

# Northanger Abbey

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*For films named Northanger Abbey, see Northanger Abbey (1986 film) or Northanger Abbey (2007 TV drama).*

***Northanger Abbey*** /nôrth'ân-jur, -ang-gur/ was the first of Jane Austen's novels to be completed for publication, though she had previously made a start on *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Cassandra Austen's *Memorandum*, *Susan* (as it was first called) was written about the years 1798–1799. It was revised by Austen for the press in 1803, and sold in the same year for £10 to a London bookseller, Crosby & Co., who decided against publishing. In 1817, the bookseller was content to sell it back to the novelist's brother, Henry Austen, for the exact sum — £10 — that he had paid for it at the beginning, not knowing that the writer was by then the author of four popular novels. The novel was further revised before being brought out posthumously in late December 1817 (1818 given on the title-page), as the first two volumes of a four-volume set with *Persuasion*.

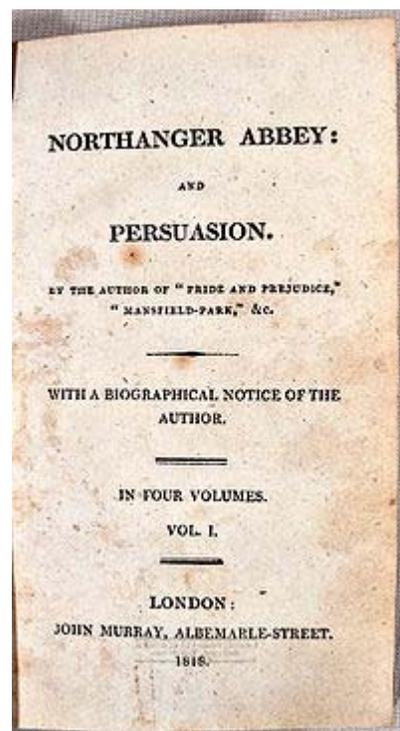
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## Plot introduction

*Northanger Abbey* follows seventeen-year-old Gothic novel aficionado Catherine Morland and family friends Mr. and Mrs. Allen as they visit Bath, England. Catherine is in Bath for the first time. There she meets her friends such as Isabella Thorpe, and goes to balls. Catherine finds herself pursued by Isabella's brother, the rather rough-mannered, slovenly John Thorpe, and by her real love interest, Henry Tilney. She also becomes friends with Eleanor Tilney, Henry's younger sister. Henry captivates her with his view on novels and his knowledge of history and the world. General Tilney (Henry and Eleanor's father) invites Catherine to visit their estate, Northanger Abbey, which, from her reading of Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, she expects to be dark, ancient and full of Gothic horrors and fantastical mystery.

### Northanger Abbey



<b>Author</b>	Jane Austen
<b>Country</b>	United Kingdom
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Publisher</b>	John Murray
<b>Publication date</b>	December 1817
<b>ISBN</b>	NA

## Plot summary

Seventeen year old Catherine Morland is one of ten children of a country clergyman. Although a tomboy in her childhood, by the age of 17 she is "in training for a heroine," and is excessively fond of reading Gothic novels of which Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* is a favourite.

Catherine is invited by her wealthier neighbours in Fullerton, the Allens, to accompany them to visit the resort town of Bath and partake in the winter season of balls, theatre and other social delights. Although initially the excitement of Bath is dampened by her lack of acquaintances, she is soon introduced to a clever young gentleman named Henry Tilney, with whom she dances and converses. Much to her disappointment, Catherine does not see Mr. Tilney again soon after their first meeting, though her attention is quickly engaged when Mrs. Allen meets Mrs. Thorpe, an old school friend of hers, whose son is also acquainted with Catherine's older brother, James. Catherine quickly becomes friends with the eldest Miss Thorpe, Isabella, a vivacious and flirtatious young woman.

Catherine's brother James and Isabella's brother John soon arrive in Bath. While Isabella and James are spending time together, Catherine becomes acquainted with John, a vain and crude young gentleman who incessantly tells fantastical stories about himself.

Mr. Tilney returns to Bath, accompanied by his younger sister, Eleanor Tilney, who is a sweet, elegant and respectable young lady. Catherine also meets their father, the imposing General Tilney.

