

**Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*,
an unlikely Gothic heroine**

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1. Introduction

Jane Austen (1775-1817) the sixth child in a family of seven, was born in Steventon, Hampshire. She never travelled abroad but spent all her life in southern England. Her father, the Reverend George Austen, was a cultivated man and he encouraged Jane in her reading and writing though, as she was a girl, her schooling was limited. Her novel *Northanger Abbey*, which is probably the earliest of her completed works, was begun in 1798 and then sold to a publisher a few years later. But it was not published until 1818, a year after her death. It is difficult to know how much *Northanger Abbey* was edited or altered during this time and the short period before her death, but it was written as a parody of the popular Gothic novel of romance and terror, which was immensely popular at that time. Gothic romances were cheap, prime escape literature, written for women by women and the genre had been popular for nearly half a century. Austen mentions several famous Gothic novels in *Northanger Abbey* and probably assumed that her readers were familiar with them.

Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* when the interest in Gothic themes was at its height and even when the novel finally was published in 1818, the interest in Gothic novels was still intense. *Northanger Abbey* is very much influenced by *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, an outstanding Gothic romance which was enormously popular at the time. As Marilyn Butler has suggested, Catherine's visit to *Northanger Abbey* takes the reader with her "into the setting and plot of a Radcliffean novel of terror, mystery, and self-induced illusion" (80).

Northanger Abbey tells the story of a young girl, Catherine Morland, who after having read a number of Gothic novels, imagines that she is a Gothic heroine and most certainly

aspires to become one. As I will argue in this essay, Austen contrasts her protagonist with a passive Gothic heroine by letting her character develop and mature. That she is an unlikely Gothic heroine is shown in the very first paragraph of *Northanger Abbey*: No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother; her own person and disposition, were all equally against her (13).

There are also similarities between the Gothic romance and Austen's novel as they both hold marriage to be the final goal in a young girl's life. Still, Austen's characterization of Catherine as an active young woman suggests that freedom is in part to be attained through imagination, good spirit and humour. I will also show that Catherine wins out over the patriarchal General Tilney and thereby transgresses the boundaries of social class and gender that inhibited the heroine in a Gothic romance. But first I will discuss how *Northanger Abbey* works as a parody and then end the essay by discussing the Gothic and feminism.

2. How *Northanger Abbey* functions as a parody of the Gothic

Jane Austen was very young when she wrote *Northanger Abbey* and had probably not revised it so much. She cites several famous and popular Gothic romances in her novel, and you cannot but wonder if some of it was advanced publicity for *Northanger Abbey*.

As I have mentioned in this essay the novel is a parody of Gothic romances.

According to *Introduction to Literature and Theory*, a parody is "an imitation of another work of literature (usually with exaggeration) in order to make it seem ridiculous and/or amusing" (Bennet and Royle 267). That *Northanger Abbey* is a parody is, above all, clearly indicated in the second part of the novel when Catherine is a guest at Northanger Abbey. Marilyn Butler argues in the introduction of *Northanger Abbey* that this part of the novel is an example of

“the Gothic burlesque” (XV). When leaving Bath, Catherine believes that her Gothic adventure has begun and speaks to Henry of her delight over the ancient edifice and that it must be “just like what one reads about” (138). Here she makes an allusion to all the Gothic romances she has read. We have then Henry’s dry humour when he responds: “are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that a building such as ‘what one reads about’ may produce- Have you a stout heart? -Nerves fit for sliding panels and tapestry?” (138). Henry also mocks the gothic tradition by retelling passages from Ann Radcliff’s famous novels: “We shall not have to explore our way into a hall dimly lighted by the expiring embers of a wood fire – nor be obliged to spread our beds on the floor of a room without windows, doors or furniture” (138). Here he refers to Ann Radcliff’s *Romance of the Forest*. Catherine is well pleased with her accommodation and explores the huge room. She sees a high chest which is “standing back in a deep recess on one side of the fireplace. The sight of it made her start: and, forgetting everything else, she stood gazing on it in motionless wonder” (143). What could the chest possibly contain? Perhaps it contains a skeleton? Catherine’s imagination runs riot. She tries to raise the lid a little but a sudden knocking at the door makes her “quit her hold and the lid closed with alarming violence” (144). In this passage you can feel the horror and suspense of a Gothic novel. But instead of finding a skeleton of a poor, unfortunate person, for example Mrs Tilney, she only finds a white counterpane, neatly folded. Once again, Catherine is disappointed not to find any “Gothic excitement”.

