



Northanger Abbey

Jane Austen
(1817)

PLOT AND SETTING

Seventeen-year-old Catherine Morland, who comes from the comfortable family of a village clergyman, is invited to accompany wealthy friends, Mr and Mrs Allen, to Bath for the season. This is her first trip away from home and it will prove a turning point in her life. Catherine is very fond of Gothic novels and has a constant desire to substitute illusion for reality. In Bath she meets Isabella Thorpe, a sophisticated young woman who encourages her interest in romantic fantasies and becomes engaged to her brother, James Morland. She also tries to promote a romance between Catherine and her irresponsible brother, John Thorpe, but Catherine is more attracted to a young clergyman she has met, Henry Tilney, the son of General Tilney of Northanger Abbey.

The Tilneys invite her to their home, where she imagines numerous terrible secrets surrounding the General and his house. There Catherine thinks she has found the proof that General Tilney's wife was murdered, a crime that could easily have come out of one of her Gothic stories. She is humiliated when General Tilney returns suddenly from London and orders her to leave the abbey. She returns home but Henry follows her and explains that the General, believing her to be poor, had been anxious to keep her away from his son. Once he knows the truth, the General gives his blessing to Henry's marriage to Catherine. Meanwhile, Henry Tilney's worldly brother, Captain Tilney, has had a flirt with Isabella Thorpe and caused her to break

off her engagement to James Morland. But Captain Tilney is not taken in by the pragmatic Isabella and she is left without a husband.

THE HEROINE

The heroines of sentimental and Gothic novels were virtuous, accomplished in music and drawing, very sensitive and usually indulged in exaggerated displays of emotions. In the opening pages of *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland is introduced as an **anti-heroine**: she finds her lessons annoying and prefers physical exercise, she has natural feelings and good sense. However, when she is in Northanger Abbey, she acts like a **Gothic heroine**, letting her imagination run wild and basing absurd conclusions on slight evidence. Like Marianne Dashwood (→ Text Bank 41-42) and Elizabeth Bennet (→ 4.16), she loses her illusions as the story develops and improves her power of judgement.

THEMES

The novel develops some of Jane Austen's favourite themes, that is, the initiation of a young woman into the complexities of **adult social life** and the danger of **imagination** uncontrolled by reason and judgement. Catherine's mistake is that she imposes the values of the melodramatic novels she reads on the reality which surrounds her; in this way she is less certain of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary.

Key idea

A parody of Gothic

Although the novel was drafted in 1798, it received less radical revision than later works and is therefore an example of the early phase of Jane Austen's art, when high-spirited satire was mixed with a growing sense of more

mature themes.

Northanger Abbey is a satirical work that makes fun of the Gothic novels, particularly the work of Ann Radcliffe, that were so popular in Austen's day.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 ANSWER the following questions about *Northanger Abbey*.

- 1 Who is Catherine Morland?
- 2 How does her trip to Bath change her life?
- 3 What does Catherine think she has found at Northanger Abbey?
- 4 Why does General Tilney turn her out of Northanger Abbey?
- 5 Who does Catherine marry at the end?
- 6 How is the heroine presented at the beginning of the novel?
- 7 How does she change in the course of the story?
- 8 What themes are developed in the novel?
- 9 What kind of work is *Northanger Abbey*?



The mysterious cabinet

The following text describes an exciting experience Catherine has while she is at Northanger Abbey. She has just found an ebony cabinet in her room and is exploring its secrets.

Jane Austen
Northanger Abbey
(1817)

Chapter XXI

The place in the middle alone remained now unexplored; [...] It was some time however before she could unfasten¹ the door, the same difficulty occurring in the management² of this inner lock as of the outer; but **at length** it did open; and not vain, as hitherto³, was her search; her quick eyes directly fell on a roll of paper pushed back into the further part of the cavity, apparently for concealment⁴, and her feelings at that moment were indescribable. Her heart fluttered⁵, her knees trembled, and her cheeks grew pale. She seized⁶, with an unsteady⁷ hand, the precious manuscript, for half a **glance** sufficed to ascertain⁸ written characters; and while she **acknowledged** with awful sensations this striking exemplification of what Henry had **foretold**, resolved instantly to **peruse**⁹ every line before she attempted to rest.

