

The Real Antagonist in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

Northanger Abbey is so loaded with irony that its main antagonist is someone we would never suspect. This hidden adversary maneuvers Catherine Morland into a conflict. The conflict *seems* a creation of the protagonist's overactive imagination. However, the novel drops enough clues to indicate Henry Tilney willfully manipulates Catherine to produce the conflict. Finally, several hints in the novel suggest Henry also narrates it, thus sealing the novel's irony.

Northanger Abbey was Jane Austen's first full novel. She sold it to a publisher in 1803, but it did not see print until after her death (Fowler *vii*). Meanwhile, Austen focused on other works seen as romantic comedies, with marriage and social status as main themes (*viii-xii*). These topics are only minor themes in *Northanger Abbey*, which is a parody of "Gothic" novels, such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Many reviewers see Henry's father as the novel's adversary. "General Tilney, while not the sort of fiend found in the Gothics, is still quite dangerous in his way, and very far from being a good man" (*ix*).



Illustration by Charles E. Brock (1922)

Early in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland fails to see people for what they really are. She admires Isabella Thorpe's "powers" of discernment on the subjects of fashion, flirtation and "quizzes" (972).¹ Initially, Catherine does not see Isabella as a shallow flirt, though the narrator makes this obvious. Even by the second half of the novel, Catherine still has not seen through her false friend's wiles. Isabella must be "unconsciously encouraging" Captain Tilney

(1034). Catherine only suspects oddness in Isabella's manner at this point.

Catherine does not see through Isabella's "shallow artifice" until nearly the novel's end. Yet she still fails to understand Captain Tilney's motives. Henry is the one who lets Catherine believe Frederick flirted with Isabella only "for mischief's sake." However, he protects his brother by refusing to speculate further. Rather, he suggests Catherine's "mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity, and therefore not accessible to the cool reasonings of family partiality, or a desire of revenge." What possible motive for revenge Frederick might have, Henry does not say. Catherine is only "complimented out" of a deeper analysis—if that was a compliment. She only perceives Frederick is neither a complete villain nor the "agreeable" character Henry might make him out to be (1072).

At one level, Catherine must conquer her own runaway imagination, which *seems* to be the novel's adversary. From the start, the novel hints its "heroine" has a penchant for fiction. Catherine prefers "running about the country" to books, but "provided they were all story and no reflection, she had never any objection to books at all" (962). Henry does little to discourage Catherine's fancy, either by his presence or absence. Indeed, he invents two fictions (or at best, exaggerated facts) about himself for Catherine to enter in her "journal." Thus, he is either a "queer, half-witted man" or a "most extraordinary genius" (968). Although Catherine has a vivid imagination that is easily encouraged, she is neither distrustful nor senseless enough to be her own adversary.

It is hardly surprising when Henry reveals he has read more novels than Catherine has (1013). Yet, Tilney and his sister also read history. Thus, Henry seems to distinguish between fact and fiction, though Eleanor may be less sanguine, content to “take the false with the true.” Catherine, however, “cannot be interested in” history, which she sees as a “torment” (1014). With typical irony, Henry suggests Catherine’s idea of “torment” can also “instruct” (1015). Later during the same walk, Catherine declares, “something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London” (1016). Eleanor mistakes her to mean “a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George’s Fields; the



Illustration by Charles E. Brock (1922)

Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood” (1017) or some similar calamity, as Henry sardonically suggests. However, Catherine artlessly speaks only of fiction again. Eleanor assumes she is speaking of something factual. Only Henry can see both sides, which he points out with biting sarcasm while suggesting both women lack sense.

Ironically, he also spins the fiction into something far more fantastic than the original suggestion.

The real danger from Catherine’s imagination surfaces upon her invitation to Northanger Abbey. She conjures up an image of “its narrow cells and ruined chapel” and cannot “subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun” (1030). Once again, Henry’s wit and invention only promote this idea. With peculiar foresight, he concocts “an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it,” “a ponderous chest which no efforts can open,” “a violent storm,” an “old-fashioned cabinet of ebony and gold” with

a “roll of paper” in an inner compartment, and a lamp that “suddenly expires” (1039-41).

Of course, the abbey turns out to be quite ordinary, and Catherine’s room “very unlike the one which Henry had endeavoured to alarm her by the description of” (1042). Therefore, Henry was just making up stories again. Or was he? In short order, Catherine finds a “large high chest” that “seemed to resist her efforts” to open it (1043). It contains nothing important, but the weather that night is stormy: “it blew and rained violently.” Catherine starts to imagine “horrid scenes.” Yet, “Henry had certainly been only in jest in what he had told her that morning” (1044). Or had he? Catherine goes on to find an “old-