When General Tilney walks Catherine around the abbey, she is disappointed that most of the building is quite modern and lacks the “Gothic” touch. A part of the abbey has been removed and a new modern building has been erected in its place. “How inexpressibly different in these domestic arrangements from such as she had read about – from abbeys and castles ...” (161). Here Catherine manifests her disappointment in the new, modern Northanger Abbey. Catherine wants everything of Northanger Abbey to be Gothic and much

of what she sees of the abbey is quite the opposite of a Gothic edifice. However, Catherine is convinced that General Tilney has murdered his wife or possibly keeps her alive in a secret room in the abbey. One night after having seen a glimpse of an unknown gallery of the abbey, Catherine decides to search it. Here lies the deceased Mrs Tilney's bedroom. She is convinced that she may find evidence of the General's crime. But the bedroom is situated in the modern part of the abbey and there is no evidence that an awful crime has taken place. Austen's description of the scenery at Northanger Abbey is also an allusion to Gothic novels. This is clearly indicated in the following passage which could be taken from a Gothic novel: "The night was stormy; the wind had been rising at intervals the whole afternoon; and by the time the party broke up, it blew and rained violently" (146). Catherine's imagination is gradually rising: "Catherine, as she crossed the hall, listened to the tempest with sensations of awe; and, when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time that she was really in an Abbey" (146).

That it is a parody of the gothic is clearly indicated as you have a tendency to laugh instead of shuddering. There is no real danger in Northanger Abbey and the setting is only partly Gothic. It is only Catherine's imagination that turns it into a gothic scenario. The only true gothic character is the General Tilney, a terrible patriarch, who controls his children with an iron hand. You shudder when he throws Catherine out of the abbey, with no interest in her means of getting home. But the other characters in the novel are quite ordinary people with good and bad sides, and this reinforces the parody.

3. What are the characteristics of a Gothic heroine and the characteristics of Catherine Morland, the unlikely Gothic heroine?

3.1 The Gothic heroine

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a great number of Gothic novels were produced and read by mostly women. This new literary genre was probably a reaction against the morality and rationality of the eighteenth century and was appreciated by the amount of emotion it generated, such as fear and horror. Fred Botting argues in his work *Gothic* that “Gothic signifies a writing of excess” (1). The excess is the abundance of horror and fear in the Gothic novel. The word “horrid” was used for all things that caused fear and confusion. The Gothic novels were tales of the macabre, fantastic and supernatural and the setting was mostly remote castles or haunted graveyards.

There is always a heroine in the Gothic novel, and she is subjected to terrors unimagined. She is a young, timid creature who is unable to adapt to all the horrors she is exposed to. She lacks initiative and is therefore helpless in dangerous situations to change for the better. Gothic characters such as the Gothic heroine are stereotypes, and do not show any development. They are caught in their circumstances and cannot break free. The Gothic heroines are stereotyped to such a degree as to be called stock characters. Chris Baldick defines a stock character as “a stereotyped character easily recognized by readers ... from recurrent appearances in literary ... tradition” (243).

In her novel *Clermont*, Regina Roche gives us an excellent portrait of the Gothic heroine:

She was tall and delicately made, nor was the symmetry of her features inferior to that of her bodily form. Her eyes, large and of the darkest hazel, ever true to the varying emotions of her soul, languished beneath their long

silken lashes with all the softness of sensibility and sparkled with all the fire of animation; her hair, a rich auburn, added luxuriance to her beauty, and by a natural curl, gave an expression of the greatest innocence to her face; the palest blush of health just tinted her dimpled cheek and her mouth, adorned by smiles, appeared like the half-blown rose when moistened with the dews of early morn (Sadleir, *The Northanger Novels*, 10-11).

