Feminist Insights in *Northanger Abbey*: From Novel to Screen

Anhui Wang（王安瑞）

Student Number: 2023533015

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Introduction

Though Jane Austen’s novels were written over two centuries ago, her works remain remarkably relevant, resonating with modern audiences through their astute social commentary and thought-provoking themes. Among these works, *Northanger Abbey* and its 2007 British television adaptation, directed by Jon Jones and written by Andrew Davies, is an excellent example that captures these characteristics of Austen’s novel. Starring Felicity Jones as Catherine Morland and JJ Field as Henry Tilney, the movie vividly portrays the heroine’s struggles and growth within a patriarchal society, using various cinematic techniques to reflect and challenge gender stereotypes. This essay aims to explore the feminist themes in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and its 2007 film adaptation, highlighting how both works reflect and challenge gender stereotypes through unique literary and cinematic techniques.

Plot Summary

*Northanger Abbey* follows the journey of Catherine Morland, a young woman navigating the complexities of contemporary courtship rituals. The novel is divided into two main sections. The first half details Catherine’s challenges in distinguishing good from bad acquaintances, specifically the Thorpes and the Tilneys. The second half centers on her gothic imaginations, particularly her suspicions about General Tilney’s involvement in his wife’s mysterious death at Northanger Abbey.

Throughout the story, Catherine encounters a series of unexpected events that challenge her naive perceptions of adulthood, forcing her to grow and develop a more realistic understanding of relationships and society. Ultimately, Catherine’s journey is about personal growth and understanding how to live in reality.

The film adaptation serves as a brief overview that swiftly captures the major scenes depicted in the novel, but emphasizes Catherine’s vivid fantasies by visually depicting her gothic-inspired daydreams. It captures the social dynamics of Bath and the gothic atmosphere of Northanger Abbey, highlighting Catherine’s journey from naivety to maturity. The film simplifies certain subplots to fit the cinematic format, ultimately portraying Catherine’s realization of her mistaken excessive obsession with Gothic novels, and her growth into a more discerning and rational young woman.

What is feminism?

Feminism, also known as the feminist movement, is a social and political effort aimed at achieving gender equality and eliminating gender discrimination. Its goal is to transform social structures, laws, and cultural norms to ensure full equality for women in all aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life. A seminal work in feminist literature, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, delves into the historical treatment of women and argues that women have been historically perceived as the “Other” in a male-dominated society. De Beauvoir calls for women to reject traditional roles and pursue their own paths to freedom and self-actualization.

Although Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* is not explicitly labeled as a feminist novel, both the novel and its film adaptation subtly challenge the traditional literary archetype of the ideal female through different methods in their portrayal of the protagonist, Catherine.

Feminism in the Film Adaptation

In the story, Catherine’s gothic imaginations, the result of her reading of gothic novels, play a significant role. These imaginations cannot be fully visualized and conceptualized through text alone. The film adaptation brings these fantasies to life by creating a visual parody of the problematic gothic imaginations that young girls like Catherine develop as they transition into adulthood. These fantasies are shaped by societal views on gender roles and romantic relationships, often instilled through the reading of popular gothic romances.

For instance, the movie adaptation includes scenes that depict Catherine imagining herself being abducted by scoundrels on her way to Bath, a scenario not directly stated in the novel. This visual element emphasizes how Catherine’s imagination is fueled by the gothic novels she reads. In another scene, Henry Tilney is dramatized in the film to fit the heroic rescuer trope, standing in the rain and coming to the rescue of Miss Morland under the threat of John Thorpe. Additionally, in the movie adaptation, shortly after Miss Morland notices Isabella flirting with Captain Tilney—despite having already revealed her affection to Miss Morland’s brother, James—she dreams of Isabella falling captive to Captain Tilney in the dungeon of the castle, the Abbey. These visual representations expose the tension between Catherine’s romanticized fantasies and the mundane reality she must navigate, paving the way for her awakening.

By visually portraying Catherine’s gothic fantasies, the film adaptation emphasizes the restrictive nature of societal expectations imposed on women. These expectations are deeply rooted in the idealized gender roles presented in gothic romances, where women are often depicted as passive and in need of rescue by heroic men. The film highlight how these fantasies can mislead women, shaping their perceptions and behaviors in ways that reinforce traditional gender norms.

Furthermore, the movie showcases Catherine’s growth as she learns to distinguish between her fantasies and reality. This journey reflects a feminist critique of the limitations placed on women’s roles and their agency. Catherine’s eventual realization that life is not like the gothic novels she adores marks her intellectual and personal maturation, emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and self-awareness for females.

The visual depiction of Catherine’s fantasies in the film serves as a form of irony, critiquing both the genre of gothic romance and the societal norms it perpetuates. By using irony to subvert readers’ expectations of a stereotypical heroine who passively accepts her fate as defined by male characters, Catherine emerges as a complex character who must learn to navigate and ultimately reject these imposed narratives to find her own path, reflecting the idea of ​​feminism masterly.

