



## ***Northanger Abbey*** **Week 1 Lesson Plans**

### **Introductions (10 minutes):**

*Ask participants to share their names, what drew them to a discussion group on *Northanger Abbey*, and what themes they've seen emerge in the first few chapters of the novel.*

### **The Defense of the Novel (20 minutes):**

*Provide Context:*

A prominent aspect of *Northanger Abbey* is Austen's commentary on reading and writing. Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* in the heyday of Romanticism, which was a literary movement that began in 1798 and considered poetry to be the best literary form.

William Wordsworth was one of the strongest proponents of this belief, and in his 1802 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* he wrote that poetry "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society."

A lot of people consider Austen to be a literary genius who distanced herself from the literary scene of her time. In many ways, though, *Northanger Abbey* can be read as a response to other writers. For example, when Austen defends the novel on page 23, she disagrees with Wordsworth and claims that the novel is the genre that "affords more extensive and unaffected pleasure than . . . any other literary corporation in the world." But Austen's defense of the novel goes beyond that, as demonstrated on page 23.

*Ask for a volunteer to read the passage beginning with “The progress of the friendship between . . .” and ending with “the age that could endure it.” Then discuss the questions below.*

#### Discussion Questions:

- Do you agree with Wordsworth or Austen? Do you think poetry is the genre that has the greatest effect on us as readers, or does the novel?
- What do we make of this passage? Why does Austen include this passage?
- Austen uses a specific type of language in this passage, a type of language she does not use in other places. For example, she uses a fair amount of superlatives. How does this language affect the tone of the passage?
- While Austen defends the novel in this passage, one of the literary projects of *Northanger Abbey* is to critique and satirize the specific genre of gothic novels. Are these two positions on novels contradictory, or is there some way that they make sense together?

#### Female Characters (15 minutes):

*Transition:*

In addition to *Northanger Abbey*'s gendered defense of the novel, Austen also uses female characters to comment on the lives and social status of women.

*Provide Context:*

Consider the different ways that Austen's thoughts on her female characters may be interpreted. At some points, when describing Catherine, Austen seems to demean women. For example, on page 9, Austen says that Catherine's "mind [is] about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" [9]. At other points in the novel, Austen seems like she is vouching for female agency, like on page 16, when she says, "if a rainy morning deprived [Catherine and Isabella] of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up, to read novels together" [16]. Here, it seems like Austen is offering her support of female readers.

Discussion Questions:

- From these quotes, what do we learn about Catherine?
- What can we say about Austen's attitude toward Catherine?
- In order to try to make sense of these contrasting passages, turn to a neighbor and discuss whether or not you think Austen is ultimately supporting or undercutting women in this novel.
- How do you think Austen's comments surrounding women are similar to or different from the ways that people speak about women today?

**Fashion (10-15 minutes):**

Throughout the novel, fashion is an incredibly important part of life for the female characters.

Turn to the description of Mrs. Allen and her fetishization of fashion on pages 10-11 beginning with "Mrs. Allen was one of that numerous class . . ." and ending with "but she did not depend on it."

*Read the passage out loud and then discuss the following questions.*

Discussion Questions:

- What is the purpose of including this long passage about fashion?
- How does Austen satirize or merely describe female codes of dress here?
- How are clothes and appearances still expressions of identity, including gender, sexuality, and class?

**Biographical Context and Reception History (10-15 minutes):**

Discussion Questions:

- What does Austen's biography help us to understand about the novel?
- How could relying too much on her biography mislead our interpretation of the novel?

*Northanger Abbey* has received mixed reviews. For instance, *The British Critic* believes Austen to be lacking in information, while the *Edinburgh Review* praises her skill.

- Which do you agree with more, and why?

### **Preparation for Next Discussion:**

For the next discussion group, read Chapters VI-XV, pay attention to the conversations about clothing, what each character wears and the places they display their fashionability. Consider marking passages in the text where Austen mentions specific places in Bath, muslin, or ideas related to courtship culture. These will be important themes to discuss during the next section of the novel.

There is a tab on our website with resources for Chapters VI-XV. Please take a look at this section after finishing the reading.