

Northanger Abbey

Full Book Summary

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Northanger Abbey is the coming-of-age story of a young woman named Catherine Morland. It is divided into two sections, Book I and Book II. The two Books differ significantly from each other in setting and, to a degree, in tone. Book I begins when the Allens, family friends of the Morlands, offer to take Catherine with them to Bath, a resort for the wealthier members of British society. The 17-year-old Catherine eagerly accepts the Allens' invitation. Catherine is young and naïve. Her life has been relatively sheltered, so Bath is a new world for her. In Bath, Catherine is introduced to Henry Tilney, a young clergyman who impresses Catherine with his wit and pleasant conversation. Catherine quickly falls for Henry, but after their first meeting she does not see him again for some time. Mrs. Allen runs into an old acquaintance, Mrs. Thorpe, and her three young daughters, including Isabella, who is slightly older than Catherine. Catherine and Isabella are soon best friends. Isabella, superficial and fond of gossip, inducts Catherine into the social world of Bath, with all its balls, dances, shows, fashion, and its gossip.

Just when Catherine and Isabella have settled into a close friendship, they are met with the arrival of James Morland, Catherine's brother, and John Thorpe, Isabella's brother. James and John are friends at Oxford University. Isabella wastes no time in flirting with James, and soon it is obvious to everyone except Catherine that James and Isabella are in love. Taking a cue from James, John tries to woo Catherine, asking her to be his dance partner. But at a ball, Catherine sees Henry Tilney again and is more interested in Henry than in John. John's bragging and his arrogant nature put off Catherine.

Soon all of Isabella's time is taken up with James. Without Isabella to spend her time with and saddled with the unpleasant John Thorpe, Catherine decides to become friends with Eleanor Tilney, Henry's sister. Eleanor quickly sees that Catherine has feelings for Henry, but does not say anything. After rain seems to wash out her plans for a walk with Henry and Eleanor, Catherine is pressured by James and Isabella into riding with John, much to her dismay. On the way, she spots Henry and Eleanor walking toward her house for the planned walk. John refuses to stop, angering Catherine.

Catherine apologizes to Eleanor and Henry, and plans are made for another walk. John, Isabella, and James again intervene, pressuring Catherine into another outing. Catherine firmly refuses this time and joins Eleanor and Henry

in a walk around Beechen Cliff. They discuss novels, and Catherine is delighted to find that Henry and Eleanor love books as much as she does. Catherine returns home to discover that James and Isabella have become engaged. She briefly meets with John, who is leaving Bath for several weeks. John leaves with the false impression that Catherine is in love with him, although Catherine does not realize this.

Book II begins with the arrival of Henry's older brother, Captain Frederick Tilney. Isabella quickly catches the eye of the captain and, dismayed by the discovery of James's modest income, begins to flirt with Frederick. Eleanor invites Catherine to visit the Tilney home in Northanger Abbey. The invitation is seconded by Eleanor's father, General Tilney. Catherine eagerly accepts the invitation, delighted at the prospect of visiting a real abbey and at seeing more of Henry. Before Catherine leaves, Isabella tells her that John is planning to propose to Catherine. Catherine tells Isabella to write him and tell him, with her apologies, that he is mistaken. Frederick appears and flirts with Isabella, who returns his attentions. Dismayed by this behavior, Catherine asks Henry to convince Frederick to leave Isabella alone. Henry refuses, knowing that Isabella is at least as guilty as the captain, but he tells Catherine that Frederick will probably leave Bath with his regiment soon anyway.

Catherine leaves with the Tilneys for Northanger Abbey. On the way, Catherine tells Henry how she imagines the Abbey to resemble the haunted ruins of the Gothic novels she loves. Henry, amused, responds by giving a hypothetical account of her first night at the Abbey, complete with mysterious chests, violent storms, and secret passages. Northanger Abbey turns out to be quite dull, having been fixed up by General Tilney. Due to her overactive imagination, Catherine entertains all sorts of frightening ideas about the place, each of which is thwarted. For instance, a strange bureau in Catherine's room turns out to contain nothing more mysterious than receipts. Catherine becomes intrigued by the death of Eleanor and Henry's mother years earlier. Her mind full of Gothic plots, Catherine suspects that General Tilney murdered his wife. Catherine sneaks into the mother's old chamber and discovers nothing. She is caught by Henry, who guesses her thoughts and scolds her. Mortified and ashamed, Catherine quickly resumes her good behavior.

