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## The Act of Reading in *Northanger Abbey*

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Reading is an important activity in *Northanger Abbey*; Catherine Morland, the main character, is enthusiastic for reading. In terms of reading, there are famous sentences for supporting novels by the narrator:

Yes, novels; -for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding-joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on much works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. (21)

Moreover, reading is an important activity for Catherine not only for entertainment but also for a good media of communication. Therefore the objects of reading are not simply books: Catherine tries to "read" the contexts of human relationships in the different societies. In addition, in Volume II, Catherine tries to read a hidden signified-the idea of which she gets from Gothic novels. Marilyn Butler defines the word "reading" broadly and explains it as a characteristic of Catherine's activity:

In *Northanger Abbey*, living in the world involves the reading of people, behaviour, dress and conversation as well as of books. Reading takes in more and more genres; there is so much to learn that everyone proceeds by trial and at least some error" (Butler 20).

As Butler points out, "reading" is a key word in this novel, and it is meaningful to consider how "reading" works through the whole story.

Leaving her home, Catherine joins a new society in Bath where she

has to construct human relationships around her and find out a future husband, taking a careful consideration of trustworthy people. Then it is significant for Catherine to obtain a "reading" skill to discern who can be trusted or not. Furthermore, other characters' reactions to fictional books can be related to their conducts and ways of thinking as Cynthia Griffin insists:

However, all of the main characters are, themselves, readers of novels, and their conduct throughout is directly related to the way in which they respond to fiction. Thus they bear a curious double relationship to the reader. They are both imaginary characters whom he may judge and representations of himself. (Griffin 152)

In this article, therefore, I will regard Catherine's process of obtaining her reading skill as an important element to understand this novel and focus on her changing viewpoints that stem from her perspective of human relationships. Then I will use the word "reading" with a wider concept; the object of "reading" is not only for fictions but also for the act of interpretation of people and events. Also I will use "community" as a keyword which can be referred to a group of people who share the same pattern of interpretation. Stanley Fish makes a remark of an idea "interpretive community" which affects the way of readings and recognitions of individuals.

At this point it looks as if the text is about to be dislodged as a center of authority in favor of the reader whose interpretive strategies make it; but I forestall this conclusion by arguing that the strategies in question are not his in the sense that would make him an independent agent. Rather, they proceed not from him but from the interpretive community of which he is a member; they are, in effect, community property, and insofar as they at once enable and limit the operations of his consciousness. (Fish 14)

I would like to apply Fish's theory to understand Catherine who accepts different influences from each community.

From the beginning of the story, the narrator tells readers that

Catherine is a person who is not an ordinary heroine. Moreover, there is a description of her childhood while such a description rarely appears in other Austen's works.

She never could learn or understand any thing before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid...Her mother wished her to learn music; and Catherine was sure she should like it, for she was very fond of thinking the keys of the old forlorn spinet; so, at eight years old she began. She learnt a year, and could not bear it...Her taste for drawing was not superior; though whenever she could obtain the outside of a letter from her mother, or seize upon any other odd piece of paper, she did what she could in that way, by drawing houses and trees, hens and chickens, all very much like one another.

- Writing and accounts she was taught by her father; French by her mother: her proficiency in either was not remarkable, and she shirked her lessons in both whenever she could. (2)

The description of Catherine's childhood continues till she comes to fourteen years old and is able to read various sentences as the narrator remarks:

...and it was not very wonderful that Catherine, who had by nature nothing heroic about her, should prefer cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country at the age of fourteen, to books-or at least books of information-for, provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided there were all story and no reflection, she had never any objection to books at all. (3)

At this age, books are merely accumulation of information for Catherine; she does not concern about the ways of perception, and her reading ability is limited. However, when she is between fifteen and seventeen, she changes: "But from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives (3)."