Feminism in the Novel

Compared with its movie adaptation, the original novel *Northanger Abbey* offers a deeper and more multifaceted portrayal of its characters, and utilizes the technique of switching narrative perspective to subtly convey the author’s feminist ideas. Through this complex narrative structure and rich character development, the novel indirectly critiques traditional gender roles and societal expectations.

In the movie adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney, the male protagonist, is depicted as an idealized and perfect character. However, in the original novel, Austen presents him as a more complex individual, through whom Austen critiques societal attitudes towards gender roles and intellectual equality. The novel offers an exquisite portrayal that reveals his flaws and biases, serving as a vehicle for Austen’s feminist ideas.

In Chapter XIV, for example, the narrator offers an ironic commentary on societal preferences for beautiful but intellectually inferior women: “imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms”[[1]](#footnote-1). This observation is not just a critique of general societal norms but also a subtle jab at characters like Henry. Although Henry is portrayed positively, his attitudes reflect the egotistical and patronizing tendencies of men who prefer women to be less intelligent. The narrator’s remark that Henry is “too reasonable and too well-informed to desire anything more in a woman than ignorance”[[2]](#footnote-2) highlights the societal expectation for women to be intellectually inferior to men, an expectation that Henry himself does not fully escape.

Henry’s own statements in the novel reveal his biases. His comments on women: “Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute-neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit.”[[3]](#footnote-3) display a condescending view towards female intellectual capabilities. This ironic detachment and awareness of human flaws draw a parallel to Mr. Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, who similarly views himself as superior to his less discerning family members. Henry’s character, therefore, becomes a vehicle for Austen to critique the gender norms that value women more for their looks than their intellect, while also reminding women to develop their abilities in these areas.

Henry’s multifaceted portrayal demonstrates that even seemingly upright men can harbor patronizing attitudes towards women. By creating a character who is both appealing and flawed, Austen encourages readers to reflect on the deeper societal issues regarding gender equality and intellectual respect. This underscores Austen’s feminist message: the value of a woman lies in her mind and character, not just her appearance or conformity to societal expectations.

Another unique way that the novel uses is switching narrative perspective. The whole novel employs an omniscient third-person narrator who provides critical and often ironic commentary on Catherine’s actions and thoughts. However, when delving into Catherine's mind, the narrative adopts a more intimate, almost first-person perspective. This shift creates a jarring effect when switching back to the broader, more detached observations of the omniscient narrator.

For instance, when Catherine is informed of Mrs. Tilney’s sudden death, the narrative plunges into her consciousness, capturing her visceral reaction: “her blood ran cold with the horrid suggestions which naturally sprang from these words. … And yet how many were the examples to justify even the blackest suspicions!”[[4]](#footnote-4) Which forms a sharp contrast with others’ reaction: “And the anxiousness of her spirits directed her eyes towards his figure so repeatedly, as to catch Miss Tilney’s notice. ‘My father,’ she whispered, ‘often walks about the room in this way; it is nothing unusual.’”[[5]](#footnote-5) This contrast underscores Catherine’s emotional turmoil and the tension between her imagination and reality.

Another representative example is when, after Henry’s words remind her of her overindulgence in imagination instead of reality, the narrative again shifts to a deeply personal perspective, describing her disillusionment and self-awareness: “The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry’s address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This introspective moment marks a significant development in Catherine’s character, as she recognizes the impracticality of her romantic fantasies. Soon after, the narrative shifts to a broader third-person angle again: “Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for”[[7]](#footnote-7), which critiques the unrealistic portrayals of human nature in Gothic novels.

These shifts between perspectives not only enhance the reader’s connection with Catherine but also reflect a feminist critique. By juxtaposing Catherine’s personal growth with the critical observations of the omniscient narrator, the novel challenges the traditional, passive roles often assigned to female characters in literature. Catherine’s journey from naivety to self-awareness underscores her agency and intellectual development, positioning her as an active participant in her own story rather than a mere subject of romantic fantasy, which effectively echoes the feminist idea of ​​rejecting traditional roles and self-actualization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and its 2007 film adaptation convey the feminist themes subtly woven into the narrative through unique literary and cinematic techniques. Austen’s novel employs exquisite character depictions and shifting narrative perspectives to delve deeply into Catherine Morland’s internal struggles, contrasting her naive gothic fantasies with the broader societal expectations imposed on women. The film adaptation, despite lack of depth of characters’ portrayal, visualizes Catherine’s gothic imagination, emphasizing the tension between her imaginative tendencies and the reality she must navigate. Together, the novel and its film adaptation present a compelling feminist critique, showcasing Catherine as an active participant in her own story who ultimately rejects traditional roles and pursues self-actualization. Both works continue to resonate with modern audiences, offering insightful commentary on the complexities of gender dynamics and the importance of intellectual and personal empowerment for women.

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1. Jane Austen and Marilyn Butler, Northanger Abbey (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2006), 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Austen, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Austen, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Austen, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Austen, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Austen, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Austen, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)