Northanger Abbey

Jane Austen

About the author
Jane Austen was born in 1775 in Steventon, Hampshire. Her father was the rector of the local church and played a major role in developing Austen's literary talents. She began writing at an early age and many of her famous novels such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) began life as sketches written in her teens. She never married, but came close twice. She fell in love with a man who subsequently died, and she agreed to marry a wealthy land owner, but called it off the following morning. She loved the country life and wrote mainly about middle class families from small provincial towns. None of her books were published with her name on them, they simply said 'By a Lady', and interestingly *Northanger Abbey* was one of the first books she wrote, but was the last to be published a year after her death in 1817 from a disease she had caught off cattle. She is buried in Winchester Cathedral.

Summary
Chapters 1–2: Catherine Morland is one of ten children born to the Morlands, a couple of moderate wealth living in a small village in England. Her appearance, early childhood and education are unremarkable but at fifteen Catherine began to change; her appearance improved, she started to take an interest in novels and appreciate the arts. When Catherine is seventeen, she goes to the city of Bath with a rich gentleman, Mr Allen, and his wife. She is immediately impressed by the city and its streets and feels there is adventure and romance to be found there. Catherine's companion, Mrs Allen, is rather unintelligent and unattractive but she loves going to parties and is very interested in fashion. The two ladies attend their first ball together but are initially disappointed because Mrs Allen sees nobody she knows, and no one asks Catherine to dance. A few days later, they go to another party where Catherine is introduced to a very entertaining young man called Mr Henry Tilney. Catherine enjoys his theatrical manner and dancing with him and hopes to see him again. She returns with Mrs Allen the next day but he is not there. Mrs Allen meets an old school friend, Mrs Thorpe, and her three daughters. The girls' brother, John, is a friend of Catherine's brother, James, both of whom are at Oxford University. Catherine makes friends with the oldest daughter, Isabella, and the two spend a lot of time walking, talking about books, and Henry Tilney and men in general.

Chapters 3–4: The two girls meet their respective brothers in the street. Isabella's brother, John, turns out to be a rather boastful, rude and ignorant young man, but despite this Catherine agrees to dance with him that evening. When she arrives at the dance, John is not there. While James and Isabella are dancing, Catherine sees Mr Tilney with a young woman, who she rightly assumes is his sister. She is later introduced to the beautiful and elegant sister, Eleanor, who everyone finds attractive. During the evening, Catherine notices that her brother and Isabella seem to be in love. The next morning, John Thorpe arrives to take Catherine for a ride in his carriage. During the ride he talks of nothing but himself. Catherine finds him extremely tedious, just as tedious in fact as Isabella and James's infatuation with each other. The next evening, Catherine goes to a ball and dances with Mr Tilney despite the protestations of the overbearing John Thorpe. At the end of the party, Catherine, Tilney and his sister agree to go for a walk the following day. As she is waiting for the Tilneys to arrive, John Thorpe calls on her to take her on a carriage ride again, saying that the Tilneys have gone out of town. As they are going through the town, she sees Miss Tilney and her brother and asks John to stop but he doesn't. When she returns home, she is told the Tilneys had called on her just after she had left with John. She is very upset about the unfavourable impression she must have made on her new friends.
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Chapters 5–6: The misunderstanding is cleared up the following night, and they agree to reschedule their walk for the following Monday. John Thorpe once again tries to disrupt her plans by playing a dirty trick, but the plan fails and the group go on a very enjoyable walk. Later, Catherine learns that James has gone to ask his parents permission to marry Isabella. Just before he leaves for London, John Thorpe corners Catherine and starts implying that they too would make a good couple but she really doesn't infer anything from his conversation. Later, at another dance, Catherine is introduced to Henry's handsome brother, Captain Tilney, who surprises her by dancing with Isabella. Catherine begins to think Isabella's feelings towards her fiancé are changing and this is confirmed when she mentions the small amount of money he is going to receive. Catherine is delighted when Henry's father, General Tilney, invites her to the Tilney family home, Northanger Abbey. Before she leaves, Isabella tells her that her brother John is in love with her and that she has encouraged his attentions. She denies the accusation. Increasingly worried about Isabella's changing moods and obvious attraction to Captain Tilney, she decides to talk to Henry. He merely says he has no control over his brother.