Catherine receives a letter from her brother telling her that his engagement to Isabella has been called off. Catherine thinks that Frederick forced himself between them, but Henry convinces her that it was as much Isabella's fault as Frederick's. Catherine visits Henry's house at Woodston. The General drops hints about Catherine marrying Henry. Catherine gets another letter, this time from Isabella, telling her that Frederick has left her, and asking Catherine to

apologize to James for her. Angry at being manipulated, Catherine wishes she had never known Isabella. The General leaves on a business trip, and Henry goes back to Woodston for several days. The General then returns unexpectedly and tells Eleanor to send Catherine away the next morning. Though she is very embarrassed, Eleanor has no choice but to send Catherine to her home in Fullerton.

Catherine's family is irritated by the General's rudeness, but is glad to have her home. Catherine mopes around, despondent, until suddenly Henry arrives in Fullerton and proposes to her. Henry explains that his father's behavior was due to John Thorpe. In Bath, when John thought Catherine loved him, he had told General Tilney that Catherine was from a very wealthy family. When the General ran into John much later, after Isabella had told John about Catherine's true feelings, John had angrily told the General that the Morlands were almost poor. Mortified, the General had sent Catherine away, furious that his hopes for John to make a wealthy match were to be frustrated. Henry and Catherine decide to wait until the General gives his consent to their marriage. Within a few months, Eleanor marries a very wealthy and important man, which puts the General in a good mood. Once he is told of the true nature of the Morland's financial situation, which is moderate, he gives his consent, and the novel ends with the marriage of Henry and Catherine.

Character List

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- Catherine Morland

The protagonist of *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine is seventeen years old, and has spent all her life in her family's modest home in the rural area of Fullerton. While Catherine has read many novels (particularly Gothic novels), she is very inexperienced at reading people. Her naiveté about the world and about the motivations and character of the people she meets is an endless source of confusion and frustration for her. Nonetheless, Catherine is very intelligent and learns from her mistakes, and can also be witty. Her strongest attributes are her integrity and caring nature.

- Henry Tilney

Henry Tilney is a 26-year-old parson in a small village called Woodston. He is intelligent, well-tempered, and attuned to the motivations and behavior of those around him. He is very well read, and enjoys novels as much as history books. He is good natured, but has a wry cynical view of human behavior. He is often amused at the folly of others, but he takes care to gently instruct them properly, if possible, particularly in the case of the naïve Catherine.

- Eleanor Tilney
Henry's younger sister, Eleanor is a shy, quiet young woman. She shares an interest in reading with her brother, but for the most part, her reserve prevents her from having many friends. Like her brothers, Eleanor is often subject to the somewhat tyrannical behavior of her father, General Tilney.
- General Tilney
The domineering father of Henry, Eleanor and Captain Tilney. He is a widower. Like several characters in the novel (such as Mrs. Allen), the General is very concerned with material things. He takes great pride in his home, Northanger Abbey, which he has refurbished himself. He is preoccupied with both earning money and spending it. He enjoys eating a large dinner and having the best of everything, and he wants his children to marry wealthy people. He has a gruff nature which make some, such as Catherine Morland, think poorly of him.
- Isabella Thorpe
One Mrs. Thorpe's three daughters, and the sister of John Thorpe. She is Catherine's best friend for the first half of the novel. Isabella is attractive and very spirited, but like her mother, she is a gossip and often concerned with superficial things. She enjoys flirting with many young men, which bothers the more reserved Catherine. Ultimately, Isabella's nature causes her to lose both James and her other boyfriend, Frederick Tilney.
- John Thorpe
The brother of Isabella, he is conceited, arrogant, and given to boasting and exaggeration. He talks endlessly and rarely listens. Like his sister, John is given to superficiality. John tries to woo Catherine, but his arrogance quickly turns her against him.
- James Morland
The brother of Catherine and a fellow student of John Thorpe at Oxford University. James is mild-mannered and very caring, like his sister. James falls for Isabella Thorpe and becomes engaged to her, but breaks off the engagement when she begins a flirtation with Frederick Tilney.

