Julia Shin

Tenisha McDonald

English 206

16 December 2022

The Selfish Woman Writer

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* primarily focuses on the development of women as readers, specifically following Catherine Morland's journey as she becomes a better reader of novels and people. The female authors prevalent throughout, however, such as the oft-mentioned master of the Gothic novel, Mrs. Radcliffe, shape both Catherine's perception of the world and the world's perception of Catherine as a novel's heroine, emphasizing the responsibility held by women as writers. The narrator's acknowledgement of a gendered conflict between female novelists and male critics, the appeal made directly to novel-writers, and the epistolary nature of female authors reveal that what a woman writer chooses not to write holds equal importance to what she actually does write. Through the novel's entreaty to female authors to not disparage their own genre and gender, the morality behind *Northanger Abbey* creates a new ethos of feminist novel writing.

The presence of a perceptive, self-aware narrator appears at key intervals throughout *Northanger Abbey*, serving to provide satiric commentary on tropes and issues behind the novel in a first-person perspective. One such instance takes place when the narrator describes the rapidly budding friendship between the heroine Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe, a new acquaintance made during Catherine's trip to Bath. While relaying the sudden progression of their relationship, the narrator deliberately mentions that the two women bond over their shared love of reading novels. In fact, they appreciate each other's company during this activity so much

that they insist "in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt… to read novels together" (31). Promptly shifting away from the actual plot and characters, the narrator begins a direct address with the exasperated confirmation, "Yes, novels," affirming the uncommon occurrence of a heroine in a novel actually being depicted reading other novels and promising: "I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading… the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding" (31). This explicit pledge highlights the core integrity behind *Northanger Abbey* in its refusal to belittle the novel as a form and to make Catherine a heroine who hates novels in order to signify her virtue and intelligence. The narrator encourages this principled method of novel-writing and attempts to unify novelists against a gendered common foe, the snobby male-dominated world of literary criticism, personified by "the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Poe, and Prior" to overwhelming praise (32). When the narrator laments, "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," it therefore reads as a question of who will support the undervalued novelists, most likely female, if not other fellow women writers (32)? The emphatic statement of disapproval, directed toward the authors that write their heroines to view reading novels as a shallow pursuit, places consequence on the decision to not propagate certain messages and dissuades novelists from deprecating their own craft. With a final appeal to "not desert one another," as women novelists "are an injured body," the narrator establishes the righteous philosophy of female writers forming a community and supporting each other instead of adding to male condemnations of the novel (32).

While Henry Tilney mainly fulfills the standard role of Catherine's love interest, he also serves as an alternative to the insightful narrator and represents Austen's ideal novel-reader.

Fully confessing his ability to be engrossed completely by a thrilling story, he recalls "finishing [*The Mysteries of Udolpho*] in two days" (118). Unlike Catherine, however, Tilney maintains a critical distance from the text, always managing to separate fantastical escapism from real life. His ability to read well also makes him a better judge of people, as he understands both their inventions and realities. During their first conversation, Tilney's wry understanding makes itself clear when he interrupts their easy exchange on "such matters as naturally arose from the objects around them" due to the sudden realization that they never addressed the dull, societally required questions of how long Catherine has been in Bath, where she has been so far, and how she likes it (17). Tilney functions in a similar manner to the self-aware narrator by making active commentary on the events and tropes surrounding him. As an actual character, however, this often translates into him teasing others due to his recognition of the ridiculousness of certain societal expectations. He ends up jokingly regretting that he "shall make but a poor figure in [Catherine's] journal tomorrow" (18). As Catherine has previously only been seen consuming media, this is the first instance of Catherine explicitly being referred to as a writer, even if simply in jest. Tilney reduces women's journals, however, to a practice useful in remembering "the civilities and compliments of every day," as well as "various dresses," "the particular state of your complexion" and the "curl of your hair," implying that when women write only for themselves, their work becomes meaningless fluff (19). The first notable instance of a female character in the novel writing for an inherently self-centered reason, as journaling requires reflection solely on the self, garners heavy critique from the character that functions as another meta narrator. This criticism extends to all women writers, as their work will inevitably become the empty foolishness they are trying so hard to distance themselves from due to their selfishness and lack of support for other female authors. The only positive outcome Tilney believes comes

out of keeping a journal is the "easy style of writing for which ladies are so generally celebrated" (19). After all, "everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female" (19). Characterizing the writing of letters, which communicates ideas and creates connections to others, as expressly female stresses the woman writer's ability to affect her readers, as well as the moral duty that comes with such an ability. Although journal writing lacks significance in *Northanger Abbey*, the epistolary form allows women to exercise influence through their words and, above all, the words they do not write.

Even after his compliments toward the letter-writing style of women, Tilney expresses three major criticisms of their technique: "A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar" (19). Toward the end of *Northanger Abbey*, Isabella Thorpe, Catherine's fellow novel-reading friend, writes a letter to Catherine that contains all three of the bad letter-writing traits of women, according to Henry Tilney. This letter, the first and only verbatim piece of writing from a female character in the novel, represents the selfish woman writer. Abandoned by both James Morland, Catherine's brother and her ex-fiance, and Captain Tilney, the flaky first-born of Henry's family, Isabella resorts to the written word, attempting to exploit her friend's naivete and ingratiate herself with the Morlands again. Isabella's words lack a true subject, as she skirts around her real self-serving purposes and deceives through the blatant lies and manipulations in her letter. Switching from strong declarations that James "is the only man I ever did or could love, and I trust you will convince him of it" to immediately speaking of the "spring fashions" and the "most frightful [hats] you can imagine," Isabella unconvincingly inveigles Catherine to see things from her perspective (242). From the beginning, she directs Catherine to "write to [her] soon…direct to [her] own home" (241). The epitome of an opportunistic female author, Isabella also implores Catherine to

pen a letter to convince her brother James of Isabella's innocence in her affair with Captain Tilney, urging her to "lose no time… in writing to him and to me" (244). Because Catherine has become a better reader of people throughout the novel, she sees through the "inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood" of the letter and makes the emphatic decision that she will not write to James on Isabella's behalf, nor will she ever mention Isabella's name again in his presence (244). The journey of Catherine Morland is not a writer's künstlerroman. Instead, her ability to understand Isabella's true intentions enables Catherine to choose not to use the influence she has over her brother, and in the end, this choice to not write becomes more important than the words actually written by Isabella. In this final decision to not make Catherine a writer, the novel cements the ethical duties of authorship and calls for other female authors to stop writing novels where novels, women, female novel-readers, and female novel-writers are all portrayed in a bad light.

The utilization of a direct narrator of *Northanger Abbey* communicates the need for women writers band together and provide support for each other instead of for their mostly male critics. While Tilney's adjacent narrative role as a commentator positions journaling and, by extension, all self-centered writing by women as inherently meaningless, he places power in the letters they send. The influence of the communicative written word, as seen in the letter sent from Isabella to Catherine, can be employed in serve of evil. Catherine's choice to not write the letter to her brother and the corresponding focus on what women choose not to write ultimately contribute to the formation of a feminist morality behind writing novels, which maintains that women writers have an ethical responsibility to not disparage the work of other female authors.

HONOR PLEDGE: I pledge my honor that this paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.