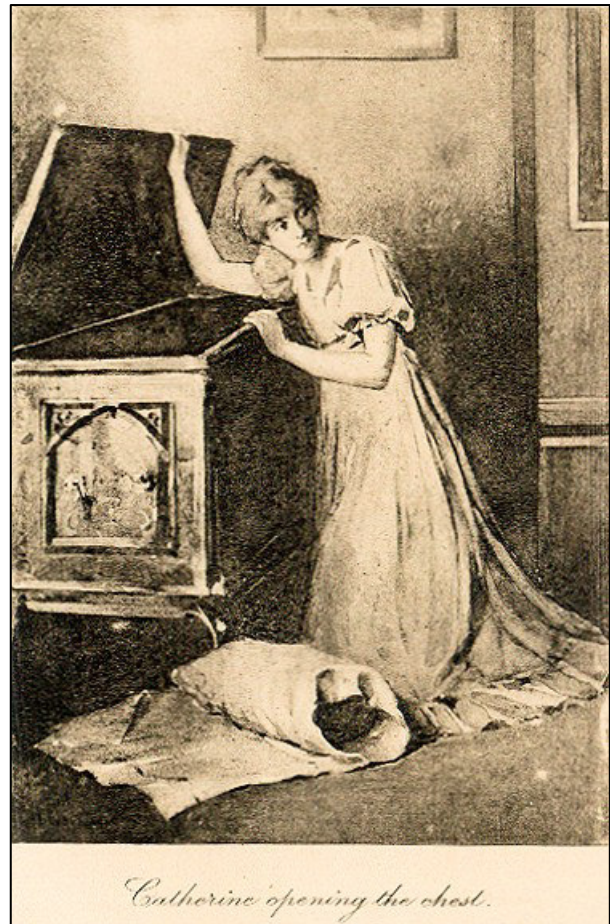


Illustration by William C. Cooke (1894)

fashioned black cabinet” of “black and yellow Japan” (1045). Its locked central drawer contains a “roll of paper.” On the verge of this discovery, however, she unwittingly snuffs out her own candle. Oddly, a “violent gust of wind” arises thereafter (1046), which might have put out the candle if Catherine had not done so.

There are three possibilities for Henry’s connection with these events he had depicted earlier. He has some sort of precognition, he deliberately sets up Catherine or the whole string of events is one huge coincidence. None of these options seems probable, and the novel does not give a definite answer. Apart from this sequence of events, there is little evidence for prophecy. Henry otherwise does not display such a gift, nor do any of Austen’s other characters. With

psychic phenomena ruled out, the storm and the candle's extinction must be due to chance. However, even if the other discoveries are coincidental, the appearance of the cabinet alone is "certainly a very remarkable coincidence" (1045).

Despite Henry's inventions or designs, Catherine's imagination is not blameless. "She had often read of such characters" as the General, and forms a notion of his "cruelty" toward his late wife (1052). She feels "secure from all possibility of wronging him" in his "air and attitude" of a Gothic villain (1055). The memorial to Mrs. Tilney on the family church pew is just more evidence. "That the General, having erected such a monument, should be able to face it" or "even enter the church" seem both strange and plausible to Catherine (1057).

The novel's possible climax (one of two, anyhow) comes when Henry surprises Catherine in Mrs. Tilney's room. She expects to find evidence of some heinous crime, but instead finds nothing (1059). Upon Henry's questioning, Catherine speaks of Mrs. Tilney "dying so suddenly," and suggests the General "perhaps had not been very fond of her." With only these scanty disclosures, Henry quickly indicts her of suspecting the General of "some negligence" or even "something still less pardonable" (1060-61).

These suspicions hit the mark, but Henry's explanations for being in the right place at the wrong time fall flat of it. They seem nearly flawless, though—perhaps *too* flawless. Henry has more excuses than he really needs, and he soon turns any suspicions back on Catherine.

Henry extracts Catherine's "confession" and she runs off, mortified, fearing that he "must despise her for ever" (1061). But instead, he pays her "rather more attention than usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he was aware of it" (1062).

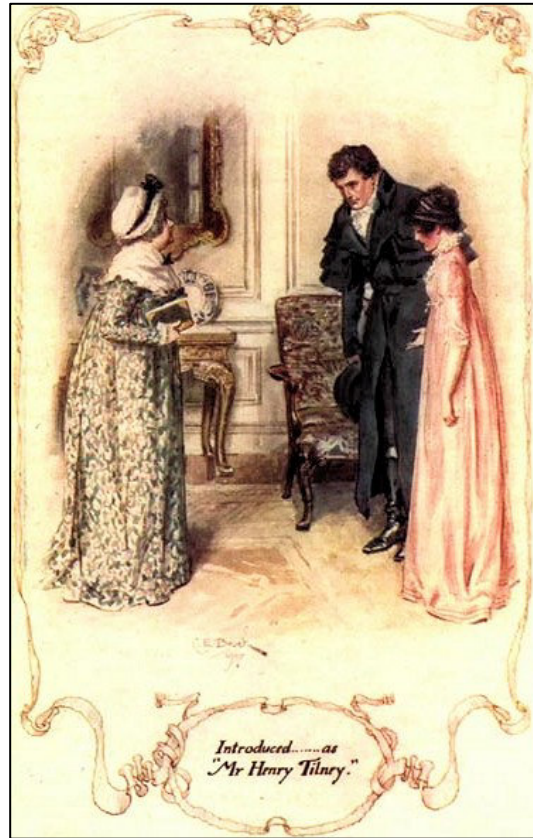
Why should he not be aware of it? Was he not just the inquisitor of Catherine's "crime" but also its instigator? For Henry Tilney does not merely encourage Catherine's fantasies of Northanger Abbey. He directly mentions "an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died

in it” and hints at even darker mysteries at Northanger (1039).