The Thorpes are not very happy about Catherine's friendship with the Tilneys, as they (correctly as it happens) perceive Henry as a rival for Catherine's affections. Catherine tries to maintain her friendships with both the Thorpes and the Tilneys, though John Thorpe continually tries to sabotage her relationship with the Tilneys. This leads to several misunderstandings, which upset Catherine and put her in the awkward position of explaining herself to the Tilneys.

Isabella and James become engaged. Mr Morland (senior) approves the match and offers James a country parson's living worth a modest sum, which he will be able to have in two years. The couple must therefore wait that long to marry. Isabella is dissatisfied, having believed the Morlands to be quite wealthy, but she pretends to Catherine that she is merely dissatisfied that they must wait so long to be married. James departs to purchase a ring, and John accompanies him after coyly suggesting marriage to the confused Catherine. Isabella immediately begins to flirt with Captain Tilney, the older brother to Henry. Innocent Catherine cannot understand her friend's behavior; but Henry understands it all too well, as he knows his brother's character and habits. The flirtation continues even when James returns, much to James' embarrassment and distress.

The Tilneys invite Catherine to stay with them for a few weeks at their home, Northanger Abbey. Catherine, in accordance with her novel reading, expects the Abbey to be exotic and frightening. Henry teases her about this, as it turns out that Northanger Abbey is pleasant and decidedly un-Gothic. However, there is a mysterious suite of rooms that no one ever goes into: Catherine learns that they were Mrs. Tilney's, who died nine years earlier. Catherine decides that, since General Tilney does not now seem to be affected by the loss of his wife, he may have murdered her or even imprisoned her in her chamber.

Catherine persuades Eleanor to show her Mrs. Tilney's rooms, but General Tilney suddenly appears. Catherine flees, sure that she will be punished. Later, Catherine sneaks back to Mrs. Tilney's rooms, to discover that her overactive imagination has once again led her astray, as nothing is strange or distressing in the rooms at all. Unfortunately, Henry passes in the corridor and questions her as to what she is doing. On hearing her (reluctantly admitted) suspicions, Henry angrily informs her that his father loved his wife in his own way and was truly upset by her death. He goes on to criticize Catherine for entertaining such wild ideas. She leaves

crying, fearing that she has lost Henry's entire regard.

Realizing how foolish she had been, Catherine comes to understand that, though novels may be delightful, their content does not relate to everyday life. Henry does not stay angry with her but lets her get over her shameful thoughts and actions in her own time and does not mention them to her again.

Soon after this adventure, James writes to inform her that he has broken off his engagement with Isabella because of her flirtations with Captain Tilney. The Tilneys are shocked; and Catherine is terribly disappointed, realizing what a dishonest person Isabella is, though she will miss her as a friend. The General goes off to London, and Eleanor becomes less inhibited and shy away from his imposing presence. In General Tilney's absence, Catherine passes several enjoyable days with Henry and Eleanor until he returns abruptly, in a temper. Eleanor tells Catherine that the family has an engagement that prevents Catherine from staying any longer and that she must go home early the next morning, in a shocking, inhospitable move that forces Catherine to undertake the seventy-mile journey alone.

At home, Catherine is listless and unhappy. Her parents, unaware of her trials of the heart, try to bring her up to her usual spirits, with little effect. Two days after she returns home, however, Henry pays a sudden unexpected visit and explains what happened. General Tilney had believed (on the misinformation of John Thorpe) her to be exceedingly rich and therefore a proper match for Henry. In London, General Tilney ran into Thorpe again, who, angry at Catherine's refusal of his half-made proposal of marriage, said instead that she was nearly destitute. Enraged, General Tilney returned home to evict Catherine. When Henry returned to Northanger from Woodston, his father informed him of what had occurred and forbade him to think of Catherine again. When Henry argued and learned how she had been treated, he breaks with his father and tells Catherine he still wants to marry her despite his father's disapproval. Catherine is delighted.

Eventually, General Tilney acquiesces, because Eleanor has become engaged to a wealthy and titled man; and he discovers that the Morlands, while not extremely rich, are far from destitute.

