

A Comparative Study of Characters in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and the Ideal Lady in the 18th Century in Britain

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The purpose of my study is to compare the two heroines, Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* and Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and discover the reason why Austen uses imperfect heroines for her novels.

At the end of the 18th century, since people considered that women should be tender and obedient like “an angel,” many books encouraging this idea were published and an image of the ideal woman was popularized in Britain. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen describes a smart woman as a woman who has “the misfortune of knowing any thing” and suggests that she should “conceal it as well as she can” (NA 112). Therefore, women tend to dress well, smile like “an angel” for the sake of the favors of men and getting married to them. In order to get married and live happily with a husband and children, some women read books offering guidance on correct behavior and follow the models they present.

By comparing the two heroines, we can find that there are differences between Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*. Their appearances, characters and circumstances are completely different, and Catherine is described as a new type of heroine. Austen describes her appearance and character at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey* and shows how different she is from the image of a heroine in traditional novels. The opening sentence of *Northanger Abbey* says that “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine” (NA 5). “An heroine” here is a heroine of the Gothic Romance novels that enjoyed great popularity at the end of the 18th century. Heroines in Gothic Romance novels are usually described as very beautiful and intelligent, but they are so sensitive that they often collapse in a faint when unexpected events occur and surprise them. While Emily is described as a beautiful, intelligent and talented woman, Catherine is plain, hates to study and is uninterested in the arts but loves to play outside. Austen mentions that

Catherine is inadequate as a heroine of a novel and throughout the novel repeatedly emphasizes that she is not suitable for a heroine.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen states that novels reveal “the greatest powers of the mind” and the “most thorough knowledge of human nature” (NA 31). She believes that novels give us useful knowledge when we understand their wit and humor, and their choice of words. At that time, novels were considered worthless, and people tended to read what were considered worthy books such as poetry and historical books. However, Austen defended the genre of novels and told us that novels will help readers study human nature by reading detailed descriptions of various characters. Austen states that novels always should be the guide to good sense. She succeeds in teaching readers some important lessons without using perfect heroines.