In the novel’s pithy summation, the General expels Catherine on mistaken grounds (1075). Henry then defies his father’s false prejudices against Catherine to marry her. The narrator acknowledges that Henry is “now sincerely attached” (1086). Yet, “attach” is a dubious word that can describe any number of things, such as Lucy Steele being “incapable of attaching a sensible man” in *Sense and Sensibility*.² In *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator goes on to say “that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought.” Maybe Henry wishes to toy with Catherine further. Perhaps he truly loves her or at least “her society” (1086). However, even a villain (or at least a man without much “tenderness of disposition”) can love a woman. He may do so and also be her adversary and injure her with his “temper.” Henry admits as much in his disturbing account of his father’s feelings for his mother (1061).

The General, Captain Tilney, John and Isabella Thorpe are all static, marginal characters who do not change in any important ways. Not one makes a lasting impact on Catherine. They all vex Catherine briefly, but not one is a fitting, dynamic adversary for the novel’s “heroine” as the narrator wryly calls her (961).

So who is narrating *Northanger Abbey*, anyway? Surely, Austen herself is not the sarcastic commentator. This is a work of fiction, not an autobiography. Austen's voice may appear at some points, as perhaps in the "defense of the novel" (974). However, this might also be the narrator's viewpoint, and it has enough sardonic wit to be one or the other, or both. Henry certainly could identify with the "liveliest effusions of wit and humour" contained in novels (974). He has "read hundreds and hundreds" of them, even "all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure" (1013). Is it yet another "coincidence" that both the narrator and Henry seem to share the same dry sense of humor?



Furthermore, is it mere happenstance the narrator disappears during (or rather slips seamlessly into) Henry's dialogue, only to reappear when it concludes? For the narrator says "fortune was more favourable to our heroine" on her meeting of Henry, who had "an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by her" (967). In the dialogue that follows, Henry takes much the same tone as the narrator. On parting, Henry tells Catherine, "I am authorized to tease you on this subject whenever we meet, and nothing in the world advances intimacy so much." The narrator then hopes Catherine does not dream of Henry, "for if it be true... that no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman's love is declared, it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her." However, it "cannot be ascertained" whether Catherine does dream of Henry (970), since the

narrator is not omniscient.

If we extended *Northanger Abbey* slightly for a screenplay, the following ending may not be too much of a stretch. The scene fades from a wedding flashback to a close-up of an aged hand writing in a pocket journal. A weathered voice follows along with the writing and asks whether the story should “recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience” (1090). The pocketbook closes to reveal a stone slab with two tombstones side by side: one bears General Tilney’s name and the other Mrs. Tilney’s. A third slab appears as if in a dream haze. It bears Catherine’s name, a range of dates and an epitaph about how she never lost her “innate principle of general integrity” (1072). This slab vanishes after a few seconds, leaving the first two rooted in reality. The camera then pans around to present a “handsome man, of a commanding aspect, past the bloom, but not past the vigour of life” (998). This is not General Tilney, though. Only now do we realize the narrator’s voice to be an older version of a voice heard throughout the movie: the voice of Henry Tilney. Henry closes his journal and darts a sardonic smile to his right, where Catherine stands with a child in her arms. She returns an innocent smile. An older boy at Catherine’s side seems to mirror his father’s sarcastic expression.

Is this ending too dark for a work originally a comedy? *Northanger Abbey* is, after all, a parody on many levels, and above all, ironic. Attempting, at least, an adaptation in the same spirit would be a fitting tribute to the author’s ingenuity.

Notes

¹ Austen seems to use various nineteenth-century British meanings of “quiz.” As a noun, it can mean an odd person or thing. As a verb, it can mean to mock, to peer at or to make fun of someone. Thus, deriving a noun from this last meaning, *Northanger Abbey* might be a “quiz” of other novelists or of itself (“Quiz”).

² In full, the third definition in Webster’s dictionary is:

To win the heart of; to connect by ties of love or self-interest; to attract; to fasten or bind by moral influence;—with *to*; as, attached to a friend; attaching others to us by wealth or flattery.

Incapable of attaching a sensible man. *Miss Austen*.

God... by various ties attaches man to man. *Cowper*. (“Attach”)

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