This quotation describes very well the characteristics of the Gothic heroine as being fragile, passive, innocent and pure.

The Gothic heroine is often persecuted by a heinous, vicious and evil male individual, very often her own father, and is locked up in a remote edifice. She is caught in a trap. However, after many adventures, the Gothic heroine “manages to return with an elevated sense of identity to the solid realities of justice, morality and social order” (Botting 7). She obtains security and safety when she marries. But now she is caught in a trap of yet another kind, that of domesticity.

In *The Female Gothic* Juliann Fleenor argues that “the Gothic romance maintains that the most important relationship in a woman’s life is with a male and that her life can be reduced to a quest for romantic love. These values reduce women’s lives only to their relationship with men” (14). As far as we know, Jane Austen had no romantic attachment and economically, she was supported by her father and then by her brothers. She was their responsibility and she spent her whole life within the family. Her writing though, provided her with a small income and in this respect she was long before her time, but she was also trapped in the conventions and in the patriarchy of her time.

3.2 Catherine Morland

From the very beginning, Jane Austen portrays her heroine, Catherine, in the most ordinary terms possible. She is not the ravishing heroine of the Gothic novels but an ordinary, rather pleasing and “matter of fact” young girl, who is in Society for the first time. She is a charming young girl and extremely fond of the popular Gothic novels of the time. She has read a great deal of cheap literature strongly influenced by the predominant Gothic fashion. In her mind she is a Gothic heroine or at least, she is in training to become one: “from fifteen to seventeen she was training for a heroine, she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (15).

Catherine is a tomboy but just old enough to appreciate feminine things. When Austen describes Catherine in the beginning of the novel, she suggests that she is an unlikely gothic heroine:

She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features;-so much for her person;-and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind. She was fond of all boy’s plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird or watering a rosebush. Indeed she had no taste for a garden; and if she gathered flowers at all, it was chiefly for the pleasure of mischief-at least so it was conjectured from her always preferring those which was forbidden to take (13).

Catherine is quite an ordinary young girl and only imagines that she takes part in a Gothic novel.

In the first part of the novel, Catherine finds herself in the fashionable Bath where she is eager for adventures. She meets people who are in Bath for different reasons but mainly to find a suitable partner in life. Already after a couple of weeks in Bath, far away from her family, she is starting to mature. Her introduction to Bath society makes Catherine lose a little of her childish innocence. It is the start of a long process towards maturity. She is lively, matter of fact, and in some ways still a tomboy, gauche and direct, who cannot faint when emotions overcome her but adapts herself at once to the circumstances in which she finds herself. At one moment in Bath she is alarmed and surprised at seeing Henry accompanied by another woman: “Catherine sat erect, in the perfect use of her senses, and with cheeks only a little redder than usual” (49), thus she does not reveal any emotions, quite the opposite of a Gothic heroine. When she meets Henry Tilney, instead of fainting with pure joy she welcomes him quietly. She does find herself in some very difficult situations, not least at the hands of General Tilney, Henry’s father and fine creation of a villain. But she is always able to help her situation by practical measures. In the second part of the novel, Catherine is invited to Northanger Abbey, the medieval abbey which belongs to the Tilney family. Catherine is a guest mainly because she is thought, mistakenly, to be an heiress. Catherine is delighted over the invitation: “To receive so flattering an invitation! To have her company so warmly solicited!” (123). In spite of her confusion when the General refers to her situation as an heiress, she is determined to be pleased and to enjoy herself according to the influences she has picked up from popular books and magazines. She explores the old house with many questions in her mind. Now her Gothic adventure begins.

4. Catherine's gradual development and other characters in *Northanger Abbey* that have an influence on her development

4.1 Catherine's gradual development

The main argument for Catherine's role as an unlikely Gothic heroine is that Catherine develops and matures, and that she tackles each difficulty with aplomb, unlike the Gothic heroine who is unable to change and remains passive.