These descriptions of Catherine's activity of reading of her childhood show the possibilities of the change of her reading habit and the flexibility of her reading skill. There is no description of heroines' childhood in Austen's works except in this novel and *Mansfield Park*, and moreover, Fanny's childhood in *Mansfield Park* is described to show rather the transition of her environment than her flexibility. Therefore, one can expect that Catherine is a person who can be changeable, depending on her situation and life lessons she learns. Susan Morgan points out that education is a central theme of this novel:

At a center of Austen's new idea of fiction, is the problem of education. Austen's constant subject, the relations between ourselves and other people, appears here as teaching and learning, as a novel of education. (Morgan 187)

As Morgan insists, Catherine has education as moving to different places and having different kinds of human relationships.

Leaving her home, Catherine visits Bath which is the place for socialization with Mrs. Allen. Although Mrs. Allen is expected to supervise Catherine instead of her parents, Mrs. Allen's attention goes to shopping and fashion, and she rejects to be Catherine's guardian. As a result, Catherine becomes alone and has no dependable protection in the new place. Considering Bath as a central place of socialization, Catherine is thrown into an open society, where people come from various backgrounds, and she has to place herself in the web of human relationships from the beginning. As a result, Catherine is required to have an advanced proficiency to read human mind and relationship.

Moreover, Catherine's human relationships can change entirely according to her choice and decision because nobody can give Catherine any information or advice beforehand. Catherine's situation, then, makes this novel unique because she is distinctly different from Austen's other heroines who have human relationships through the closed society of their families and relatives. Also, the description of the crowded ball room of Bath shows Catherine's difficulty to find a comfortable niche and construct relationships; there are too many people, so Catherine finds neither a

comfortable space nor communicative society.

After a while, Catherine is introduced to Isabella Thorpe who is a daughter of Mrs. Allen's friend. Soon afterwards Catherine gets close to Isabella because they share common interests such as shopping and Gothic novels. Catherine has few advantages by having a relationship with Isabella because she has neither fortune nor good connections. Moreover, Catherine cannot have intellectual training from Isabella as the narrator introduces a typical example of their conversations using an ironical perspective. Because Catherine and Isabella's perspective is limited, and they have conversations for rather simply exchanging information than developing ideas.

As a woman who eagerly looks for a future husband, Isabella has more advantages than Catherine by their relationship because Isabella can have more information about James, Catherine's brother, whom she is interested in. Furthermore, Isabella has chances to impress him, spending time with him and his sister. Thus Isabella uses Catherine as a mediator between James and herself.

Isabella takes an initiative in the relationship with Catherine and talks to her "I know you better than you know yourself" (51). Isabella does not consider Catherine's priority and allow her to reject Isabella's proposal to go to Clifton. Ignoring Catherine's opinion, Isabella restricts Catherine's spontaneity and she turns into a controlling figure under the mask of her friendly manner toward Catherine. Isabella even catches "hold of one hand" (77) of Catherine who resists following Isabella's decision and tries to deprive Catherine of her spontaneity by restricting her physical control.

Catherine and Isabella read *Mysteries of Udolpho* to find what is hidden behind the veil. Since their reading habit stems from a simple curiosity to follow the plot and their talks are for exchanges of information, they do not discuss what they think about the book in their conversation. Without critical perspectives, figuring out a secret of the story is the most important for Catherine and Isabella. As Janet Todd describes, keeping her readers "guessing and waiting, eager to move to the next volume, persuaded for the moment to live in the fictional world" (15) is what Radcliff did in her Gothic writing, Catherine and Isabella are

typically simple Gothic novel readers and do not read between lines, thinking beyond the plot. Their conversation about novels reveals their immature idea because they take such a way of reading based on simple curiosity and lack a critical point of view. Their shared reading experience helps Catherine to have excessive imagination and prevent her from perceiving reality. Catherine's attitude which accepts Isabella's interpretation reflects the relationship between Catherine and Isabella; Catherine does not criticize Isabella and takes only simple information from Isabella. As a result, the relationship with Isabella allows Catherine to develop her excessive imagination and to be an uncritical thinker instead of leading her to have intellectual training by examining her thoughts.