Chapters 7–8: On the way to the Abbey, Henry exploits Catherine's vivid imagination and fondness for Gothic novels by teasing her. He tells her frightening stories about a dark room with a mysterious cupboard in it, and how she will find a secret room with a sharp knife in it and a diary of miserable girl called Matilda. They arrive at the Abbey and after dinner, presided over by the regimental and controlling General Tilney, a storm breaks as she is retiring to bed. In her room is an old cupboard, like the one Henry had described. She opens it and finds some sheets of paper with writing on them. She also imagines the General is a murderer or has his wife locked away like a lunatic. John Thorpe spends almost the entire book telling lies about Catherine. At the Abbey she really believes she will find a secret room with a sharp knife in it and a dark room with a mysterious cupboard in it, and how she will find something gruesome in the cupboard but finds nothing but pieces of paper. She also imagines the General is a wife murderer or has his wife locked away like a lunatic. John Thorpe spends almost the entire book telling lies about people.

Chapters 9–10: Catherine receives a letter from her brother saying that his engagement to Isabella has been broken off and that she is going to marry Captain Tilney. Catherine knows that General Tilney, who is unaware of the developments, wouldn't want his son to marry Isabella because her family had no money and this thought worries her because, despite the General's warm acceptance of her, she herself is not rich. Catherine receives a letter from Isabella telling her she can't understand why James has left her and implying some misunderstanding had taken place. Catherine sees through this pack of lies and vows never to see her friend again. One night, the General inexplicably gives orders that Catherine must leave the house early the next morning and return home. She cannot think of what she has done to offend him. Sadly, she says goodbye to Eleanor and tells her to mention her to her brother, who has had to go away on business.

Chapters 11–12: Catherine returns home after an absence of eleven weeks and explains her unannounced return to her parents. Her mother believes the General to be a very strange man and agrees that her son is better off without Isabella. On a visit to the Allens', Catherine wonders if she will ever see Henry again. She has her answer a few days later when Henry visits her to ask her to marry him. She is delighted and then deeply upset when Henry goes on to tell her his father has refused him permission to see her. The General had been told lies about Catherine by Isabella's brother, John. He told him she was extremely wealthy and this had encouraged the General to welcome her warmly into his house. John, incensed by Catherine's rejection of him, had then told the General the truth, which resulted in her being thrown out of the house. Catherine's parents are happy about the wedding announcement but demand that the General agree to it too. The job of convincing the General is done admirably by Eleanor and her new husband, and the couple are married almost a year after they had first met.

Background and themes

Self deception and lies: Owing to her obsession with Gothic novels Catherine is often unable to tell fact from fiction. At the Abbey she really believes she will find something gruesome in the cupboard but finds nothing but pieces of paper. She also imagines the General is a wife murderer or has his wife locked away like a lunatic. John Thorpe spends almost the entire book telling lies about people.
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Wealth: Isabella pretends she cares nothing about money yet when an opportunity presents itself to marry a richer man than her fiancé she attempts to take it. The General will not countenance a penniless marriage and John Thorpe boasts about his imaginary wealth.

Innocence: Catherine, a quiet country girl, is totally unaware of the ways of the world especially where love is concerned. Her naivety about men is contrasted with Isabella’s cynical understanding of them.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

1 Quiz: After the students have read the Introduction, put them in groups of three and tell them they are going to answer some questions about facts contained in the Introduction. Then read out the following questions which the students have to write the answer to: When was Jane Austen born? (1775) How many novels did she write? (Six) Was the village of Steventon in the east, west, north or south of England? (South) At what age did Austen write Love and Friendship? (Fourteen) When did her father retire? (1801) How old was she when she died? (Forty-one) What was Austen’s older sister’s name? (Cassandra) Which English king kept her novels in his houses? (King George IV)

2 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to think about how life was different in early Victorian England compared with life today. Ask them to consider the following: Do you think people ate healthier food? Did they drink alcohol? Did people eat more or less than today? Was life more or less stressful? What types of transport did they use? What type of houses did they live in? How did they communicate over distances with each other? What did they do for entertainment? What type of music did they listen to? What types of work did they do?

While reading (p. 2, after ‘To be almost pretty is a great prize to a girl who has been plain for fifteen years.’)

3 Write: Put the students in pairs and ask them to make a list of all the words they know in English to describe a person’s physical appearance. Put their suggestions on the board and add some of your own. Then ask them to discuss the following questions: How important are a person’s looks to finding love, friends or a good job? Do you think the media puts too much emphasis on looks? Do you have a problem of young people going on drastic diets to get very thin in your country? Do you think it’s alright to have plastic surgery to alter the way you look?

(p. 8, after ‘It cost me more than any other dress in my wardrobe.’)

