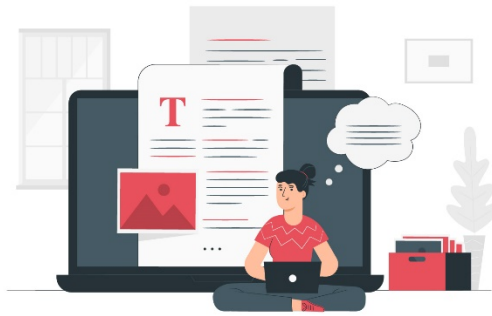


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## Intertextuality, Reading and Learning in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

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### **Abstract:**

“Nearly everything Jane Austen wrote is ridiculous from today’s perspective.”

(Carroll 169)

We might be prone to think so given the sheer number of Jane Austen revisions and adaptations in print, TV shows and movies, and the overwhelming changes the world and our society have experienced since the Regency era of early 19th century Britain. From Joseph Conrad perplexed wonder before H.G. Wells “What is there in her [Jane Austen]? What is it all about?” (Mullan) to present times, the corpus of Jane Austen has gone through crests and troughs of critical opinion. Yet, little doubt can be raised about her pioneering themes of novel writing or her smooth portrayal of upper middle class and aristocracy of regency Britain in all the comic nuances. Among many others, one common theme underlying Austen’s novels is education, reading of popular novels and letter writing, which are strongly associated with the notions of intellect, class and upward social mobility of the female characters. This paper takes up this theme in the context of *Northanger Abbey* and explores how reading of novels and the learning wielded through it play an important role in the world of the novel. Austen reinforces this theme with the aid of intertextual references which will be briefly discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Novel, Reading and Education, Defence of the Novel, Intertextual References.

We find Jane Austen feeling little anxiety of influence while writing *Northanger Abbey*. She freely draws from many novels popular at the time when she was writing. In the text, we find references to different books, novels as well as non-fiction, guidebooks, and newspapers of the time that Austen had read and must have assumed her readers to have been acquainted with. We find this intertextuality in every Austen novel but *Northanger Abbey* is different in that books occupy a pivotal role in the construction and progression of its plot. In

fact, Butler calls this novel the “most social and referential of her [Austen's] novels” (Austen xii).

There is an integral relationship between reading books and development of the characters' understanding and knowledge of the world. There are extended discussions about reading habits and preferences of the characters particularly between Catherine and Isabella, and Henry Tilney, Eleanor and Catherine. Often refinement of the characters' minds and their temperament are indicated by the kind of books they read and the attitude they adopt towards the habit of reading. Moreover, the author uses novels as tools of acquiring knowledge and education. They also serve as devices to put forward a rejoinder to the general charge of inferiority of the novels among the 18<sup>th</sup> century critics and reviewers.

From the outset of the novel, we experience a tangible assertion on reading and learning in the efforts of educating a ten-year-old “often inattentive and occasionally stupid” (Austen 16) Catherine Morland by her parents. Though the narrator criticizes her lack of interest in books of information, it is by virtue of reading books of story with little reflection that we see our protagonist transform into a relatively refined and mature person. And by the time she is seventeen, she is already acquainted with the works of Shakespeare and the 18<sup>th</sup> century stalwarts of literature like Pope, Gray and Thomson. Catherine does not read them casually; she believes them to contain important lessons for life and tries to learn from them. Her journey from a general state of naiveté to the acquisition of a wider understanding of the ways of the world is propelled as well as sometimes marred by her reading habits.

Catherine's departure from her home to the fashionable heart of Bath is significant to her development as a person as it is here that she befriends Isabella, Eleanor and Henry and meets John Thorpe — each of whom is integral to her understanding a completely new perspective of the world and its people. Isabella introduces her to the corpus of Ann Radcliffe and the gothic novels of other writers like Eliza Parsons, Regina Maria Roche, Peter Teuthold, Eleanor Sleath and Peter Will. Though Catherine already used to indulge in gothic novels, it is only after meeting Isabella that her knowledge about the titles and their authors receive a boost. It is from Isabella that she receives her first knowledge of friendship as well as betrayal. From being influenced by her dear friend in reading habits and romance, she comes to consider Isabella “ungenerous and selfish, regardless of everything but her own gratification” (Austen 94). In John Thorpe, Catherine finds a very insensitive and insincere person often trying to deceive her to have his own way. In his behaviour, she first learns the

possibility of impropriety even in gentlemen which she had not experienced before. Eleanor and Henry introduce her further to the world of books; from them, she learns about fiction, non-fiction, drawing and painting. She learns to appreciate the importance of history as well as acquires a keen eye for the beauty of landscape and nature.