Different from Isabella, her brother John Thorpe rejects to read novels and does not share the reading experience with Catherine. On the other hand, he is a contradictory figure to be a manipulator of fictions, telling lies to Catherine to keep her away from Tilneys and giving General Tilney false information of her. Both Isabella and John, therefore, prevent Catherine from having correct recognition and constructing the relationship with Tilneys. Accordingly, Catherine can only have a distorted interpretation because of an influence of simple plot-pursuing reading of Gothic fictions and false information in Thorpe community.

Also Catherine constructs a different kind of human relationship with Tilneys. Henry Tilney especially takes a role of Catherine's teacher and teaches her the proper way of reading. Contrary to John Thorpe, Henry says "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid" (82) and is in defense of novels. However, Henry does not be absorbed in novels like Catherine and distinguishes fictions from reality. In addition he is sensitive to words and takes careful attention to mature way of speech when he uses them, avoiding ambiguity and exaggeration.

'...But now really, do not you think Udolpho the nicest book in the world?'

'The nicest; -by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding.'

'Henry,' said Miss Tilney, 'you are very impertinent. Miss Morland, he is treating you exactly as he does his sister. He is for ever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you.' (83)

Henry's acute sense of words and tendency to avoid exaggerated expressions are straightly linked to his perception of reality. Furthermore, Henry becomes a teacher to teach Catherine the way of proper interpretation and recommends her to change her reading list to have an opportunity for well-balanced reading.

Containing lessons, reflections, and idea developments, Catherine's conversations with Henry make difference from the ones with Thorpes which are merely for information exchange. As Marilyn Butler indicates "Choice of these as subjects for conversation already implies a certain degree of thoughtfulness and rationality-unlike John Thorpe's topic of horses, curricles, drink, and money, and Isabella's of 'dress, balls, flirtations and quizzes'" (Butler 174), Catherine's conversations with Henry appeal to her rationality and contribute to her improvement of perception of reality.

Although Henry's sister, Eleanor, likes to read novels, she practices well-balanced reading by taking history books as well as fictions and her reading habit makes clear contrast with that of Catherine's, who remarks "it [history] tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me" (84). Henry and Eleanor do not be extremely involved in books but take moderate distance from them. Also, for Henry and Eleanor, books are materials in their thinking process rather than an object of superficial interests.

Therefore the Tilney community, which is composed of Henry and Eleanor, shows an ideal reading model in *Northanger Abbey*. It shows a model of well-balanced reading and an interpretation. In addition, it is opposed to the Thorpe community, which shows unrealistic thoughts and distorted perception of reality. These two are depicted as polarized communities because Catherine is not allowed to attend both of them at the same time; when she tries to be in the Tilney community, the Thorpe community intrudes her by telling her lies and trying to attract her by



Gothic taste. Accordingly, Catherine goes back and forth between two communities.

There is a conflict of perspectives between Tilney community and Catherine. The chasm that divides their interpretations appears when they misunderstand what the word "riot" is signified; Catherine thinks it signifies the fictional incident while Eleanor thinks it signifies a real incident. As Henry says, their misinterpretation is "scandalous."

"My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. The confusion there is scandalous. Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern ...that such words could relate only to a circulating library." (88)

Although Catherine attempts to get close to the Tilney community, she cannot completely share interpretations with them because of the difference of their thoughts.

Northanger Abbey gives Catherine an opportunity to have close relationship with Tilneys, being away from boisterous Bath society. Different from what Catherine imagined, Northanger Abbey is not a ruin, but it is a modernized edifice under General Tilney's control. Moreover, as a forefront working place, it is constantly renewed and does not remain in a particular state. Labour and time are important elements in Northanger Abbey. Therefore, the watch that General Tilney brings expresses his acute sense of time as a resource of profit and diligence. Then the garden of Northanger Abbey is not an ornament but a place of production; it has a capability to produce pineapples which should be difficult to be grown in England. In the place of pursuing profit, General Tilney does not refer to books and has no aptitude to fiction.

Children are also under the persistent control of patriarchal General Tilney in Northanger Abbey. Though their social positions and properties do not force them to think about particular occupations, men are expected to work by General Tilney because he is strongly conscious of the transition from the leisured class to the gentry's class with occupations

as a leading grope of English society. Spiritually, in addition, General Tilney takes a powerful role of his family, forcing his children to follow his opinions and accepting no objection from them. As a result, Northanger Abbey is a place supervised by powerful General Tilney which is designed for effective working and productivity, pursuing the utmost wealth.