So gradually Catherine develops. When the novel begins, she is only a child, and she lives with her large family in the village at Fullerton. Catherine is good-hearted and very naïve and likes outdoor play, and her mother who has a large family, possibly leaves Catherine to her own devices. This makes her a very independent person and she learns early to rely on her own judgment, without her mother having time to check her reading. But already in Bath her education begins. She is a child when she comes to Bath but her experiences help her to develop. She has left her mother and the rest of her family is out of sight. She stays in Bath with the Allens, a simple, middle-aged couple. Mrs Allen appears to be empty-headed and is only interested in appearances. "Mrs Allen was one of that numerous class of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough to marry them" (18). Catherine's real education begins when she makes the acquaintance of Isabella and John Thorpe and is utterly deceived by them. John Thorpe is consistent but a liar; Isabella is charming but false.

She fails in her attempt to know the person who is hiding behind "the mask of their words" (Honan 138-139). She takes them at their words but their words are false. Gradually she finds out about their true personalities.

Catherine seems disappointed with Bath. In the fashionable Rooms in Bath, Catherine finds “bewildering anonymity, expressionless eyes, and alienation with ‘crowds of people’ at every moment passing in and out, up the steps and down; people whom nobody cared about, and nobody wanted to see” (Honan 139). She finds the people she meets in Bath very shallow and uninteresting and is disappointed. She is seeking a Gothic adventure but does not find it. In moving through that crowd, Catherine leaves behind her secure childhood training and takes a first step in her development. In Bath, she also meets Henry Tilney who is an agreeable and sensible young man and gradually she learns how to interpret the social language.

When Catherine is invited by General Tilney to Northanger, the novel becomes “a subtle, alarming and realistic ‘Gothic work’ itself“ (Honan 140). As we enter the Gothic inspired abbey, which is the next stage of Catherine’s education, the setting of the novel changes completely. Catherine is enthusiastic about her stay in the abbey and expects to find all the horrors she has read about in her Gothic novels. She wrongfully believes that the General has murdered his wife and explores the abbey to find some evidence of his awful crime. She finds nothing, however, and Catherine is ashamed of her feelings. She realizes that she has been grossly mistaken in her own calculation: “Astonishment and doubt first seized them; and a shortly succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame” (169). Catherine has now learnt to control her imagination by use of reason. Henry also teaches her common sense: “Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you” (173). Even though he has a great part in Catherine’s development I

believe he himself has encouraged her to express her deep interest in the gothic genre because it has amused him. But he falls in love with her at the same time.

She has made a mistake regarding the General but “no girl reaches selfhood without independent judgement and no one becomes free without risk of error” (Honan 141). She has learnt a great deal by her mistake. But even though the General is no murderer he is indeed disagreeable and bullying. After having received a misleading report from John Thorpe regarding Catherine’s future inheritance, he packs her off back to her family. He is indeed a true villain. All by herself, Catherine has to find her way back home: “She met with nothing, however, to distress or frighten her. Her youth, civil manners and liberal pay, procured her all the attention that a traveller like herself could require ...” (203). The journey home illustrates that she is perfectly capable of fending for herself and thus she is an unlikely Gothic heroine.

This incident is Gothic and for a short while we can sense horror and brutal violence lurking behind the pleasant surface of English country life. Catherine returns to her family not as an innocent young girl but as a mature young adult who is starting to learn by her mistakes. Her mother says calmly: “And it is a great comfort to find that she is not a poor helpless creature, but can shift very well for herself” (207). She has learnt first in Bath and then during her stay at Northanger Abbey, that she has to look behind the dazzling appearances to find reality and thus the truth. On her return, “Catherine remained at Fullerton to cry” (217). She is not a gothic heroine but she is entitled to cry, because she is not at once reunited with her sweetheart. But Henry follows her and by the time he reaches her to ask for her hand in marriage, she has turned into a wise, and sensible young woman. Finally, Catherine has awakened from her “Gothic dream”.

