emphasis on the second part, but Book I can't be overlooked entirely. It is rather the narrator's voice that puts this theme forward from the very beginning.

The question of reality also applies to the novel: it is often said to be what makes the difference between a romance and a novel, the latter inherently comprising a degree of (nascent) realism which the earlier form didn't have.

The traditional exotic setting of Gothic novels: long ago in a country far away, preferably a Catholic one. This is to be contrasted with Henry's appeal to modern English common sense.

READING & DECIPHERING

Not only do the protagonists read novels, but society is presented as a series of semiotic systems.

Catherine reads the world through the prism or the grid of Gothic novels: it is not so much that she's confused about the difference between books and reality, but that she applies an inappropriate code to what she experiences. It is the setting of the abbey that leads her to it, not necessarily a general disposition, though. There are signs, but she misreads them. The codes applicable to literature and to reality are not the same, which the opening lines about "being an heroine" ironically point out. More generally, as Henry remarks on several occasions, she is inexperienced (or simply bad?) at reading people, their characters and their motivations.

Other aspects can be seen as systems of signs to be deciphered or interpreted: Mrs Allen's obsession with fabrics shows how dress encodes one's social rank; what one drives (a curricule or a gig, for example) reveals one's financial situation; so does one's address — as read in the Pump Room book, perhaps —, and the map of Bath becomes a sort of code; social interactions (including flirting) also follow a code; so do balls and dances,

and the general organisation of the time: the week in Bath (balls, theatre plays, etc. depending on the day of the week), the day at Northanger. This actually points to a highly codified society, which is also a way to establish, maintain, and highlight the social hierarchy.

It might be worth mentioning that in the 18th century, many thinkers discussed the notion of educated taste and the relationship between sensitivity, imagination, and judgement. According to Burke, for example (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757), sensitivity is the most important, imagination second, and judgement can sometimes numb the natural feelings.

AMBITION & MEDIOCRITY

Back to the marriage plot: in the end, Eleanor marries an unnamed Viscount, “a man of fortune and consequence”, while Catherine marries Henry, who enjoys “an income of independence and comfort” for now and can count on “a very considerable fortune” later (pp. 232–233): social betterment, upward mobility, for both of them. The General’s initial rejection of both matches relied precisely on social and financial grounds: he insisted on his daughter’s marrying into the nobility, and didn’t accept a *mésalliance* for his son — which could seem contradictory or hypocritical... On the other hand, the Morlands, even though they are of much more modest means (especially with so many children), have no particular ambition either for themselves or for their daughter: they’re happy with their place in society. It is worth noting that it is precisely because he suspects her of being after his money (being a gold-digger) that General Tilney sends Catherine home on her own (at least according to one reading). This insistence on the social hierarchy might be reflected in the military ranks of the General and Captain.

This social aspect can be connected with Catherine’s development and betterment as a person: her growing up: the Bildungsroman dimension of *NA*, her learning about society and people, her becoming less naïve. It should also be compared with the narrator’s remarks about being or not being a heroine (in the opening and closing chapters). She has relinquished her Gothic dreams and merely wishes to be happily married — even though in the end she *has* advanced socially and financially —, contrary to Isabella, who remains unmarried because she was too ambitious and greedy (or simply an incorrigible flirt?). This literary side may in turn have an ideological content, and it may be possible to read it as extolling (from the narrator, and thus probably Austen) happy mediocrity over ambition, and even perhaps as the expression of a rather strongly conservative view of society: everyone should know and keep their place in the social hierarchy. In the historical context of (first) writing — the French Revolution —, this would be highly meaningful.

Strictly personal (but insurmountable) interrogations

How is it that so many people find *NA* — and JA’s works in general — funny, and I don’t? Why can’t I see comedy but only mean, bitter, shoot-everything-that-moves sarcasm? Why can’t I manage to get over what I perceive only as provincial conservatism?

Aren’t many interpretations of and comments on this novel actually a form of shoeorning it into things that better apply to JA’s later, more mature novels? Doesn’t this lead some critics to say just about everything and anything about *NA*?

What about the *deus ex machina* at the end? Seriously?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Several websites and reading guides — of various levels and degrees of literary depth — can be found on the internet, such as the following:

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/northanger-abbey>

<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/northangerabbey/>

https://janeausten.fandom.com/wiki/Northanger_Abbey