

Embodying ‘the Naïve Reader’s Shame’:
Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. A Case Study

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Abstract

The affective turn in the humanities has placed immense importance on the cultural, historical and political meanings of emotions. In literary studies, especially, this has allowed for an opening up of the space of the narrative to pay close attention to the language of affect and emotional intensities in both historical as well as contemporary literary/non-literary archives. This article traces and analyse how ‘naivety’ came to be produced in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century by focusing on the figure of the naïve reader. Drawing upon the work of affect theorists, gender theorists, as well as scholars of body studies and Eighteenth-century Studies, this article analyses how anti-novel discourse re-produced the naïve reader enabling the circulation and reproduction of those affects, aesthetics and intensities it sought to censor. Firstly, it locates the figure of the naïve reader in popular periodicals and articles at the time. Secondly, it focuses on how ‘the naïve reader’ and ‘naivety’ itself gets re-produced in the novel format and how emotions like shame, do the work of censoring this naivety, particularly in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. Lastly, this article concludes with comments on the significance of the political aesthetic of the naïve reader.

Keywords: naïve reader, shame, affect, Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

Introduction: Tracing the ‘Naïve Reader’ in 18th Century Print Cultures

The proliferation of print¹ in the eighteenth century has been subjected to a lot of critical scrutiny and scholarly attention. It has been argued that, as the novel became central to public life leading to the invention of private reading, it produced new attitudes towards reading, as well as new ways of consuming literature. It simultaneously created new dangers and concerns regarding these new ways of reading, as the democratisation of print materials led to new reading experiences, as well as to the creation of different groups and classes of readers. While the story of its ascent to prominence continues to be theorised, speculated and remains open to revision, the very act of reading novels has become part of the collective imagination in contemporary culture. It has paved the way for novels and novel-reading to be represented in specific socio-cultural contexts often represented and reproduced across popular media formats.

This article seeks to demonstrate how naivety in the late eighteenth century came to be produced by focusing and tracing the figure of the naïve reader. I contend that the figure of the naïve reader originated in the periodicals and print cultures of the late – eighteenth century, at a time when “suspensions about the effects on women of novel reading and novel writing increased from 1790 to 1815, a period when the political ferment over the French Revolution reached its height” (Mudge 97). Much of the anti-novel discourse from this period relied on the creation and re-production of the naïve reader. The trope of the naïve reader was handy in exposing the dangers of novel-reading on a society marked by the proliferation of the novel form and the invention of private reading. As much as critics feared the naïve subject and critiqued the novel form as exciting the passions of novel readers, the language of censorship employed by them remained charged with affect.

It is essential to note how the naïve reader was an aesthetic modelled out of primarily male anxieties about women readers. Solitary women readers posed multiple dangers and threats to

patriarchal control. For this reason, novels and novel reading was criticised or not treated as serious. It was deemed silly by the critics of the novel form in an attempt to repress and censor female embodied practises of reading. By looking at ‘the naïve reader,’ I turn my attention to how these naïve and uncritical practices of reading were embodied and affective. While it is important to note the difference between actual historical readers’ accounts and fictional readers and not conflate the two, the heroine of Jane Austen’s novel *Northanger Abbey* became a site for these anxieties, censorious attitudes and topical discussions to unfold. Austen’s naïve reader of seventeen years old espouses a certain kind of politics of non-normativity through the embodiment of the affect of shame. In the late 18th century, the critique of female reading habits by the male characters became charged with a language of affect. The attempt to repress the naïve reader and naïve practices of reading only ended up further proliferating the vocabulary and concept of naivety.

This concept of naivety has lingered in the popular imagination through contemporary historical fiction/ media. In the popular TV series *Downton Abbey* (2010), the Dowager played by Maggie Smith speaks for unanimous beliefs of the English upper-class when she exclaims “She reads too many novels” (“Season 1 Episode 6,” 00:46:48) on learning about Lady Mary’s desire to tell the complete truth about Mr. Pamuk to Matthew Crawley before accepting his marriage proposal. In another key moment in the show, when Lady Sybil decides to choose Branson as her partner, irrespective of his class and social status, the Dowager tries to explain how “this sort of thing is all very well in novels, but in reality it can prove very uncomfortable” (“Season 2 Episode 8,” 00:10:17). Both these comments on novels and novel reading occur at crucial moments in the show; they are directed at the Crawley sisters when they are about to do something irrational and unconventional. While the TV series maps the arcs of both Mary and Sybil Crawley as powerful female characters, this evocation of their habit of reading novels is uttered in the context of their refusal to withdraw from a certain course of action they have decided for themselves, which also happens to be transgressive in nature.

Downton Abbey, like many other popular television genres, acknowledges the affect that novels are known to exercise on female readers.