4 Discuss: The students will know that Mrs Allen is obsessed with clothes. Put them into groups to discuss the following questions about clothes: How important are clothes to you? Are women more interested in clothes than men? How much do you spend on clothes a year? Are there any shops you regularly buy clothes in? Do you think the way you dress says something about your personality? What is your country’s national dress? Should there be dress codes for formal events such as weddings, funerals, dinner parties, business meetings?

After reading

5 Research: The two girls are interested in Gothic novels. Ask the students to look for information on the Internet about this genre. Then they have to give an oral presentation, pointing out the main themes of Gothic literature, its principal writers and a brief description of one important novel.

Chapters 3–4

While reading (p. 24, after ‘Don’t you agree, dear Catherine?’)

6 Role play: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Catherine and Mrs Allen. Mrs Allen asks about Mr Thorpe and the ride in the carriage and Catherine answers very truthfully what she thinks.

After reading

7 Write and ask: On the board, write What was the real reason for Catherine’s brother’s visit? Elicit the answer (To see Isabella). Ask students to write other questions about something in Chapters 3–4. Now have students stand up and walk around the class, asking and answering each others questions.

8 Discuss: Put the students into groups, remind them that Catherine can’t tell lies and ask them to talk about the following questions: Have you ever told a lie? If so, when? Do you think it is sometimes better to tell a lie than to tell the truth, and if so, in which situations? Do you think politicians tell lies to get votes? Do you think doctors tell lies to their patients? Do you think parents tell lies to their children and children to their parents?

Chapters 5–6

While reading (p. 36, after ‘That was a good idea of mine, wasn’t it?’)

9 Act: Put the students in groups of three and tell them they are going to write and then perform a short scene featuring John Thorpe, Catherine and Isabella. Catherine is very angry that John has tried to trick her a second time, Isabella accuses Catherine of not being her friend and John insists Catherine will have a much better time with him than her other friends.
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(p. 49, after ‘I did not mean to encourage your brother.’)

10 Write: Tell the students to write a letter from Catherine to John Thorpe explaining that she didn’t encourage him and would not encourage him as she thought him a very disagreeable person. The students don’t have to write in a very formal style.

After reading

11 Write and guess: On the board, write At the beginning of the sixth act, Catherine saw Henry Tilney. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (fifth not sixth). Now students choose a sentence from Chapters 5–6 and rewrite it changing one word. Students walk around the class, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

12 Game: Put the students in pairs and tell them there are twenty words in Chapter 6 that are used to describe a person’s character. Tell them they have up to ten minutes to find the words. Tell them they may have to change the form of some of the words. The pair that finishes first with all twenty words, or the pair with most words after ten minutes, wins. See Discussion activities key for list of words.

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

13 Predict: Put the students in pairs and ask them to predict the answers to the following questions: Is the Abbey very old/modern? Does Catherine find a blanket/book/clothes in a chest in her room? Does Catherine find a knife/a roll of papers/old clothes in the cupboard in her room? Does Catherine think that the General murdered/loved/his wife? Is there a picture of Eleanor’s mother in her mother’s room/Eleanor’s room/Catherine’s room? Henry is angry because Catherine went into his mother’s room/told him that she suspected his father didn’t love his mother/insults his sister?

While reading (p. 55, after ‘Please, go on!’)

14 Write: Ask the class for suggestions of vocabulary that might be used to write a scary horror story, and put their suggestions on the board, adding some of your own. Then put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to write a story of what happens to Catherine in the Abbey on one dark night. The students then read out their story and the class votes for the best one.

(p. 60, at the end of Chapter 7.)

15 Game: Remind the students that a lot of household items are mentioned in the chapter. Put them in groups of four and tell them are now going to play the twenty questions game. Student A thinks of something that is normally found in a typical house. The other students have to ask Student A questions to try and guess the item. Student A can only respond ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘sometimes’. The group can ask up to twenty questions. If they can’t guess correctly, Student A wins.

After reading

16 Discuss: Catherine has a vivid imagination and a love of horror stories. Put the students in small groups to discuss the following questions: Do you like horror books, films and video games? What is the scariest film you have ever seen and what happened in it? Do you prefer psychological horror films or ones with lots of bloody murders in them? Do you think some films can affect some people badly? Do you believe children become more violent when they spend a lot of time playing violent video games?

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

17 Discuss: Catherine is going to receive two letters, both of which upset her. The first one is from her brother, saying that he has broken off his relationship with Isabella. Put the students in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: Is it possible to remain friends with somebody you have broken up with? What are the reasons couples separate? Do you think the divorce rate is going up in your country and if so why? Should couples live together for a while before they get married?

