

---

## Theme Of Gender In Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* mainly focuses on gender inequality that was present in her society. The author tells the story of three families which stand for different social classes and special emphasis is put on the role of women. The first one is the 'great ladies', and it includes women who meet social expectations concerning their roles. The other one is the 'heroines' – these are the females who appear 'stronger' as they regularly endure numerous difficulties, but always manage to handle them. Jane Austen narrates with irony and sarcasm about money, gender presumptions and the categorization of females into distinctive types with specific qualities. However, the novel disrupts gender expectations and vanishes some prejudices about the role of a female in society.

Introducing Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen questions the perfect female type. Catherine seems to be not an ideal heroine as she did not possess typical traits the heroines of that time period did. Moreover, she was not very beautiful, tragic or smart. It was the character who stood in opposition to those heroines typical for that period literature. Catherine behaves in particular manner describes her as naïve and inexperienced, imaginative and overactive young lady. “She was, moreover, noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house” (Austen 3). This is the way Catherine used to be at ten, but she was training to become a heroine: reading and memorizing the quotes. She was trained to become a lady and forget about boys' games and cricket. In spite of the fact that Catherine appears to be extremely unlike most of Austen's champions in that she is not particularly smart, she demonstrates great judgment in diverse situations in the novel. For instance, by despising John Thorpe, Catherine makes everybody realize that she could decide for herself, and she will not surrender to the societal pressure to be with him. By depicting Catherine as a non-traditional female character, Austen rejects the ordinary social traditions for ladies and endeavors to transform them with her writings.

Merril Smith in *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America* shows the evolution of the female role in the United States and Europe. The author admits it is an important part of the history and describes female role according to different aspects like: family life, marriage, religion, political life etc. Merrill Smith views Jane Austen as a companion in her ideas and *Northanger Abbey* as a manifestation of men and women equality, and starts her book with the words of Catherine speaking about history “The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all”(Austen 101). The education for women in the 18th century was very important. As they were deeply-rooted in domestic affairs, education was a great opportunity for employment and career prospects. That is why, increased interest in literacy and reading is observed in that time society and the novel, particularly. Women were interested in writing, music and painting apart from literature (Smith 14-18). Finally, *Northanger Abbey* is a novel that emphasizes the role of reading and writing. However, the author hints ironically how reading may influence the readers, particularly naïve and imaginative as Catherine.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen reflects on the unequal position of sexes by delineating two types of women. Anyhow, Jane Austen indicates that many virtues inherent in women of that time only

---

demean and abuse them in the larger society. While women showcase these virtues in order to meet social expectations, they consistently deceive as they act powerless in order to perform these virtues. Most likely, they do not realize that their adjustment to these societal needs is an acceptance of the growing disparity in gender roles.

Rachel Evans in *The Rationality and Femininity of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen* describes the methods and ways Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen used to fight for female rights – both in fiction and writing. This theme is observed in many Austen's fictional works. "This critique of the master-slave relationship between men and women shows how Austen engages with Wollstonecraft argument that there is a master-slave relationship implicit in gender politics"(Evans 21). In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen puts emphasis on both the pretence of the women's demonstrations of the virtues and the suppositions behind these virtues. She demonstrates how many of these demonstrations are executed simply to satisfy the opposite sex, and for them to do this, women regularly must be submissive to the opposite sex. At that time, compliance seemed to be a quality a real female trait. Prevalent works of that time additionally show humility as an attribute of every self-respecting lady. However, a well-known feminist of the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft, considers humility as an example of craftiness. Jane Austen seems to agree with Wollstonecraft as she evaluates the use of craftiness by 'great ladies' in *Northanger Abbey*. She thus alludes that it is the fact that this women's shortcoming is viewed as an ideal quality for a 'great lady'. Moreover, the very intention to satisfy and please men demonstrates ladies' inferiority comparing to men's position in performing gender roles.

Austen's sentiments about women's roles seem to remain constantly in *Northanger Abbey*. She ridicules these desirable qualities that 'great ladies' are expected to have through mocking the depiction of such type of women. At some point, the heroine of the story Catherine was very embarrassed at her ignorance, as she could not compete with the male character Tilneys in some rather intellectual discussions. Here Austen portrays this as so-called 'misplaced embarrassment'. She also believes that even in case a lady is excessively shrewd and clever, it would be wise to conceal such traits. According to societal standards of those times, a woman is supposed to know less than a man, and if a lady happens to be extremely smart and shrewd, she needs to act stupid in order to qualify to be called a "great lady". This was the only way for a woman to match her role of a 'great lady', and hence, to satisfy men's desire for dominance and superiority. Jane Austen goes further when she says that for a good young lady, natural foolishness is a real advantage. She also says, 'imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms". With such dissimulation in the characteristics of 'great ladies', it is maybe rather improper to categorize women regarding these qualities.

In her work *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen clearly mocks different authors who accept the idea that women should always remain naive. She straightforwardly addresses this when she states, 'the advantages of natural folly in beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author'. Austen recalls the recommendations that ladies of her time received from such men as, Dr. John Gregory, and she truly believes that ladies ought to use their brains. Moreover, by depicting Mrs. Allen as a materialistic and moronic female character, Austen just further criticizes this type of women. Mrs. Allen is the ideal representation of the submissive and meek wife that men expected other ladies to be alike. Her lack of mind and inability to think lets her associate with the opposite sex with a capacity of praising the feeling of self-importance in others. Men, for example, Henry Tilney, took pleasure in lack of awareness in women because it let them showcase their knowledge and intellect and to educate the gullible ladies. As the voice

---

of an “injured body”, she calls attention to the inherent estimation of the novel-reading while commenting the continuous unfairness done towards the readers. Why would the main character of one novel belittle the others? Authors must stick together, she echoes in the last lines of her writing. Austen furnishes us with such fine meaning of her craft, as “work”, in which the main advantage of the brain is shown.

Austen not only showed the ladylike type of women of those times and ridiculed the manifestation of their craftsmanship, but also ensured ladies' roles in the aware readership of the future nineteenth century. This paper tried to investigate the level of mortification in the attempt to fit the standards of society and how the role of ladies in those times became primarily inferior. Austen holds views that were not common for ladies of her time. Proper conduct for a lady appeared unreasonable. She contended that ladies should fully use their mind and it should be a common practice to exercise them. Austen utilizes various literary techniques to underline her beliefs in *Northanger Abbey*. She emphatically contradicts female adjustment to social standards and suggests that women should to be equal to men in their rights.