While both Mary and Sybil Crawley were shown to be capable of making their own decisions, novels were designated as objects capable enough to corrupt their minds. This line of thinking can be traced back to the moment the novel form came to dominate the marketplace in Britain. Ever since its emergence, it attracted responses from all sections of British society in the eighteenth century. The appearance of the novel, along with the invention of cheaper print technologies, ensured its availability to the common reader in unprecedented ways. The novel form can be said to have created an opportunity for widespread discussion, debate and criticism in the popular periodicals of the time about its possible effect on readers. As observed by Ina Ferris, “women, novels, and reading had formed a cluster of critical concern since the eighteenth century, and by the end of that century the perception that the novel was a female field was well entrenched” (35). Ferris’ comment about the association of the novel form with women is crucial in defining and understanding the naïve reader. While these members of civil society contemplated and tried to define the meaning and impact of novel reading, it was the women and the lower classes who came to be thought of as predominantly naïve and susceptible to this dangerous form.

Commentary upon the novel and its possible dangers came to be articulated by the conservative, as well as the progressive, circles. While arguments of a more regressive nature expressed the fear that the novel would pull female readers away from their household duties or lead them to embody behaviours that could topple the family structure, the state and the nation itself, practices of certain kinds of novel reading did not escape scrutiny from even the most resoundingly progressive voices. It was noted by Mary Wollstonecraft, that “reveries of stupid novelists . . . corrupt the taste, and draw the heart from its daily duties” (425-26). It is important to note that descriptions of novel reading as negative, such as Wollstonecraft’s comment, came up in the context of a century obsessed with defining taste and appropriate codes of

conduct. *What one reads*, was never an innocuous question but a matter of taste, class and moral character.

This preoccupation with taste and conduct, along with reason, was central to understanding and defining the individual in the 18th century. As commented by Simon Gikandi,

within the European continental tradition, the production of a unique and self-reflective human subject was closely aligned with the project of rationality and the autonomy of aesthetic judgment. Modern subjects were those individuals who were capable of using their faculties of reason and judgment in the conduct of human affairs. (4)

Gikandi links this idea of subjectivity with the ability to think rationally. Theories of art, judgment and the emergence of a critical rational subject in the European context; in fact, all of human existence came to depend on its capacity for thought, as summed up by in the Cartesian idiom, “I think therefore I am.” In the enlightened era, “critique” became “essential to human flourishing” (During 84). The concept of the naïve reader as uncritical, irrational and ignorant proliferated in order to separately define critique and the critical subject.

In order to eradicate this uncritical and naïve subject, the periodical came to play a crucial role in the 18th century. Among various reasons, the periodical was predicated on this desire to lay down prescriptions for private behaviour. It sought to modify and lay down rules for fashioning the self, according to reason and morality. In its heyday, the periodical was committed to disciplining leisure and exercise control on its women readers, who it termed as “creatures of emotion and sensibility” (Hale 570). In order to be perceived as subjects, those operating within the category of emotions needed adjustment and rectification. In a century obsessed with reason, the notion of a naïve subject first came to be defined in print cultures. Ironically, the idea of naivety first began to emerge in the attempt to carve out a subject fashioned through superior taste and aesthetic judgment. We witness naivety being produced in a certain way and consequently expelled,

replaced systematically with culture, sophistication, refinement and acceptance of all those social mores approved by the status quo. In this context, being naïve becomes pejorative, unsophisticated, artless and threatening.

The immature naïve subject had to be socialised and educated in the ways of the world in order to achieve maturity and find a place in a social and political sense. According to Immanuel Kant, Enlightenment was

man's emergence from his self – incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapreaude!*" (7).

This encouragement to 'dare to know' had important implications on the novel form, and especially on the emergence of the bildungsroman also known as 'the novel of education,' which traced the journey of the modern subject (usually a young man) from naivety to maturity. It encouraged to not only flesh out the critical capabilities of the modern individual, but to also purge out this Kantian "immaturity" which was defined by irrational, uncritical, and unsophisticated behaviour.

Typically, in a bildungsroman, "Youth 'must come to an end' – youth is subordinated to the idea of 'maturity': like the story, it has meaning only in so far as it leads to a stable and 'final' identity" (Moretti 8). Naivety served as an obstacle to the making and socialization of this stable, critical subject. As Franco Moretti further points out in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, the bildungsroman is a genre reserved for the development of the "free individual" as a "convinced citizen" not "fearful subject" (16). This conviction is required by the nation-state that demands "agreement, homogeneity, consensus," for it is threatened by the emotional "fearful subject" (Moretti 16). "As the narration of white, European, and predominantly male subject formation, the bildungsroman is thus closely tied to the economic,

imperialist, and racist domination of Western society” (Kontje 110), which was intolerant to both unreason and uncritical readers. The very concept of the so-called naïve reader, both in fiction and in reality, threatened to disrupt the making of a mature, stable citizen that inhered the ethos of Western society.