## Characters

**Catherine Morland:** A 17-year-old girl who loves reading Gothic novels. Something of a tomboy in her childhood, her looks are described by the narrator as "pleasing, and, when in good looks, pretty." Catherine lacks experience and sees her life as if she were a heroine in a Gothic novel. She sees the best in people, and to begin with always seems ignorant of other people's malignant intentions. She is the devoted sister of James Morland. She is good-natured and frank and often makes insightful comments on the inconsistencies and insincerities of people around her, usually to Henry Tilney, and thus is unintentionally sarcastic and funny. She is also seen as a humble and modest character, becoming exceedingly happy when she receives the smallest compliment. Catherine's character grows throughout the novel, as she gradually becomes a real heroine, learning from her mistakes when she is exposed to the outside world in Bath. She sometimes makes the mistake of applying Gothic novels to real life situations; for example, later in the novel she begins to suspect General Tilney of having murdered his deceased wife. Catherine soon learns that Gothic novels are really just fiction and do not always correspond with reality.

**Henry Tilney:** A well-read clergyman in his mid-20s, the younger son of the wealthy Tilney family. He is Catherine's romantic interest throughout the novel, and during the course of the plot he comes to return her feelings. He is sarcastic, intuitive, and clever, given to witticisms and light flirtations (which Catherine is not always able to understand or reciprocate in kind), but he also has a sympathetic nature (he is a good brother to Eleanor), which leads him to take a liking to Catherine's naïve straightforward sincerity.

**John Thorpe:** An arrogant and extremely boastful young man who certainly appears distasteful to the likes of

Catherine. He is Isabella's brother and he has designs on Catherine Morland.

**Isabella Thorpe:** A manipulative and self-serving young woman on a quest to obtain a well-off husband; at the time, marriage was the accepted way for young women of a certain class to become "established" with a household of their own (as opposed to becoming a dependent spinster), and Isabella lacks most assets (such as wealth or family connections to bring to a marriage) that would make her a "catch" on the "marriage market". Upon her arrival in Bath she is without acquaintance, leading her to immediately form a quick friendship with Catherine Morland. Additionally, when she learns that Catherine is the sister to James Morland (whom Isabella suspects to be worth more financially than he is in reality), she goes to every length to ensure a connection between the two families.

**General Tilney:** A stern and rigid retired general with an obsessive nature, General Tilney is the sole surviving parent to his three children Frederick, Henry, and Eleanor.

**Eleanor Tilney:** Henry's sister, she plays little part in Bath, but takes on more importance in Northanger Abbey. A convenient chaperon for Catherine and Henry's times together. Obedient daughter, warm friend, sweet sister, but lonely under her father's tyranny.

**Frederick Tilney:** Henry's older brother (the presumed heir to the Northanger estate), an officer in the army who enjoys pursuing flirtations with pretty girls who are willing to offer him some encouragement (though without any ultimate serious intent on his part).

**Mr. Allen:** A kindly man, with some slight resemblance to Mr. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*.

**Mrs. Allen:** Somewhat vacuous, she sees everything in terms of her obsession with clothing and fashion, and has a tendency to utter repetitions of remarks made by others in place of original conversation.

## Major themes

- The intricacies and tedium of high society, particularly partner selection.
- The conflicts of marriage for love and marriage for property.
- Life lived as if in a Gothic novel, filled with danger and intrigue, and the obsession with all things gothic.
- The dangers of believing life is the same as fiction.
- The maturation of the young into skeptical adulthood, the loss of imagination, innocence and good faith.
- Things are not what they seem at first.
- Social criticism (comedy of manners).
- Parody of the gothic novels' "gothic and anti-gothic" attitudes.

In addition, Catherine Morland realises she is not to rely upon others, such as Isabella, who are negatively influential on her, but to be single minded and independent. It is only through bad experiences that Catherine really begins to properly mature and grow up.

## Allusions/references to other works

Several Gothic novels are mentioned in the book, including most importantly *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe. Austen also satirizes *Clermont*, a Gothic novel by Regina Maria Roche. This last is included in a list of seven somewhat obscure Gothic works, known as the 'Northanger horrid novels' as recommended by Isabella Thorpe to Catherine Morland:

“Dear creature! how much I am obliged to you; and when you have finished Udolpho, we will read The

Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you.”<sup>[1]</sup>

“Have you, indeed! How glad I am! — What are they all?”

“I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocket-book. *Castle of Wolfenbach*, *Clermont*, *Mysterious Warnings*, *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *Midnight Bell*, *Orphan of the Rhine*, and *Horrid Mysteries*. Those will last us some time.”

“Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?”

“Yes, quite sure; for a particular friend of mine, a Miss Andrews, a sweet girl, one of the sweetest creatures in the world, has read every one of them...”

