

On tip-toe she entered; the room was before her; but it was some minutes before she could advance another step. She beheld what fixed her to the spot and agitated every feature.—She saw a large, well-proportioned apartment, a handsome dimity bed, arranged as unoccupied with a housemaid’s care, a bright Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes and neatly painted chairs, on which the warm beams of a western sun gayly poured through two sash windows! Catherine had expected to have her feelings worked, and worked they were. Astonishment and doubt seized them; and a shortly succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame. She could not be mistaken as to the room; but how grossly mistaken she was of everything else!—in Miss Tilney’s meaning, in her own calculation! (133) ¹

Among Austen’s heroines, Catherine Morland is particularly susceptible to bouts of gothic sensibility. Her preoccupation with a misguided perception of General Tilney leads her far astray in her relationship with his son, whom she desires. During her stay at the Tilney’s home, this dynamic comes to a climax when Henry catches her exploring his father’s room in a childish attempt to produce evidence that the General killed his wife. His subsequent interrogation of her paranoia and her change in attitude that follows can be understood as the most significant turning point in her character—it represents a turn away from the sensibility of the Thorpes in favor of the sense of the Tilneys.²

The chapter that follows begins with, “The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened” (136).³ For readers, that moment comes as a relief, for Austen’s use of free indirect style has forced all of Catherine’s naive and misguided notions upon them, and until that point there was never a scene in which those notions were directly confronted and corrected. This frustration with Catherine becomes the dominant aspect of the relationship between her and the reader. This passage that depicts her entry into the General’s bedroom

¹ The assignment called for the passage under examination to replace any traditional title.

² This is a slightly non-traditional opening. I felt that the anticlimactic nature of the passage at hand needed to be framed in the context of the climactic episode that followed soon after. The first two paragraphs can be seen as the “introduction.” A thesis statement can be found at the end of the second.

³ This is an MLA-kosher in-text citations. Page numbers alone are okay if the essay is on a single text.

epitomizes the delusional thought processes that Catherine's situation and growth suffers from prior to her sobering exchange with Henry Tilney.⁴

The heroine's cautious entry into the General's room is a significant moment in its own right. The tone⁵ of this passage is important and uniquely Austenian in that it represents Catherine's interiority. The proof of this is in a single mark of punctuation—the exclamation point that closes the description of the contents of the room.⁶ It's uncanny to read because it modifies nothing but the description of a room, but helps create a powerful climactic passage in which the description and reaction are being provided simultaneously in a single elegant statement designed to abruptly call for the dismissal of Catherine's decisions. As the reader⁷ goes over each object, *a bright Bath stove... mahogany wardrobes... neatly painted chairs*,⁸ they are forming their own unsurprised assessment of them. Being met with an exclamation point at the end results in the spotlight being thrown upon Catherine and her incessant sensationalism. Whereas she had intended for this to be her moment of truth, it becomes the the moment where even the most accommodating readers lay her fantasies to rest.⁹

Miss Morland's sensibility; however, seems to survive the moment. Her reaction to the scene with "astonishment" and "doubt" would not be out of place in an authentically gothic setting; but in this case the character is viewing a rather pleasant, well-lit room—again drawing attention to Catherine's debilitating world-view.¹⁰ The violence of her response is not because such a room is uncommon or would be out of place in the renovated, modernized, and permanently inhabited abbey, but because it is so profoundly different than what the outlandish

⁴ The thesis statement frames the passage within the context of the whole novel. In this case, I was focusing on the development of the main character and how this episode affected that development.

⁵ Here I am clearly stating the aspect of the passage that I'm reacting to at the beginning of the paragraph.

⁶ This is an example of how specific observations can be.

⁷ "The reader" is me, of course. Maintain third person whenever possible.

⁸ A direct quotation may not seem necessary if you are referring to the passage under examination.

⁹ At the end of the paragraph I'm framing the function of my observation within the development of the character.