Gendering the Concept of the ‘Naïve Reader’

It is unsurprising that naïve practices of reading came to be associated with women readers. This gendering occurred not only in terms of genres but also of the spaces allocated for reading.² As certain genres and types of reading material became markers of class and gender identities, they also inaugurated the domains and spaces reserved for the ‘public’ and the ‘private act’ of reading. These codes of behaviour, based on class and gender, were formed due to the anxieties experienced by elites, predominantly by the men of a certain class and ideology, as a result of the growing ubiquity of the novel form. It was precisely the easy accessibility of cheap fiction and of the often unregulated market relationships that came to exist directly between the producers, sellers and consumers of the novel form that sparked these fears.³ In the chapter, “New Readers in the Nineteenth Century,” Martyn Lyons talks about the gendering of the novel form in ways that alluded to certain gender stereotypes. In doing so, he lays down the specific dangers that novel reading posed for its female readers. He highlights the idea of alternative sexual behaviour and erotic connotations within this context helpful to make sense of the naïve reader’s shame in Austen:

Novels were held suitable for women, because they were seen as creatures of the imagination, of limited intellectual capacity, both frivolous and emotional. The novel was the anti-thesis of practical and instructive literature. It demanded little, and its sole purpose was to amuse readers with time on their hands. Above all, the novel belonged to the domain of the imagination . . . carried a certain danger for the nineteenth-century bourgeois husband and paterfamilias: the novel could excite passions, and stimulate the female imagination. It could encourage romantic expectations

that appeared unreasonable; it could make erotic suggestions which threatened chastity and good order. (319)

According to Lyons' analysis, women's indulgence in leisurely forms of reading such as the novel itself came to be regarded as dangerous.

While a growing tradition of criticism regards the reader of the newly emerging novel form to be principally female, Jan Fergus alerts her readers and literary historians to the dangers of relegating the 'feminisation of the novel' in callous terms in her book *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth – Century England*. In the introduction, she argues that the view of women being the primary consumers of the novel form has been overestimated and is often not backed by actual historical records:⁴

Although literacy does not necessarily imply reading, still less reading novels, scholars and eighteenth-century critics have persisted in characterising the audience for fiction as female. Their evidence for this identification is largely anecdotal or circular . . . evidence for the notion that women 'dominated' the fiction-reading public is taken primarily from the accusations of eighteenth-century reviewers and moralists whose laments are well documented. (*Provincial Readers* 12)

According to the evidence collected by Fergus, it would be largely incorrect to say that the novel was consumed predominantly by a class of unruly, young women, who were easily manipulated and excited by this pliable and emerging form. Rather, the young, naïve and often female reader was the subject of several essays and articles published in the periodical form, often authored/curated by male literary critics. The paranoia of the male critic, who no longer found himself in a position to control the unregulated market forces of the reader and seller, seemed to be obsessed with this image of a young woman who allowed the reading of romances to overtake her reality. There is, however, plenty of evidence to support the 'fictiveness' of the figure of 'the naïve female reader' and its ubiquitous presence in the writings of the early critics of the novel

form. For instance, Richard Berenger wrote to the periodical *The World in 1754*, illustrating the dangers of reading romances:

... and as human nature is apt to be more influenced by example than precept, I shall beg leave to enforce the truth of what I have advanced by the following history.

CLARINDA was the only child of a wealthy merchant, who placed all his happiness in the expectations of her merit and the rewards of it . . . Every hour which was not appropriated to one of these accomplishments, was spent in the ensnaring practice of reading NOVELS and ROMANCES; of which CLELIA was her favourite, and the hero of it continually in her head. (261-2)

He details a figure of a young passionate woman reader and the consequences of such practices of reading. She is so obsessed with reading romances and so “corrupted” by the novels she reads that she chooses a lowly Valet as her partner instead of the noble Theodore, simply because “he did not approach in heroics, nor first break his passion to her in shady groves, he was not the hero she expected, . . . he was not the hero which CLELIA had impressed on CLARINDA’s imagination” (262). By Berenger’s own assessment, Clarinda is a transgressive figure, who in her naivety chooses a partner not only of her own choice but who is simply much less suitable than Theodore by virtue of his nationality and class status. Consequences of desiring reality to imitate a romance novel, or, more fundamentally, of reading romances, are disinheritance and heartbreak. Even as Berenger warned against the perils of reading and maligned the practices of reading romances of this young female reader, he ironically ended up employing the dramatic device of storytelling itself to warn against Romances and include all the transgressive desires he sought to censor. The trope of the impressionable naïve female reader was re-produced in other similar anti-novel discourses as a sign of the fears of conservatives and social elites. The dangers of reading were often hysterically and irrationally associated as being linked to leading to the actualisation of forbidden desires and unacceptable of codes of behaviour that violated both gender and class norms.