- Frederick Tilney
 Captain Frederick Tilney (often referred to simply as "Captain Tilney") is the oldest sibling in the Tilney family. Unlike his brother Henry or his sister Eleanor, Frederick is a flirt and given to mischief. Austen suggests that Frederick is the Tilney child closest in character to General Tilney by identifying both men by their ranks rather than by their names. Frederick flirts with Isabella Thorpe and leads her to break off her engagement with James Morland, then abandons her in Bath.
- Mr. and Mrs. Allen
 The couple that invites Catherine to go to Bath with them. Like Catherine's family, the Allens live in the rural town of Fullerton. They are older and wealthier than the Morlands, but they are childless, and they see Catherine as a kind of surrogate daughter. Mr. Allen is a practical man who spends most of his time in Bath playing cards; Mrs. Allen is greatly concerned with fashion, and spends her time either shopping, knitting, or talking to Mrs. Thorpe.
- Mrs. Thorpe
 Mrs. Thorpe is the widowed mother of Isabella and of two other daughters. Like her daughter, she is concerned primarily with gossip, fashion, and money. In conversation with her friend Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Thorpe talks mostly about her pride in her children (Mrs. Allen has no children) while Mrs. Allen talks about her gowns (Mrs. Thorpe is not nearly as wealthy as the Allens).
- Mr. and Mrs. Morland and family
 The family, which includes Catherine and James, is from the rural town of Fullerton. We visit the Morlands only briefly, at the beginning and end of the novel. Mr. and Mrs. Morland are relatively simple, practical folk, especially compared to people like Mrs. Thorpe and General Tilney. Both James and Catherine must get the approval of their parents before they can marry their prospective spouses.

Mini Essays

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Catherine is inexperienced and innocent at the beginning of the novel. How has she changed by the end of the novel?

Northanger Abbey is a *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age tale in which the heroine or hero sheds his or her naiveté. In the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine does not see the obvious flirtation between her brother James and her friend Isabella, and she does not understand what Isabella is doing by flirting with Frederick Tilney. Catherine has difficulty identifying people's motivations, which, as Henry points out, causes her to assume that people do things for the same unimpeachable reasons she would. As a result, Catherine thinks well of almost everyone, and is frequently too charitable to such people as Isabella and John Thorpe. As the novel progresses, Catherine starts trying to understand people and their motivations, although this pursuit is influenced by her overactive imagination. She attributes General Tilney's grumpiness and odd behavior to guilt over murdering his new wife. After Henry scolds her for this terrible and unfounded suspicion, Catherine comes to a new realization about the nature of people. She understands that people can be both good and bad, because real life is never as black-and-white as it is in the novels she reads. What makes Catherine think the General murdered his wife? Why does she realize her mistake so quickly?

There are several reasons why Catherine starts to believe that the General killed his wife. The first is that she has just read a Gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, by Anne Radcliffe, and has come to associate old buildings like Northanger Abbey with the mysterious buildings she encounters in her reading. Catherine arrives at the Abbey feeling that she is in a Gothic novel herself. As she later admits to herself, she arrives at the Abbey "craving to be scared," and when she finds it to be a very boring place, she makes up her own secrets. When Catherine finds out that Mrs. Tilney died of a mysterious illness nine years earlier, and that Eleanor was not there at the time of her mother's death, she feels her suspicions of General Tilney are confirmed. After that, every odd quirk of the General's makes Catherine feel certain that he has a guilty conscience. Her desire to be scared becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Soon, Catherine is swept up in a paranoid fantasy, and even entertains the idea that Mrs. Tilney is alive and held captive in a dungeon beneath the Abbey. She does not wonder why the General would murder his wife. She sees him as a cardboard villain from a novel, a purely evil person who would certainly murder his wife without a second thought. Once Henry chastises her for her morbid imaginings, and shows her how illogical her suspicions were, Catherine wakes up from her fantasy and realizes how silly it was. She begins to understand that the General may be gruff and sometimes mean to his children, but he is not evil, and he is not a murderer.

Is General Tilney the antagonist of the novel? Why or why not?

The antagonist of the novel is the character who opposes the protagonist's goals. For most of the novel, General Tilney does his best to make Catherine feel comfortable, because he thinks she is rich and wants her to marry his son, Henry. So to Catherine, the protagonist, he is very pleasant. To his children, the General is alarmingly bossy. He has a generally gruff nature that makes him seem unpleasant. But he does his utmost to make Catherine feel welcome until the end of her stay, when he acts badly by sending her away abruptly, with no explanation. This is the most cruel thing that anyone does to Catherine in the course of the novel. We discover later that the General sent Catherine away because John Thorpe told him that her family had no money. This infuriated the General, who had hoped to marry John into a rich family.

Complicating the matter is the fact that Catherine has imagined the General as a villain from a Gothic horror novel. Since the reader sees the General through Catherine's eyes, the General seems to become a true villain, at least for a few chapters. Even after Catherine realizes her mistake, a lingering doubt about the General and his behavior remains, especially when he sends Catherine home so rudely. Although the General behaves badly, however, he is not indisputably villainous. On one hand, he is greedy, rude to his children, and obsessed with wealth and class. On the other, he is a loving father and capable of being a gracious host to Catherine. An arrogant man like John Thorpe, were he to play a larger part in the novel, could easily become the antagonist. However, no one in the novel actively, constantly works to thwart Catherine or her hopes, which means the novel has no true antagonist.