¹⁰ Framing my next point, about specific imagery, within the development of the character.

expectation that her imagination had conjured. For a reader, there is hope that this sight of ordinary domesticity would serve as an epiphany—a moment of serious and much needed growth for Catherine. This hope is well founded. The contents of the room are all associated with warmth, light, and beauty;¹¹ in other words, they serve as a direct refutation of her fantasies that, in prior moments, had been stoked occasionally by the General’s manners or by the less refined elements of Northanger. She even seems to momentarily confront her own lack of sense, “She could not be mistaken as to the room; but how grossly mistaken she was of everything else!”, but again, Catherine is betrayed by the narrator. Austen’s frequent use of exclamation points and panicked language shows just how invested Catherine is in this fiction of hers, even in the discovery of a contradicting truth.

The immediate result of these observations provides no respite for the frustrated reader.¹² Instead of Miss Morland accepting that there is no reason to be suspicious of General Tilney, she merely acquiesces that perhaps running around the house that she is a guest in isn’t such a good idea.¹³ She simply decides that, “whatever might have been the General’s crimes, he had certainly too much wit to let them sue for detection” (133). Catherine’s conclusion is a real failure of her character to develop independently. A character with just slightly more sense than she has would have interpreted the brightly lit apartment as a sufficiently steady influence; and that character would have never needed a private lecture from her romantic interest.

After the private lecture *does* occur, Catherine appears more aware that ridiculous perceptions of others, even when they are kept to one’s self, can be damaging to her

¹¹ In this book, Gothic imagery is closely aligned with the character’s immature interiority. Contrasting imagery, like that in this passage, carries great significance.

¹² This serves as a transition sentence. In this paragraph, I’m moving away from direct observation of the selected passage and into an exploration of why the observations are important.

¹³ Rearticulating the presence of the event (which this passage is a part of) within the greater arc of the novel.

relationships with others.¹⁴ At the beginning of the following chapter she acknowledges that her reading of Gothic novels had led her astray and that, “Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and charming even as were the works of her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for” (137). She even follows this train of thought far enough to invite the concept of “mixed characters” into her realm of knowledge, as proven by her thinking that the General, “upon serious consideration, to be not perfectly amiable” (138). For better or for worse then, and since all others had failed before him, Henry is framed as the most significant actor in Miss Morland’s social education. This too is, to some degree, a disappointment. Catherine’s function in coming out into society is to get married. Her steadily improving ability to interact with people in that society was seemingly important in her quest to find a good husband; but that entire development of her character was brushed away when Henry Tilney married her in spite of witnessing, most intimately, her egregious failing in being a guest and acquaintance.¹⁵

This doesn’t quite deny the expectation that Catherine’s personal development will be rewarded because from this point onwards she still has to present herself as rehabilitated to the Tilneys. What it does deny is any further interesting exchanges between Catherine and Henry, for it solidifies Catherine as being subordinate to Henry not just in age and, unfortunately, sex; but subordinate in terms of knowledge and morality as well.¹⁶ There only further conversation before he makes his way to Fullerton is to teach her that the loss of Isabella’s friendship is not something worth fretting over (142); the lively conversations in the Upper Rooms in which Catherine proved to have an intelligent and unique, if naive, personality are nowhere to be seen in the falling action of the book.¹⁷

¹⁴ This sentence describes actual progress in the character’s development.

¹⁵ This is in reference to the event that the passage describes. I’m relating the event to the trajectory of her character.

¹⁶ Relating the events of the passage to the character’s ultimate fate.

¹⁷ Again, here I am relating the events of the passage to the character’s ultimate fate.

Austen's representation of Catherine's interiority confirms the depth of her fantasy as the book approaches its climax.¹⁸ Her failure to improve herself from the knowledge she attains from her own observations defines the relationship she has with the man she eventually marries.¹⁹ Austen doesn't describe Catherine Morland as being a 'heroine' at the beginning of the story, and this failure makes it questionable whether she ever becomes one by the end.²⁰

¹⁸ The significance of the style.

¹⁹ The significance of the event.

²⁰ The significance of the outcome of the event in the character's long-term development.