In another letter penned by Ann Wingrove, "On Reading Novels," submitted to *Letters, Moral and Entertaining* (1795), a similar literary device was employed, and the trope of the young naïve reader who relentlessly pursued her desires is shown to meet a disastrous end. Wingrove created the fictional story of Maria, the daughter of a clergyman, who, in her obsession with Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison, refused to form any romantic attachment to any of her suitors for they failed to match up to her favourite literary character. Her demise is narrated as, "Time had now faded the roses on her once blooming cheeks, disappointment and mortification had changed her temper, and in her fortieth year she retired . . . continually repining at her past folly in rejecting several worthy men" (272). Once again, the consequences of reading novels are portrayed as spinsterhood and loss of rank, accompanied by shame. Ultimately, reading history and religious scriptures is preferred over reading novels precisely because the latter enables the unregulated female body to behave in transgressive ways and ends in failure to be successfully co-opted by the patriarchal institution of marriage. The category of the naïve female reader is thus continually pre-supposed and re-produced as an aesthetic in early criticism of the novel form to ultimately espouse a certain kind of conservative politics.

It is important to note how the novel addiction and its effect on women was itself imagined by the censors and critics of the novel form. Additionally, the language they continued to employ not only relied on techniques of storytelling and mimicked the bildungsroman of fallen heroines, much like the language of the novels they sought to critique, but their accounts were powerfully charged with the language of affect. James Fordyce elucidates this in his sermon:

Besides the beautiful productions of that incomparable pen, there seem to me to be very few, in the style of Novel that you can read with safety, and yet fewer that you can be read with advantage. — What shall we say of certain books, which we are assured . . . are in their nature so shameful, in their tendency so pestiferous . . . can it be true, that any young woman, pretending to decency, should

endure for a moment to look on this infernal brood of futility and lewdness? (264)

As evident from his wording, even the critics fearful of the affective elements of the novel could only articulate their dissent and criticism in affective terms,⁵ as even the most well-reasoned arguments were fundamentally driven by these irrational fears. Judith Butler's essay "Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor," further delves into the idea of censorship as productive in nature. She notes that the act of censorship in regulating speech acts produces discursive regimes of both the "speakable and the unspeakable" (251). According to her, language ends up reproducing and re-staging the very thing it attempts to circumscribe; instead, an act which is never complete to begin with, and the vocabulary of censorship inadvertently ends up becoming dependent on the vocabularies of the censored (Butler 251). By virtue of being productive, censorship essentially re-produces and re-hashes the idea of the naïve reader. More than an assessment of reading practices of the age, these censorious attitudes become productive and generate a new aesthetic that becomes the site for rising fears and concerns sparked by novel reading.

This new aesthetic, however, remains merely a fiction. As J. M. Coetzee states, "affronts to innocence are not upon one's essential being but upon constructs. . . . The infringements are real; what is infringed, however, is not our essence but a foundational fiction" (14). The censor works with this "foundational fiction" to the extent that he "acts out the outrage" (Coetzee 9) of the community or merely fabricates the community's outrage and then "acts it out" (9). This understanding of censorship becomes centrally important to our reading of the censorious attitudes towards novel reading. In their attempt to critique the hyper-imagination of the naïve reader, these censors primarily imagined the naïve reader itself. They relied on the "foundational fiction" of a young, naïve reader who is addicted to reading to the extent that it led to the insane quixotic desire for mistaking reality with fiction. As Fergus notes in "Women Readers: A Case Study," "Before 1770, I can find no evidence of a middle-class female public addicted to

fiction in any form, and even after that point, provincial men and women in all but lower classes showed a fairly comparable interest in fiction" (159). The vocabulary created for censoring this tendency inadvertently became a fiction.

Different ideological groups have responded affectively to novel reading by showing fear and panic to the phenomenon of reading novels. Rather than taking these affective practices of reading out of circulation, censorious attitudes re-inscribed them. This response can be seen as connected to the looming threat of loss of some form of power and control. As noted by Coetzee, "the punitive gesture of censoring finds its origin in the reaction of being offended" (ix), and all the instances of taking offense are based on "the experience or premonition of being robbed of power" (3). The aesthetic of the naïve reader produced in these tracts is then systematically feminised even without the presence of concrete proof that women were the primary consumers of the cheaply printed novel. The naïve reader is essentially and specifically imagined as a young woman reader who consumes the bulk of a particular kind of fiction meant to excite and inflame the reader's senses. In an essay that appeared in *The Monthly Preceptor* in 1800, the youthful novel-reader is gendered in these terms:

The love of Novels Is, without doubt, extremely pernicious, as it introduces false ideas into the mind . . . The imaginations of the young are lively, and their judgments frequently erroneous . . . The consequence is, that the youthful Novel-reader, if she possesses sensibility, will really participate in the various misfortunes. . . . (253)

The kind of reader who was targeted as its prime consumer is a young naïve female reader. This fiction was attached again and again onto the body of a female reader for a significant reason. As quoted in Fergus, Margaret Anne Doody has persuasively suggested that a "feminization" of the novel is a way "to limit any damage it may do: To pretend that the novel is primarily directed towards females . . . is reassuring, for women (unlike youthful male aristocrats) are theoretically disabled from bringing concepts

into social currency” (172). Thus, the naïve reader is feminised to assuage these anxieties and the threat of loss of power and control.