4.2 Other characters in *Northanger Abbey* that have an influence on Catherine's development

All the different characters in the novel have an influence on Catherine and they can all, in various ways, be related to the Gothic heroine. Already in Bath she meets Henry Tilney with whom she falls in love. He is a sensible young clergyman from Gloucester. He is quite sardonic in his approach and teases Catherine by calling himself "a queer, half-witted man" (23), but she feels attracted to him in spite of his strange humour: "He seemed to be about four or five and twenty, was rather tall, had a pleasant countenance, a very intelligent and lively eye, and, if not quite handsome, was very near it. His address was good, and Catherine felt herself in high luck" (23). Henry teaches Catherine common sense and "unknowingly leads her to the edge of common sense-and beyond" (Wright 110). Catherine looks up to Henry Tilney who is very much down to earth and sensible and he gradually removes her false beliefs about people and situations. He teaches her to navigate in life.

Bath is also the hunting-grounds of the Thorpe family, Isabella and John. They play the role of villains in directing the plot. They batten on Catherine, because Isabella has chosen Catherine's brother James as a likely partner. She reels him in. It is only his lack of enough money to keep her in style that makes her go hunting again. This time, the desired man is Tilney's elder brother, Frederick, who as heir to Northanger Abbey is used to being hunted, and who escapes her, leaving her with nothing. Isabella is a real life example of a young girl with little money, but with a great deal of ambition. She is aware that she has to find a man to keep her and has a terrible drive to succeed. Catherine learns a great deal from Isabella and her machinations. Isabella is an experienced huntress whereas Catherine is a total innocent. Catherine is very impressionable and is immediately drawn to Isabella: "Catherine was delighted with this extension of her Bath acquaintance, and almost forgot Mr Tilney while she

talked to Miss Thorpe. Friendship is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love” (30).

Catherine is taken up as a friend early in the novel by the Thorpe brother and sister. She is attractive to them as she has a brother coming to Bath. Isabella offers friendship to the young and inexperienced Catherine because of her brother James, who is neither married nor engaged. A very eligible match for Isabella! Isabella succeeds in her schemes and gets engaged to him. Marriage is the only security for young girls hence Isabella’s hunt for a rich husband, or anyone at all, in the end. By her hunting of suitable partners, Isabella shows that the trap of matrimony is her only hope for a good life. The hunt takes all her attention and her interest. She reveals her affinity with passive Gothic heroines by not developing out of the trap of men. There were many true-to-type young women hunting men and security in the fashionable towns, such as Bath.

So we have a young girl, quite experienced, on the hunt for a husband and another young girl, Catherine, who is hoping for marriage with love. Throughout the novel, we have evidence of Catherine’s good taste in contrast to the bold flirtations of Isabella “(...)dress, balls, flirtations, and quizzes...” (45). Gradually, Catherine discovers Isabella’s real personality: Catherine could almost have accused Isabella of being wanting in tenderness towards herself and her sorrows; so very little did they appear to dwell on her mind, and so very inadequate was the comfort she offered (81).

Isabella’s action, her chasing after men, makes Catherine develop. Finally, Isabella breaks up her engagement with Catherine’s brother James, which makes Catherine horrified: “Isabella- no wonder now I have not heard from her-Isabella has deserted my brother and is to marry your’s!” (177). John Thorpe is also a very disagreeable figure. He is a

stout young man of middling height, who, with a plain face and ungraceful form, seemed fearful of being too much like a gentleman

unless he wore the dress of a groom, and too much like a gentleman
 unless he were easy where he ought to be civil, and impudent where he
 might be allowed to be easy (42).

Catherine dislikes him almost immediately. He is dishonest and rude. When he wants Catherine to accompany him to Blaize Castle and she tells him that she is already engaged to see the Tilney brother and sister, he lies to her. When Catherine tries to make him stop the carriage he “only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on” (78). This makes Catherine angry and upset and she is gradually seeing the true characters of John and Isabella Thorpe. She is starting to see them with greater objectivity.