An interesting contrast is found in the novel between the Thorpe and the Tilney siblings. The former can almost be called a foil to the latter. They differ so vastly that associating with and befriending the latter after being so closely associated with the former almost seems like an implicit indicator of Catherine's improvement of taste and understanding of human manners. The Beechen Cliff episode (Austen 102) which is very important to the beginning of the friendship between Catherine and the Tilney siblings almost did not happen because of the intervention and manipulation of Isabella and John Thorpe. Though John is more to blame in this regard, Isabella does not prove to be an understanding or considerate friend either. In her quest to coax Catherine into going to Blaize Castle instead of honouring the arrangement made with Eleanor Tilney, she does not hesitate to emotionally manipulate her. Even though Catherine fails to see through Isabella, a keen sense of what is right and what is not saves her from yielding to her pretentious friends' and her brother's plans.

Another contrast notable between the Thorpes and the Tilneys is their opposite attitude towards novels. Now, here I would like to state that Jane Austen makes a very explicit and conscious effort to vindicate the position of the novel and the craft of writing and reading novels, especially popular novels, in *Northanger Abbey*. In the early 19th century, the literary form called the "novel" was still a relatively recent phenomenon and it was the common object of censure among literary critics. Coleridge, for instance, notes that -

"... where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction, of the powers of the mind: it is such an utter loss to the reader, that it is not so much to be called *pastime* as *kill-time*. It is filling the mind with a little mawkish sensibility, instead of encouraging and cultivating the more noble faculties." (Coleridge 390)

Austen's narratorial voice challenges the notion of the inferiority of novels to other books of information by proclaiming the novels to be such works -

“...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.” (Austen 37)

A slighting rejoinder to this proclamation occurs in the novel shortly after in John Thorpe's response to Catherine's question about whether he has read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* -

“‘Udolpho! Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do.’

Catherine, humbled and ashamed, was going to apologize for her question, but he prevented her by saying, ‘Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since *Tom Jones*, except *the Monk*; I read that t'other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation.’” (Austen 47)

This crude response displeases Catherine who is an avid reader of gothic novels and though she is somewhat ashamed at her reading choices after John's censure of the novels, she is unable to take it in stride and forms an unfavourable opinion of John Thorpe despite Isabella's insistence on her brother's gentility.

A while later in the novel, in the Beechen Cliff excursion of Catherine with Henry and Eleanor Tilney, we encounter another position with regards to the habit of reading novels in Henry Tilney's response to Catherine. Keeping in mind probably the unfavourable attitude of John Thorpe towards novels and those who read them, Catherine wonders aloud if a gentleman like Henry Tilney reads novels.

“‘... But you never read novels, I dare say?’”

‘Why not?’

‘Because they are not clever enough for you — gentlemen read better books.’

‘The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, when I had once begun it,

I could not lay down again; — I remember finishing it in two days — my hair standing on end the whole time.” (Austen 102-103)

In Henry Tilney’s condemnation of the detractors of the novel, we find a strong ally to the position of the narrator. This succession of refutation and counter refutation between John and Henry also indicates the temperament of the two male characters where the former emerges as an embodiment of the abusive, harsh and irrational critic censured by the author-narrator while Henry suggests a refined sensibility moulded by good taste, good reason and wide reading. With his mean and dismissive attitude towards novels without even being properly acquainted with many, John Thorpe comes across as vapid and boisterous. Henry Tilney, meanwhile, provides a masculinist position to the justification of reading novels and his nature indicates that reading novels can if anything enhance the reader’s pleasure and better his sensibilities.