As much as it is necessary to control women’s bodies within patriarchal structures, by ascribing novel reading as a dangerous recreation onto the body of the naïve female reader, it became easier to assert control over the same. While some of these critics expressed the fear that the naïve female reader would conflate reality for fantasy, the real dangers such a reader posed were fundamentally embodied because the “problem is not that those who engage on fiction reading or erotic self-stimulation are mistaken about the ontological status of fantasy” but that they were “more compelling, more able to arouse . . . than real sexual partners” (Laqueur 322). The lack of control, increased accessibility and free play of fantasy allowed the naïve reader to embody unruly desires and behave in ways that may be undisciplined and not permissible by the status quo.

Under the influence of the novel, the loss of mental and moral sense was located in the bodily gestures, as the body became the site that can inhabit and enact transgressive desires, moral and spiritual depravity. The body essentially threatened to challenge rank and social status by disobeying prescribed norms of behaviour (Nixon 54). It was thus, the body of the naïve female reader that was considered dangerous. The aesthetic of the naïve reader was consciously created, and subsequently feminised, because the act of solitary reading posed dangerous ways of being that deviated from the norm. As pointed out by Thomas Laqueur in *Solitary Sex: The Cultural History of Masturbation*, “imagination” and “the luxury of fancy” became symptomatic of the sexually deviant act of masturbation itself (305-317). Passions that the novel was imagined to evoke in the reader’s mind posed a danger directly to one’s bodily responses and sexual behaviour, as the “roaming, unsecured and undisciplined mind free to imagine as it wished, free to create worlds of its own, seems very close to the secret life of the sexual desiring body” (Laqueur 305). Thus, private reading helped in the very creation of masturbation as the secret and the “solitary vice” itself as the pleasures of reading alone also produced the conditions for pleasuring oneself. This deviancy, as noted by Laqueur, is

dangerous precisely because it seems to defy compulsory heterosexuality and frees the body of the woman from prescribed roles of household duties and childbearing (323). The free play of fantasy and “imagination” can directly lead the body to be unpredictable and therefore uncontrollable:

The danger of forsaking the real for the wasteful and illusory, which Tissot put at the heart of onanism, is there too in critiques of “novelism” . . . Novels, like masturbation created for women alternative “companions of their pillows”; novels, like masturbation, inflamed the passions of the youth . . . in short, novels, like seductive whispers and dirty talk, turned women on, made them forget their honour, and led to every sort of deviant sexual practice. (Laqueur 321-22)

The fiction of the naïve reader was essentially created so that the bodily desires of the feminised reader could be controlled. Thus, most of the anti-novel discourse had to first imagine the female naïve reader who could then be taught about the ills of reading novels. She is subsequently discouraged from being affected and using her imagination too much to stop her from identifying with the heroines of those pernicious novels.

However, this very technique involved the power of imagination and relied on identifying with the naïve reader. Anti-novelist discourse fundamentally required and relied on this ability of the female reader to naively identify with this “foundational fiction” they created. They were dependent on the female reader’s ability to empathise and see themselves reflected in the story of the naïve heroine/reader who indulged in emotionally charged novels and practices of reading that subsequently led to her fall. Thus, affective practises of reading proliferated and were re-produced through the site of the body of the female reader, too naïve to know the difference between the real and the fictional.

As pointed out by Lyons, interviews with actual women readers have revealed them to be critical of their own reading practises relegating them as “trash” or “nonsense reading” that distracted them from a demanding “work ethic” (321). Much of

their reading was conducted in secrecy. Reading for pleasure had to be essentially ostracised for it became time spent away from the “labour” of housework and the image of “good housekeeper” was incompatible with “reading” (312). From the extracts quoted above, it is evident that writers of conduct literature relied on inducing shame in order to discourage readers from reading novels that were so-called vile and shameful in their nature. The evocation of shame in these anti-novel writings is integral for a number of reasons.

From the genre’s inception, the novel was defined by a shame closely tied to cultural degradations of the feminine more generally.

During the century in which “guilt, shame, and danger came to be so sharply focused” on onanism, the public found in the novel, according to Thomas Laqueur, a potent counterpoint of masturbation. And it was the female novel readers who were cast as “the prototypical absorbed readers”: “just as the woman masturbator was the poster girl of dangerous solitary sex – she produced nothing but desire, pure libidinous pleasure – the woman reader was . . . the perfect onanist.” (Bennett 3-4)⁶

This linking of women’s private reading time and masturbation can have interesting insights in unpacking the affective aspects of naïve reading. I contend that, Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* can be then read as a case study steeped in questions of shame, reading naively, the female body and sexual desire.