The Bath episode does much to introduce the question of a suitable partner for the young people gathered there. Fortunately for Catherine she meets Henry Tilney, and a mutual interest is the result. She is reassured that her host, Mr Allen, is satisfied with Henry Tilney, the latter being a clergyman and of a very respected family. Isabella finds James, Catherine’s brother to be a suitable person for matrimony and lays claim to James’s sister, Catherine. So far so good. Isabella is engaged to James, and Catherine is interested in the rather eccentric Mr Tilney.

Catherine also meets Henry Tilney’s sister Eleanor in Bath. She is a very quiet, passive and self-contained figure who plays very little role in the novel. She seems to lack any initiative but nevertheless she is a role model to Catherine. Eleanor accompanies Catherine on the journey to the Abbey and later she is the anguished messenger that her father, the General uses to get rid of Catherine. The reader is delighted to learn, at the end of the novel, that Eleanor finds a husband and moves away from the abbey and her grim father. She is unable to change her situation and gets her escape through marriage.

General Tilney is a key figure in *Northanger Abbey*, though he is present only on a few occasions. But he has enormous power, due to his position of father, landowner and

keeper of the family money, which we guess is considerable. He is a real villain but not because he has killed his wife as Catherine believes, but because he discovers Catherine's social status and hopes that he can prevent his son Henry from marrying her. Isabella has a try at luring Henry's elder brother but is doomed to fail. Catherine's innocence and lack of cunning assures her of the love and future happiness with Henry, but only after several drawbacks. And we are left feeling Austen's tongue-in-cheek humour. General Tilney as arch-villain is very much in Radcliffe's style and suggestive of horrors. His power is boundless and Catherine shrinks from any show of defiance or independence. The expulsion of the young guest Catherine from Northanger Abbey by the General is an action so remarkable that everybody is horrified, not least Catherine. Here too Catherine wins out over the patriarchal General Tilney and shows that she is no simpering heroine who faints through the cruelty of a typical villain.

5. The Gothic and feminism

As I have mentioned in this essay Gothic romances were written by women for women and offered an escape from their domestic lives. As K.K. Ruthven argues: "female gothic offers women the vicarious experience of romantic release from a threatening entrapment" (118).

Dani Cavallero has described the situation of a Gothic heroine. The quotation below describes the situation of the eighteenth century women as well as the situation of the female characters in *Northanger Abbey*:

At the time when Gothic novels were enjoying maximum popularity, the bourgeois commitment to an architectural code of comfort, privacy and control tended to go hand in hand with the advancement of a philosophy of domesticity

which pivoted on the feminization of space – the relegation of woman to the walled-in realm of the home, hypocritically dubbed as a celebration of woman’s maternal and matrimonial authority. Woman’s confinement infantilised her. Ironically, while the aristocratic, barbarian Gothic is supposed to embody women’s oppression by presenting its female characters as captives of aristocratic male persecutors, it is the bourgeois home itself that does its best to devalue women by confining them to a claustrophobic environment of supposedly civilized housing (142).

The horror of the Gothic novels is a metaphor for the entrapment of women in society and their entrapment of the patriarchy. First the women were at the mercy of their fathers and then they were at the mercy of their husbands. Society was more or less hostile to women.

There are similarities between the Gothic romance and Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* as both hold marriage to be the final goal of a young girl’s life. The women in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine, Isabella and Eleanor and not least the Gothic heroine, are all “confined” and “infantilised”. They live highly circumscribed lives. Their sole goal in life is to find a suitable husband to marry and marriage is the only way to obtain a secure life. There were no other options in the eighteenth century for a woman than to find an eligible husband, if they did not have a family who could provide for them. Catherine, unwittingly, draws Henry’s attention to her because of her innocence and lack of common sense. And she falls in love with him. Isabella, who is quite the opposite of Catherine, is a man hunter. Her actions and thoughts shed light on the situation of women. Her desperation in finding a suitable husband makes you feel sorry for her. You understand her actions when you consider that they are related to the importance of getting married. Isabella’s first “target” is Catherine’s brother, James but when she realizes that he has no great expectations, her attention goes to Captain

Tilney, Henry's brother. And of course, in the end, she loses them both. Her tragedy is that in her day there are hardly any other alternatives than finding a man to keep her.