Catherine’s friendship with Isabella and later with Eleanor plays a principal role in her education of the wider world. While Isabella is the first one to introduce Catherine to a number of gothic novels of the time, her reading tastes are very superficial. She does not seem to take books she reads as anything more than something to pass the time while being casually entertained. Catherine’s position in this regard is quite different as we know from our earlier discussion. Her simple mindedness does not allow her to perceive Isabella’s hollow personality; all she can actually learn from her is fashion and foppery. A huge change comes in her perception of Isabella after she befriends Miss Eleanor Tilney and also grows to develop a better understanding of human nature. To supersede Isabella’s over sentimental behaviour and pretentious proclamations, we have a genteel, smart and knowledgeable young woman in Eleanor Tilney who takes kindly to Catherine and her innocent sensibility and actually tries to get to know her. There is no artificiality about her friendship with Catherine. She is capable of making Catherine realize the importance and beauty of reading history; she refers to classic 18<sup>th</sup> century histories like David Hume’s *History of England* and William Robertson’s *Scotland, The Reign of Charles V and America*. Eleanor is widely read and if not superior, she is not inferior to her brother intellectually. Though Catherine is little inspired to peruse any history books anytime soon, she humbly accepts the importance of learning to read even the difficult books for the improvement of mental faculty and knowledge.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen uses the familiarity of the characters with different books and their appreciation of the same as markers of their intellectual and social position as

well as refinement of personality. We have a deceitful John Thorpe inadvertently revealing his insincere character in front of Catherine as he tries to sound more knowledgeable than he is when he mistakes *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to have been written by some other author and not Mrs. Radcliffe. On the one hand he criticizes the gothic novels and the people who read them, and on the other he claims to harbour a mighty fondness for Mrs. Radcliffe's works. On being made aware of his mistake by Catherine, he spits out a jumbled response and pretends to have mistaken *Udolpho* for Burney's *Camilla* instead. Similarly, Eleanor and Henry Tilney's vast knowledge of novels, painting and history are indicative of their superior position, not merely financially but also intellectually and morally.

We have similar instances of Austen using references (or mis-references) to different poems and novels in *Emma* as signifiers of social, economical and intellectual position of the characters who are speaking or discussing it. We find the pompous and arrogant Mrs. Elton misquoting from Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' which is indicative of her literary insensitivity (Austen 221). In Chapter 16 of the 3rd volume of *Emma*, we again have her inappropriately misquoting from John Gay's *Fables* when she alludes to 'The Hare and Many Friends' (Austen 357). In *Emma* as well, books are used as tools of knowledge and reading the popular books of the day is indicated as being a tell-tale sign that someone wants to improve their intellectual sensibility or their position among fellow 'superior' neighbours. We have Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, people in the lower stratum of the socio-economic ladder, reading *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Children of the Abbey* and subscribing to the popular tastes of the time in a quest to better their positions intellectually. We have Emma Woodhouse judging other characters for not having read certain books. Undeniably, reading books and the physical book in itself come up repeatedly as tropes of knowledge, education, character and status.

A progression from unfamiliarity to familiarity with an extensive range of books coupled with the adoption of reading books with a positive attitude is followed by a better understanding of life, people and the society the people inhabit. At least that is what I find Austen trying to establish via the adventures of our 'heroine' Catherine. However, her improvement in character is not solely due to her reading different books. In fact, her obsession with gothic novels is what sends her in a fanciful frenzy; she almost gets on the wrong side of Henry Tilney while blindly following her whims and it takes Henry to admonish her for her to finally respond to fiction and reality separately. Though the famous mock-gothic subplot serves as a parody of gothic novels and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in

particular, in my opinion Austen also uses this parody to convey a sort of warning against giving into the fancies of romances and gothic novels.

Emphasis is put more on reading and learning, and less on superficial voracious reading of popular novels. Catherine does not just read popular novels but also learns from them and situates her acquired knowledge with the experiences she has, the people she associates with, and the social conventions she encounters. And by the time we are ready to happily close the pages of *Northanger Abbey*, we bid adieu to a Catherine – wiser, smarter and kinder – who is much different than the one we encounter in the first pages.

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