

A Character Sketch of Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

Dr. Sanjay Kumar

Principal, J.P. College of Education, Biyabani, Nalanda [Bihar]

Dr. Ashok Kumar "Priydarshi"

English, Vidya Publications, Patna, Bihar

ABSTRACT

A seventeen-year old raised in a rural parsonage with nine brothers and sisters, Catherine Morland is open, honest, and naive about the hypocritical ways of society. Her family is neither rich nor poor, and she is unaware of how much stock many people put in wealth and rank. She was a plain little girl, and her parents never expected very much from her, though she has grown more attractive as she has entered her late teens. She loves novels, but has not read many because not many new books are available in the out-of-the-way town where she was raised. She is especially obsessed by Gothic novels set in castles and abandoned abbeys, and hopes to experience some of the thrills portrayed in these novels herself. At the start of the novel, she has very little experience judging people's characters or intentions, and does not trust her own intuition. When she is taken to the holiday town of Bath by the Allens, wealthy friends of her family, and meets the Tilneys and Thorpes, she begins to learn the ways of the world. Over the course of the novel, she proves herself capable of learning from the experiences she has throughout the novel, even as she maintains her honesty, goodness, and loyalty to those whom she loves.

Keywords—Rural parsonage, hypocritical, attractive, available, obsessed, abandoned, experiences, goodness, loyalty, etc.

Introduction:

'Northanger Abbey' is a coming-of-age novel and a satire of Gothic novels written by Jane Austen. Though it was completed in 1803, it was published posthumously in 1817 with 'Persuasion'. Catherine Morland is the principal character or protagonist of this novel. To quote the quotation from the Summary of 'Northanger Abbey' by Shmoop:

"The story [of 'Northanger Abbey'] concerns Catherine Morland, the naive young protagonist, and her journey to a better understanding of herself and the world around her."¹

I. Catherine's gradual development:

The main argument for Catherine's role as an unlikely Gothic heroine is that she 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, Catherine is only a child, and she lives with her large family in the villages at Fullerton. To quote from the text of 'Northanger Abbey' to prove it.

"No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine."²

Compared to Austen's later heroines, Catherine is somewhat thin. Mudrick finds oversimplification in her character. To quote him

"She [Catherine] is too simple and too slight : normally a symbol of the author's rejection of romantic nonsense to assert the claim of personal feeling and value beyond mere function."³

To the mind of Andrew H. Wright, Jane Austen has tried to establish her [Catherine] as a goose like parody of the sentimental Gothic heroine and to advance claims for her [Catherine] as a human being who would learn good sense and learn to go beyond it. He says

“In ‘Northanger Abbey’, Jane Austen chooses a heroine who is marvellously credulous and naive but who miraculously wins our affection and even our admiration, as Harriet Smith, for instance, does not.”⁴

Catherine is kind and good-natured. She is brought up in a large family in the country and is introduced to the ways of wider society when she is invited by her neighbours Mr. and Mrs. Allen to accompany them to Bath where she meets Isabella and John Thorpe. Catherine’s 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. Catherine’s real education begins when she makes the acquaintance of Isabella and John Thorpe in Bath 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”. 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”. 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. To quote from the article ‘Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey’ by Lit charts to prove it

“The novel [‘Northanger Abbey’] follows Catherine as she grows and matures into a better understanding of people’s natures after being exposed to outside world in Bath.”⁵

The ball at the upper Rooms is a critical event in Catherine’s experience. She is forced by what happens to her there to make judgements and decision. Catherine here shows self-restraint and Henry Tilney’s good manners win her appreciation. She begins to discover the difference between attractive appearances and real value. She starts discriminating good from bad, the important from the trivial. She really progresses towards a moral maturity. She emerges as a wiser, plainer, and more loving Catherine. Thus, she does not remain a simpleton.

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 is ashamed of her feelings. She realizes that she has been grossly mistaken in her own calculation. To quote from ‘Northanger Abbey’ to prove it.

“Astonishment and doubt first seized them; and a shortly succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame.”⁶

Catherine has now learnt to control her imagination by use of reason. Henry also teaches her common sense. Once again to quote from ‘Northanger Abbey’ to prove it.

“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.”⁷

Even though Henry has a great part in Catherine’s development, it is believed that 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”. 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. To quote from ‘Northanger Abbey’ to prove it.

“She [Catherine] 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....”⁸

The journey home illustrates that she [Catherine] 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. To quote from ‘Northanger Abbey’ to prove it.

“And it is a great comfort to find that she is not a poor helpless creature, but can shift very well for herself.”⁹

She [Catherine] 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.” 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.”

II. 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”, but she feels attracted to him in spite of his strange humour. To quote from ‘Northanger Abbey’ to prove it.

“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.”¹⁰

Henry teaches Catherine common sense and “unknowingly leads her to the edge of common sense and beyond”. 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. To quote from ‘Northanger Abbey’ to prove it.

“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.”¹¹

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. 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... ." Gradually, Catherine discovers Isabella's real personality. To quote from 'Northanger Abbey' to prove it.

"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." ¹²

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. To quote from 'Northanger Abbey' to prove it.

"Isabella—no wonder now I have not heard from her—Isabella has deserted my brother and is to marry your's!" ¹³

Conclusion:

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. In Tony Tanner's words.

"Catherine is, of course, no 'heroine' according to the stereotypes and cliches 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." ¹⁴

References:

1. "Northanger Abbey Summary", Shmoop, Retrived 8 September 2017.
2. Jane Austen, 'Northanger Abbey', Penguin Classics, 1995. p. 2.
3. Marvin Mudrick, 'Jane Austen: Irony as Defence and Discovery', University of California Press, 1974. p. 53.
4. Andrew H. Wright. 'Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure', Oxford University Press, London, 1953. p. 108.
5. "Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey", Lit charts. Retrived 27 November 2013.
6. 'Northanger Abbey', p. 169.
7. 'Northanger Abbey'. p. 173.
8. 'Northanger Abbey', p. 203.
9. 'Northanger Abbey'. p. 207.
10. 'Northanger Abbey'. p. 23.
11. 'Northanger Abbey'. p. 30.
12. 'Northanger Abbey'. p. 81.
13. 'Northanger Abbey'. p. 77.
14. Tony Tanner, 'Jane Austen', Macmillan, London, 1986. p. 58.