While reading (p. 79, at the end of Chapter 9)

18 Write: Ask the students to write a summary of Chapter 9. Tell them the summary must be exactly 50 words long, not one more or less. They then read out their stories to the rest of the class who vote for the best summary.

After reading

19 Write and guess: Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 9–10. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

20 Role play: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Catherine and Eleanor. Eleanor could invent some reasons for the General throwing Catherine out and Catherine can deny them.
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21 Predict: Put the students in pairs and ask them to predict the reason for Catherine being told to leave the house. Ask them to consider the following possibilities: The General finds out something scandalous in Catherine's past. He finds out that her brother has behaved immorally. He realises that Henry is in love with her and doesn't want the friendship to continue. He finds out that she had thought he had murdered his wife or hidden her somewhere in the house. He had been told she was wealthy and later finds out she isn't. He thinks she has stolen some money. He doesn't approve of her friend Isabella's relationship with his older son. He realises he is in love with her and wants to get her out of the way of temptation. He has gone mad.

Chapters 11–12
While reading (p. 86, after 'But you must remember that the Morland family would not have high expectations of any great achievements or successes for Catherine.')

22 Discuss: Put the students in small groups to discuss the following questions about family life: Do you come from a big family? Do you think it is an advantage to have a lot of brothers and sisters or to be an only child? Do you think your position in the family has affected your character? Do you get on well with your family? Do you have arguments with your brothers and sisters and if so what about?

(p. 95, after 'The General had been deceived by John Thorpe at their first meeting, at the theatre in Bath.')

23 Game: Put the students in groups of three and tell them they are going to play the truth and lies game. Choose a word for each group that the students are likely to know. The words could be very colloquial, and avoid choosing scientific words which are often unlikely to know. The words could be very colloquial, such as eight, six, note, lodgings, bread, invitation, aunt, title, and eighteen. Put the words on the board and ask the students if they know what they mean. Then ask them to write one true definition and two false ones for their word. Encourage them to write imaginative descriptions and to make the false definitions realistic. Each person in the group then reads out their definition. The rest of the groups can ask questions and then must decide on who is telling the truth.

After reading
24 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: six, note, lodgings, bread, invitation, aunt, title, eighteen. Ask the students to talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapters 11–12.

25 Discuss and write: Put the students in pairs and ask them to write a summary of a Chapter 13 for the book, outlining what becomes of the main characters in the future. Ask them to consider the following possibilities: Catherine and Henry have children. Isabella marries a man who mistreats her or even murders her. John Thorpe starts a business and because of his arrogance goes bankrupt. The General catches the same disease as his wife and dies.

26 Research: Ask the students to look for reviews of the book on the Internet and to choose one good review and one bad one. They then have to read out their reviews to the rest of the class.

27 Quote Quiz: Put the students in groups of three or four and tell them to write a list of all the characters in the book. Then tell them they are going to hear a list of quotes from the book and they have to write down the name of the person who said each quote. Then read out the following:

1 ‘I must say I have not seen one dress in the whole room that I prefer to mine.’ (Mrs Allen)
2 ‘He is a good-natured fellow. Perhaps a little too full of opinions sometimes, but you girls like that in a gentleman, don’t you?’ (James)
3 ‘How could you have told me they had gone out of town? Stop, stop, I must speak to them.’ (Catherine)
4 ‘I do not approve of young men and women who are not related driving around the country in open carriages, going to inns and public places together.’ (Mr Allen)
5 ‘I told her you had sent me to say that having just remembered a private engagement of going to Clifton with us tomorrow, you could not walk with her until Tuesday.’ (John Thorpe)
6 ‘Such a small income is hardly enough to pay for the essential requirements of life.’ (Isabella)
7 ‘If I understand what you are implying, you had come to a conclusion too horrible for me to put into words.’ (Henry)
8 ‘My father was never satisfied with the picture and would not hang it in the sitting room or his apartment.’ (Eleanor)
9 ‘No …, it is cold and damp along that path, I will go across the park and meet you later, but don’t show our guest around the inside of the house until I join you.’ (General Tilney)
10 ‘You are not the same little girl that we said goodbye to eleven weeks ago.’ (Mrs Morland)

The team with the most correct answers wins the quiz.

28 Discuss: Put the students in small groups to discuss the following questions: Did you enjoy the book? Do you think it would make a good film? Would you like to read more of Jane Austen’s books?