Embodying ‘the Naïve Reader’s Shame’ in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*: A Case Study

Northanger Abbey, written in the 1790s and published posthumously in 1818, subsumes and inheres much of these multiple attitudes towards the early novel as it explored these affective practices around its heroine Catherine Moreland. The aesthetic of the naïve female reader who allows fancy to take over reality is novelistically produced to experience “momentary shame”

(Bennett 20) caused by her absorptive practices of reading. Shame is configured in bodily terms, as Catherine is so often led to 'blush' with 'embarrassment' throughout the novel. Austen's quixotic naïve reader is feminised and embodied as constantly ashamed until her bildungsroman traces and ends with her character's successful co-option within the institution of marriage to Henry Tilney. It is worth looking at these scenes of shame, for they reveal the female body to be engaged in acts of queer 'self-pleasure' that is both threatening and undesirable to the patriarchal order. While Austen echoed and included early attitudes towards the genre of the novel itself, satirising both the critics of novels and the novel readers, shame is included in key instances to highlight its role as a patriarchal tool to contain deviancy and non-normative desires.

In the early part of the novel, Catherine's quixotic naivety momentarily poses a direct challenge to patriarchal institutions of authority, until it is dispelled. In the process, it traces how Catherine's affective practices of reading pose a threat to the patriarchal order and inches dangerously close to transgressing the strictures of class and rank. Until her shame is exorcised in the text at the climax, it continues to be embodied as a means of self-censorship and self-disciplinary measure. As Sara Ahmed shows,

Loves that depart from the scripts of normative existence can be seen as a 'source' of shame. One may be shamed, for example, by queer desires, which depart from the 'form' of the loving nuclear family . . . Shame secures the form of the family by assigning to those who have failed its form the origin of bad feeling. (107)

And this bad feeling plagues Catherine whenever she displays non-normative modes of being that teeter perilously close to challenging normative social ideals.

Reading becomes the space for socialising with other women readers as she happily shares with her close friend Isabella that "if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up, to read novels together" (Austen 27). Private reading becomes

the source of that shameful onanism which can do without the presence of a hero, for, as Catherine herself states, “while I have *Udolpho* to read, I feel as if nobody could make me miserable” (Austen 31). Catherine is the perfect onanist, the naïve reader the anti-novel writings warned about, for she is far too absorbed in the act of reading, to the point that her desires have supplanted the need for a husband with that of a woman-authored book. Her naïve reading practices show how anti-novel views of male critics of female reading practices were often pretentious and shallow. They appear to be not so much about condemning them as “horrid” but seem rooted in the patriarchal desire to control and police the female body. As evident from the exchange between Catherine and James Thorpe in the novel, it is obvious that he seems more interested in panning novels and their readers. He is obsessed with the exercise of that control over their reading habits rather than any valuable rebuttal. Austen portrays him to be the truly ignorant reader as he erroneously condemns *Udolpho* without knowing it is written by Mrs. Radcliffe, the only author whose novels he finds worthy enough of his praise. To his ignorance, Catherine’s simple and naïve response “*Udolpho* was written by Mrs. Radcliffe” (Austen 39) is enough to challenge and expose him as the truly ignorant reader. As noted by Coetzee, all critics and censors are “absolutist” readers, who read “to know what it really means, to know its truth” for they remain emblematic of a “tyrannical second-order” characterised by “political absolutism” or “rationalistic reduction,” while the language of the real people remains imperfect, the “‘this-worldly’ language of the ‘flesh’” (161). This fleshiness of language of the first kind is what is associated with a certain kind of naivety, for it avoids the interpretative “paranoia” of the critic and the censor. “The hero is not a decoder of second-level significations but a naïve reader who takes stories at their face value” (Coetzee 157). As noted by Clive Barnett, “Coetzee targets . . . an entire metaphysics of meaning and models of reading as interpretation that it sustains” (151). Thus, by embodying naïve reading practices, by precisely taking things ‘at their face value,’ Catherine opposes

and challenges the paranoid and interpretative practices of male readers.

Her imperfect and naïve practices of reading challenge the abstract, over-complex rationalist ethos that characterises the very model of the liberal bourgeois form of argument. Not aimed at interpreting or abstracting any moral or utilitarian purpose, her reading of novels is predicated on the naïve desire to simply feel pleasure and is reflected in her language itself as evident from this exchange with Henry in chapter 14:

“But now really, do not you think *Udolpho* the nicest book in the world?”

“The nicest – by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding”

“Henry,” said Miss Tilney, “you are very impertinent. Miss Morland, he is treating you exactly as he does his sister. He is forever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you. The word ‘nicest,’ as you used it, did not suit him; and you had better change it as soon as you can, or we shall be overpowered with Johnson and Blair all the rest of the way.”