Catherine does not obtain an appropriate perspective completely and applies her proclivity of Gothic taste to her perspective when she sees Northanger Abbey. As a result, she eagerly tries to find Gothic elements of Northanger Abbey. So she is involved in her thought and does not listen to General Tilney when he introduces her to his estate:

They set forward; and, with a grandeur of air, a dignified step, which caught the eye, but could not shake the doubts of the well-read Catherine...It was very noble-very charming!-was all that Catherine had to say, for her indiscriminating eye scarcely discerned the colour of the stain; and all minuteness of praise, all praise that had much meaning, was supplied by the General: the costliness or elegance of any room's fitting-up could be nothing to her; she cared for no furniture of a more modern date than the fifteenth century. (145-6)

General Tilney's intention to show off modernity of Northanger Abbey is at variance with Catherine's intention to find out Gothic elements. There is an implied struggle between General Tilney and Catherine in terms of their intentions of readings; Catherine unconsciously rejects the signified which General Tilney expects Catherine to read. Then Catherine creates the signified that she wants to read instead. General Tilney's signified is totally different from Catherine's: as a result, her signified must be hid. Therefore, Catherine resists General Tilney in Northanger Abbey where people are expected to be under his powerful control.

Regardless of his acute sense of reality, General Tilney's perspective is distorted by his ambition of developing Northanger Abbey further, and he misinterprets that Catherine is from a wealthy family and will inherit an abundant property. Therefore, there are unrealistic thoughts in the fictional space of Northanger Abbey: Catherine's unrealistic thought which is affected by Gothic taste and General Tilney's unrealistic thought which

is grounded from his extreme ambition. As the author, Austen points out that even a person who excludes fictional elements from her life has a possibility to have misconceptions of reality, and she takes critical point of view toward such a perspective.

Catherine's relationship with Thorpes deteriorates as Catherine's view of the world grows and her interpretation of reality develops through the communication with Tilneys. Catherine's disillusionment occurs when she gets to know her misunderstanding of Isabella who breaks off the engagement with Catherine's brother because of her materialistic desire without any romantic aspect. Moreover, Catherine's excessive thought under the influence of Gothic novels is pointed out by Henry when he saw her walking around Northanger Abbey, looking for an evidence of murder committed by General Tilney.

...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—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities?" (150)

Henry reminds Catherine of a sense of accurate time and place, and an English identity, which are conditioned by sharing sense of reality. Then Catherine learns that her excessive thought cannot be shared with the Tilney community that recognizes reality as a vital ability. In addition, Henry's remark about time, space, and English identity implicitly makes a contrast with Anne Radcliff's *Mysteries of Udolpho* which story is set in Italy and France of middle age. Since Henry enjoys reading Gothic novels, he does not criticize Catherine for reading Gothic novels; Catherine's problem is her way of perception of novels. After Catherine is reprimanded by Henry, she is "completely awakened" (150). At the end of the story, then, Catherine becomes conscious of perceiving reality and avoids an excessive way of thinking. Her progress is shown by controlling her own unrealistic thought when someone walks into a room:

She trembled a little at the idea of any one's approaching so cautiously; but resolving not to be again overcome by trivial appearance of alarm, or misled by a raised imagination, she stepped quietly forward, and opened the door. (180)

Even though her unrealistic thought is brought into her head, she stops having it by her intention. Following Henry's lesson, Catherine improves her recognition and makes a difference to her former state called "a sad little shatter-brained creature" (190) by her mother. At the end, Catherine marries Henry and lives in Woodston which is away from Northanger Abbey; that means Catherine and Henry create a new society in Woodson where General Tilney's influence does not reach. Moreover, under Henry's influence, she improves her recognition and does not depend on her unrealistic thought. Finally, it is revealed that Woodston is not a place simply to pursue productivity and benefit like General Tilney's Northanger Abbey because of its acceptance of fiction in a balanced way.

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