Though these lurid titles were assumed by some to be Austen's own invention, later researches by Montague Summers and Michael Sadleir discovered that they did really exist.<sup>[2]</sup> There have since been various attempts to republish them (all seven in hardback by the Folio Society; *The Necromancer* and *The Midnight Bell* from a projected but abandoned series edited by Lucien Jenkins for Skoob Books Publishing and now a new series by Valancourt Books).

Jane Austen, who referred to Frances Burney d'Arbly as "the first of English novelists," in *Northanger Abbey* refers to her inspiring novels: “And what are you reading, Miss — ? 'Oh! It is only a novel!' replies the young lady, while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. 'It is only *Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda*'; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Later on, a character who knows little about literature and has just stated that the only recent novel he likes is *The Monk* (an over-the-top tale of lurid Gothic horror), the rest being "stupid," says: "...I was thinking of that other stupid book, written by that woman they make such a fuss about, she who married the French emigrant.' I suppose you mean *Camilla*? 'Yes, that's the book; such unnatural stuff!... it is the horridest nonsense you can imagine; there's nothing in the world in it but an old man's playing at see-saw and learning Latin...' This critique, the justness of which was unfortunately lost on poor Catherine, brought them to the door of Mrs. Thorpe's lodgings.”<sup>[4]</sup>

## Literary significance & criticism

*Northanger Abbey* is fundamentally a parody of Gothic fiction. Austen turns the conventions of eighteenth-century novels on their head, by making her heroine a plain and undistinguished girl from a middle-class family, allowing the heroine to fall in love with the hero before he has a serious thought of her, and exposing the heroine's romantic fears and curiosities as groundless. Austen biographer Claire Tomalin speculates that Austen may have begun this book, which is more explicitly comic than her other works and contains many literary allusions that her parents and siblings would have enjoyed, as a family entertainment—a piece of lighthearted parody to be read aloud by the fireside.<sup>[5]</sup>

*Northanger Abbey* exposes the difference between reality and fantasy and questions who can be trusted as a true companion and who might actually be a shallow, false friend. It is considered to be the most light-hearted of her novels.

## Film, TV or theatrical adaptations

- The A&E Network and the BBC released the television adaptation *Northanger Abbey* in 1986.
- An adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* with screenplay by Andrew Davies, was shown on ITV on 25 March

2007 as part of their "Jane Austen Season". This adaptation aired on PBS in the United States as part of the "Complete Jane Austen" on Masterpiece Classic in January 2008.

- "Pup Fiction" – an episode of *Wishbone* featuring the plot and characters of Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

As yet, there has not been a motion picture adaptation of the novel.

## Trivia

This novel contains one of the earliest occurrences of the word "baseball" in print (probably referring to a variant of rounders, played by Catherine Morland with other children during her tomboy days).

A passage from the novel appears as the preface of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, thus likening the naive mistakes of Austen's Catherine Morland to those of his own character Briony Tallis, who is in a similar position: both characters have very over-active imaginations, which lead to misconceptions that cause distress in the lives of people around them. Both treat their own lives like those of heroines in fantastical works of fiction, with Miss Morland likening herself to a character in a Gothic novel and young Briony Tallis writing her own melodramatic stories and plays with central characters such as "spontaneous Arabella" based on herself.

## Footnotes

- ↑ Northanger Abbey, chapter 6
- ↑ Jenkins, James D. (2005). Lathom, Francis. ed. *Italian Mysteries*. Valancourt Books. pp. i–ii. ISBN 0976604868.
- ↑ Northanger Abbey, Chapter 5
- ↑ Northanger Abbey, Chapter 7
- ↑ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 165.

## External links

- *Northanger Abbey* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/121>) at Project Gutenberg
- *Northanger Abbey* (<http://librivox.org/northanger-abbey-by-jane-austen/>) – free downloadable audio book (Librivox, US pronunciation).
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- *Northanger Abbey* from Google Books. (<http://books.google.com/books?id=0QZL2ujckpsC>) Scanned from volume published in 1890 from Harvard College Library.
- *Northanger Abbey* ([http://www.adamsmithacademy.org/etext/Jane\\_Austen/Northanger\\_Abbey\\_Chp\\_1.html/](http://www.adamsmithacademy.org/etext/Jane_Austen/Northanger_Abbey_Chp_1.html/)) free Audio-Text with Summary.
- *Northanger Abbey* (<http://www.shmoop.com/northanger-abbey/>) study guide, themes, quotes, teacher resources

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