“I am sure,” cried Catherine, “I did not mean to say anything wrong; but it is a nice book, and why should not I call it so?.” (Austen 102-03)

Her naïve query at the end betrays precisely the kind of ‘imperfect language of the flesh’ that is imbued with child-like pleasure and wonder as opposed to Henry’s pedantry. Her naïve interest in novels is however later revealed to be highly political and a conscious choice, for, as she rightly says, “the quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome . . .” (Austen 103). Odette Cortés London argues that Austen alerts her reader that “history, which was a male-dominated field and therefore associated with reason and the ‘sobriety of mind’, becomes muddled and not entirely trustworthy for it must contain some element of ‘invention’” (7), thereby dismantling the

binary between fact and fiction, as well as reality and fantasy upheld by anti-novel critics and censors. Catherine's desire to see more women characters, typically indicative of her naivety, embodies not only the desire for identification, but also points to the bias of male-authored genres which exclude women and their perspectives. The novel, focalised from the perspective of women characters, offers an epistemological alternative view to this history from the top which attracts Catherine. At least, it offers an opportunity to map and locate her 'self' in these narratives – a 'self' that is missing from all other discourses. In opposition to other scholars who feel Catherine's reading is restrictive due to lack of guidance and schooling available to a woman of her breeding, it is evident that this is not the case here. Rather, it is her embodied onanist desire for pleasurable reading that lure her towards novels.

It is typical of *Northanger Abbey* to follow these spurts of ingenuity with 'bad feelings' of shame. Shame, in Austen's novel, becomes symptomatic of a desire to defy social order. It "is experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence" (Ahmed 107). Her co-option in the social order is made possible only "when the shamed other can 'show' that its failure to measure up to a social ideal is temporary" (Ahmed 107). In the scene where her curiosity leads her to explore "the forbidden gallery" of Mrs. Tilney (Austen 181), Catherine Morland ends up with her in tears of shame when she is discovered by Henry, who finds her indulging in the luxury of her fancy, the "solitary vice" of stimulating her imagination that anticipated some "horrid revelation" in Mrs. Tilney's room. Elspeth Probyn says "shame is the body saying that it cannot fit in, although it desperately wants to" (72). And here, Catherine's absorption in the fiction concocted by her literally displaces her. She is found in a part of the abbey where she has no business loitering about. Even as the Tilneys' guest, her movements are restricted and controlled and relaxed only in the presence of Eleanor. In fact, her invitation to the abbey and her being preferred by the General were due to John Thorpe's exaggeration of her wealth; he had described her as "handsomely legacied" (Austen 240). Later, when she is ordered to leave most

disrespectfully and suddenly by the General, it can be read as a culmination of his understanding of her as being “out of place,” “the shamed other” who is not as wealthy as previously thought. She is thus physically placed outside – the abbey, the structure of family and the desired social rank – without hopes of being co-opted. Her shame is embodied fully by her, quite materially, as she is sent without a servant, a chaperone or even money.

This failure is required in her bildungsroman, to be both ‘witnessed’ by Tilney as well as being ‘temporary,’ before she is permanently restored to the social order. It results in the most thorough opening of her eyes to “the extravagance of her late fancies” (Austen 191), for it is dangerously close to supplanting her position in society with that of ‘the liberty’ of ‘her imagination’ to a point of no return. Catherine experiences her shame as this moment of being physically ‘out of place’ in front of Henry. “Most grievously humbled” (Austen 191), she is restored not only within the patriarchal institution of family and the hetero- normative resolution that awaits her in the end, but to the nation of England itself. Her attachment to her fancies, encouraged by her naïve practices of reading, render her dangerously close to be outside the nation⁷ itself, for when Henry learns of her horrid suspicions, “he issues a magisterial rebuke, telling her in effect, that she is lacking patriotism as well as good sense. She has forgotten her own identity” (Parrinder 186). It renders her almost “criminal”⁸ (Austen 70) and exorcises all “visions of romances” (Austen 70) inspired by her reading gothic tales set in non-English locales. Ultimately, the very idea of Catherine’s shame points to her English identity. The embodiment of her shame as the blush of her cheeks crystallises her whiteness. Her whiteness makes it possible for her to show her shame. “At other times, the invisibility of shame experiences in the unavailability of the blush can lead to some people being seen as shameless and hence as being unaffected by bad deeds” (Ahmed 120). Catherine’s capacity to display shame becomes directly linked to her racial identity. The ability to display that one is ashamed makes one racially superior. It acts as proof of one’s capacity to learn, as well as to adopt, so-called correct ways of

behaving. The visibility of shame on the white female body also ensures the possibility of overcoming it. Her whiteness inscribes her body with the physical marking of the blush. It performs the act of being affected by “bad feeling” to show that she is ready to be restored to the social ideal. Like the blush that quickly disappears, her shame is ultimately a “passing phase” (Ahmed 113) that allows her to quickly move back into the social space she previously occupied. First, she is restored and returned to her own family at the parsonage, in solitude and disgrace. Her restoration to the social order finally reaches fruition when she re-earns the good graces of the Tilneys and returns as Henry’s wife.

Until this restoration is complete, Catherine’s embodied and naïve practices of reading, manifest as non-normative and subversive ways of being, that stall and oppose this restoration. When read in this vein, Austen’s object of satire shifts from the form of the gothic novel and its heavily stereotyped readers to the figure of censor and the critic itself who condemned the early novel. The criticism that the aesthetic of the naïve reader gave birth to is re-produced in the novel to highlight and re-iterate that the feminised naïve reader was not only imagined and fictive, but also possessed the ability to transgress dominant social mores.