Eleanor has some of the characteristics of a Gothic heroine. She is completely at the mercy of her bullying father, the General Tilney and she is passive, timid and seems to lack any initiative. She seems unable to change her situation in life and her escape is through marriage. In the end, she marries a suitable man from the neighbourhood and in this manner, can escape from her father. In Gothic novels the heroine is mostly a young, passive female who is imprisoned in a remote castle by an "aristocratic male persecutor". She tries to escape, but fails. In the end however, she is liberated by a suitable man and they marry. But instead of being imprisoned in the castle she is now "imprisoned" in realms of domesticity. The middle-class women were born into dependency and uncertainty. Thanks to the newly industrialized society, women were gradually trying to liberate themselves from their "domestic bondage".

The end of the eighteenth century was the time of revolutions and the Napoleonic wars. This was the time of chaos and change, and England was very much shaken politically and socially. In England, there were riots but no revolution. All these impulses and new ideas were most certainly understood by the Austen family. Jane Austen uses humour and irony to comment upon the events of her time and to describe the condition of women. When she describes her heroine, Catherine, with the following words: "her mind was about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (17), she indicates that she is a product of her time and that a young girl of seventeen should, according to conventions, be ignorant and uninformed.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) published her social critique *A Vindication of the rights of Woman* in 1792. She writes about the condition of women and the entrapment these conditions force upon them. She writes about the need of women to have an education and a profession. As a consequence of the French Revolution and the ideological questions being

discussed, she could see the possibility of women being freed of their bondage. The feminist movement in England gained many new members. It took Mary Wollstonecraft to show the traps in the position of women as inferior to men, and thus the dangers to the female human spirit.

6. Conclusion

Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* as a parody of the Gothic novel at a time when these romances were immensely popular. They were written by women for women, and the reading gave them a possibility of an escape into romance out of their circumscribed lives. The popularity of the Gothic novels came as a reaction to eighteenth century order. The eighteenth century was also a time of unrest and great change in England. The French Revolution took place only across the channel and it threatened the stability of England and had a great impact on the advance of the feminist movement. The Austen family was surely aware of these events and by using humour and irony in her presentation of her characters and incidents, Jane Austen uses the prevailing unease to present her characters without referring to the events directly. There are similarities between The Gothic romances and Jane Austen's novels as they both reflect the circumscribed lives of women, and both hold marriage to be the goal of a young woman's life.

In Gothic novels where the characters are stereotyped, the heroine is often persecuted, harassed and imprisoned in a remote castle by a frightening male. In *Northanger Abbey*, we have the terrible patriarch, General Tilney who controls the lives of his children. His daughter Eleanor's only escape from his brutality is through marriage. Isabella, another female

character is fighting desperately to find a husband and security but, in the end, is left with nothing.

The main theme of the essay is the adventures of Catherine Morland who aspires to be a Gothic heroine but who, as a matter of fact, is quite the opposite. She is an active young woman who suggests that freedom is in part to be attained through imagination, good spirit and humour. She marries Henry and her happiness is complete. In Tony Tanners words:

Catherine is of course no 'heroine' according to the stereotypes and clichés of the popular Gothic novels and romances of the day. But she is the 'heroine' of Jane Austen's novel, prey to all the anxieties, agitations, embarrassments, disappointments-and hopes and happinesses-which would 'naturally' beset a young lady entering the world (58).

Indeed, as we have seen in the whole of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is no Gothic heroine with all her weaknesses. Like all Austen's heroines, Catherine's character is very strong and independent and in spite of many misfortunes, she triumphs in the end, even though she is caught in marriage. Patriarchy has no great influence on an independent, strong willed woman who has reached maturity.

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