The dimness¹⁰ of the light her candle emitted made her turn to it with alarm; but there was no danger of its sudden extinction; it had yet some hours to burn; and that she might not have any greater difficulty in distinguishing the writing than what its ancient date might occasion, she hastily snuffed it¹¹. Alas! It was snuffed and extinguished in one. A lamp could not have expired with more **awful** effect. Catherine, for a few moments, was motionless with horror. It was done completely; not a remnant of light in the wick¹² could give hope to the rekindling breath¹³. Darkness impenetrable and immovable filled the room. A violent gust¹⁴ of wind, rising with sudden fury, added fresh horror to the moment. Catherine trembled from head to foot. In the pause which succeeded, a sound like **receding** footsteps and the closing of a distant door struck on her affrighted ear¹⁵. Human nature could support no more. A cold sweat stood on her forehead, the manuscript fell from her hand, and groping her way¹⁶ to the bed, she jumped hastily in, and sought¹⁷ some suspension of agony by creeping far underneath the clothes. To close her eyes in sleep that night, she felt must be entirely out of the question. With a curiosity so justly awakened, and feelings in every way so agitated, repose must be absolutely impossible. The storm too abroad so dreadful! She had not been used to feel alarm from wind, but now every blast seemed fraught¹⁹ with awful intelligence. The manuscript so wonderfully found, so wonderfully **accomplishing** the morning's prediction, how was it to be **accounted for**? What could it contain? To whom could it relate? By what means could it have been so long concealed? And how singularly strange that it should fall to her lot²⁰ to discover it! Till she had made herself mistress²¹ of its contents, however, she could have neither repose nor comfort; and with the sun's first rays she was determined to peruse it. But many were the tedious hours which must yet intervene. She shuddered, tossed about²² in her bed, and envied every quiet sleeper. The storm still raged, and various were the noises, more terrific even than the wind, which struck at intervals on her startled²³ ear. The very curtains of her bed seemed at one moment in motion, and at another the lock of her door was agitated, as if by the attempt²⁴ of somebody to enter. Hollow murmurs²⁵ seemed to creep along the gallery, and more than once her blood was chilled²⁶ by the sound of distant moans²⁷. Hour after hour passed away, and the wearied²⁸ Catherine had heard three proclaimed by all the clocks in the house before the tempest **subsided** or she unknowingly fell fast asleep.

- 1 unfasten. Aprire.
- 2 occurring in the management. Che si verificò nel maneggiare.
- 3 hitherto. Finora.
- 4 for concealment. Per essere nascosto.
- 5 fluttered. Batteva forte.
- 6 seized. Afferrò.
- 7 unsteady. Malferma.
- 8 half ... ascertain. Mezza occhiata fu sufficiente per constatare.
- 9 peruse. Esaminare accuratamente.
- 10 dimness. Debolezza.
- 11 hastily snuffed it. La spense in fretta.
- 12 wick. Stoppino.
- 13 to the rekindling breath. Al soffio che l'avrebbe riaccesa.
- 14 gust. Folata.
- 15 struck on her affrighted ear. Colpì il suo orecchio terrorizzato.
- 16 groping her way. Cercando di raggiungere a tentoni.
- 17 sought. Cercò.
- 18 by creeping far underneath. Scivolando ben sotto.
- 19 every blast seemed fraught. Ogni raffica sembrava carica.
- 20 it should fall to her lot. Le fosse toccato in sorte.
- 21 mistress. Padrona.
- 22 She shuddered, tossed about. Rabbriividi, si rigirò.
- 23 startled. Spaventato.
- 24 attempt. Tentativo.
- 25 Hollow murmurs. Cupi mormorii.
- 26 chilled. Raggielato.
- 27 moans. Lamenti.
- 28 wearied. Esausta.



LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|-----------------------------|
| 1 | predicted | 6 | showed recognition of |
| 2 | bringing to successful conclusion | 7 | became less violent |
| 3 | look | 8 | finally |
| 4 | going back | 9 | given reason for |
| 5 | read through with care | 10 | terrible |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ lines 1-17 again and answer the following questions.

- 1 What does Catherine find inside the cabinet?
- 2 How does she feel?
- 3 What does she resolve to do?
- 4 What happens to the candle?
- 5 What is Catherine's reaction?

3 READ the rest of the text again and say

- 1 which noises frighten Catherine;
- 2 where she looks for safety;
- 3 what she wonders about;
- 4 what prevents her from sleeping;
- 5 whether she finally falls asleep or not.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

4 FOCUS on Catherine's actions and reactions and say what they are like.

5 STATE what message Austen wants to convey in this passage.

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE

6 EXPLAIN in what sense the passage can be read as a parody of the Gothic novel.