Conclusion

Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* becomes a case study for the exploration of naivety and of the way it circulated in the late eighteenth century. It provides a site for delving into the idea of the naïve reader as a political aesthetic. Ultimately, the female reader performs the ‘affective labour’ of being naïve. Catherine’s naivety is alluded constantly in Austen’s text. The novel aims to both parody the naïve heroines of Gothic romances, and also for Henry’s instructive speech on normative ways of reading to gain traction and currency in the text. In the end, her naivety is reduced to a folly, “the painful remembrance” (Austen 204) which produces an alienation from the Abbey itself and brings about a “revolution” in her ideas (Austen 205). This “revolution” in ways of feeling is once

again credited to the hetero-normative masculine voice in the text, much like the political revolutions in the eighteenth century. The critical and gendered possibilities of Catherine's naïve reading practices are thwarted, shamed and ultimately removed in favour of this instructional mode of reading. Her naivety becomes the 'affective labour,' performed in bodily ways to push forth the liberal, often masculinist, agenda of education that sought to transform the role of the novel as educational and instructional rather than 'mere pleasure' for the new consumers of this form. Researching the politics of naivety in the late eighteenth century print cultures can reveal not only the ways in which the political aesthetic of the naïve reader was formed and circulated but also the ways in which literary aesthetics can challenge the dominant norms and gender roles of the society.

Notes:

¹ Martyn Lyons argues that the "advances made towards general literacy in the age of Enlightenment were continued, to create a rapidly expanding number of new readers, especially for newspapers and cheap fiction" (313). Thus, the development and popularity of the novel was fundamentally tied to pedagogy and the spread of education, as demands for formal education, especially for girls, began to grow as a consequence of widespread literacy.

² The demarcation of these spaces makes it difficult to access and fully understand the spread of literary material amongst women who formed their own spaces of reading and circulating reading materials, improvising their libraries that were cut-out, re-sewn, and often shared amongst themselves, even when territories of reading spaces and materials were strictly divided between so-called masculine and feminine tastes (Lyons 321).

³ James Van Horn Melton in *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* details and traces the reasons and anxieties around novel reading in Western Europe. He points out how, apart from an older theological discourse that feared the swift replacement of reading scriptures with reading novels, there was a secularised variant of this tradition of criticism that feared abandonment of household duties by women in favour of reading books. As he significantly states, "Critics charged that for their

moralism, sentimental novels *inflamed the senses* through their celebration of love and passion” (111; my emphasis).

⁴ Jan Fergus further elucidates the problem of identifying and defining the emerging group of novel-readers as primarily women, as attempts “to recover women’s behaviour from historical record are often frustrating . . . complicated by such instances of intersecting male and female taste, and even more by the problem of registering married women’s reading” (159).

⁵ Fergus notes that much of the anti-novel discourse was predicated on “the uncontrollable imagination’ of men, which increasingly became ‘hysterical,’ desperate and ‘fraught’ with fear upon the sudden realisation that they ‘could no longer control either reading or writing of women’” (173). As much as they worried about the affective nature of novel and its dangers, they ironically responded in ever more affective vocabularies of fear and anxiety.

⁶ See unpublished Ph. D. thesis, “For Shame: Emotion, Gender, and Innovation in the Nineteenth- Century British Novel” by Ashly Elizabeth Jensen Bennett for her analysis of how novelistic innovation in the work of canonical 19th-century novelists relied on mobilising and creating scenes of shame.

⁷ See Sheryl Craig’s *Jane Austen and the State of Nation*, to see how *Northanger Abbey* is located within the context of major economic changes and political fears harboured by the British at the time, for instance, the introduction of paper money, which inaugurated the idea that “the banknote functioned as a brief work of fiction” despite being a legally binding contract (Craig 75), as well as rumours of a French invasion. Through Henry’s “voice of reason,” Catherine eventually “learns to think rationally and to reject irrational, sensational fear” (Craig 83), much like the government aimed to dispel the fears of its citizens. This reading of the nation within the novel further supports Patrick Parrinder’s assessment that the “development of the form . . . has been intimately linked to changes in national consciousness” (6). Thus, the question of shame and other affective registers of the text open up further possibilities of seeing how ‘naivety,’ understood in opposition to the “Englishness of reason,” as well as harbouring ‘naïve fears,’ can be seen as almost unpatriotic and all the more non-conformist.

⁸ The usage of the word ‘criminal’ in Chapter 25 of the novel is curious, as Catherine uses it to self-identify and self-reprimand. Edward Higgs, in *Identifying the English: A History of Personal Identification 1500 to the Present*, shows the preoccupation of the British with “new forms of

identification” in an age of rapid urbanisation and ever-increasing ‘anonymity’ to better detect and police bodies that were outside the administrative grip (4-5). By calling her folly almost “criminal,” Catherine identifies and self-acknowledges her behaviour to be non-conforming in a much larger sense that puts her “out of place” into a whole other category.

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