Perceived Preceptor: Narrator's role in Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey

Jason Godfrey
jason_godfrey@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Godfrey, Jason, "Perceived Preceptor: Narrator's role in Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey" (2017). All Faculty Publications. 2737.
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2737

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Perceived Preceptor: Narrator’s role in *Northanger Abbey*

Jason Michael Godfrey

Research drafted for presentation at the
South Central Society for Eighteenth Century Studies
2017 Conference hosted by
Brigham Young University
And
University of Utah

Department of English
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2018 Jason Michael Godfrey
ABSTRACT

Perceived Preceptor: Narrator’s role in *Northanger Abbey*

In this article, I posit that Austen uses her self-aware, colloquial narrator to satirize Catherine’s grandiose fantasies and quiz (or mock) the reader who would prefer a story where fantasies are indulged and also to instruct the reader about the importance of discernment both in-text and in larger social discourse.
Perceived Preceptor: Narrator’s role in *Northanger Abbey*

Although Jane Austen is a household name, her first novel *Northanger Abbey* has had a long road to fame. The novel didn’t garner critical or popular acclaim until well after its initial release. Upon its first publication, it was viewed as an inferior, juvenile romance that was written by a sophomoric, juvenile author. It earns passing mention as a “much better representation of English romanticism than the somewhat hectic... ‘Sense and Sensibility.’” (Berenson 75), an opinion that would be wildly unpopular in a literary debate today. And it was mentioned briefly by William Dean Howells as an acceptable New Historicist Romance (a term which he used in a very different sense from modern New Historicism). But other than these two mentions, few scholarly articles about it arise until around eighty years after its release (Howells, 60). Since then, the number of articles written about Jane Austen’s first written and posthumously published work has risen exponentially. For example, since the year 2000, approximately 150 scholarly articles have been published that reference the work. Although it is possible this may simply account for some unobserved hyperinflation of literary critics since the turn of the millennium, it is also possible that there is simply a lot more to say about *Northanger Abbey* then can be revealed by a cursory reading. One topic that begs enigmatically to be explained to the modern reader, is the puzzle of *Northanger Abbey’s* meta-driven narrator.

In *The Divine Comedy*, Virgil guides the epic poet Dante through the nine circles of hell and eventually all the way up towards Earthly Paradise. Virgil’s constant companionship provides both Dante and the reader with solid, well-founded explanations on every step of the allegorical quest. In Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* there is no Virgil. Instead the reader
stumbles through Catherine’s unlikely adventures with a narrator who intermittently breaks the fourth wall, takes occasion to interject her opinion, and is aware that the story she tells us is fiction. Burlin notes that Austen’s narrator “Interposes herself as in no other of her works” (Burlin 86). This editorial-slinging, metafictional narrator fades through stages of omniscience, examines at length parenthetical details, glosses over important information, and attempts to build a friendship with the reader through her colloquial tone. Because of the narrator’s “Astonishingly aggressive authorial ‘intrusion’” (McKillop 85) the reader “Can’t ever take [Catherine] completely seriously” (Odmark 46). But how much of the narrative is actually meant to be believed? As Susan Wolfson put it, “Who is quizzing whom?” (Wolfson 44). I posit that Austen uses her self-aware, colloquial narrator to not only satirize Catherine’s grandiose fantasies and quiz (or mock) the reader who would prefer a story where fantasies are indulged but also to instruct the reader about the importance of discernment both in-text and in larger social discourse.

Before examining the larger implications of the narrator’s role, it is important to examine generally who the narrator is and what her limits are. The narrator of this story does not follow standard fair for your typical, third-person, limited-omniscient narrator. For example, once Henry and Catherine part after their first dance the narrator notes, “[They] parted, on the lady’s side at least, with a strong inclination for continuing the acquaintance” (Austen). This quote tells us that the narrator is allowed to reveal the unspoken thoughts of Catherine such as her inclination for continuing the acquaintance. Arguably, the narrator may be even more insightful about Catherine than reading her thoughts, because not all inclinations are conscious thoughts. Catherine very well could have been impressed with Henry Tilney and desired to see
him again without having ever thought something like, “Oh, I want to see that boy again.” But if the narrator is allowed to know Catherine’s thoughts and possibly even know Catherine’s unthought desires, then what is the explanation for shutting the reader out of Catherine’s mind later in the same paragraph? Once Catherine has retired and is preparing for bed, the narrator notes, “Whether she thought of him so much... as to dream of him when there, cannot be ascertained” (Austen). In one paragraph the narrator goes from an arguably infinite knowledge of Catherine’s psyche to being unable to ascertain what Catherine’s dreams are about. And thus a precedent for inconsistency is set. The narrator is willing to make up or omit facts in order to align the story with a preconceived notion of how the plot of a proper romance should be.

Even the narrator’s methods of delivery fluctuate. Shortly after Catherine and Henry part ways for the first time the narrator hopes that Catherine doesn’t dream of Henry that night because a woman is “never justified in falling in love before the gentleman’s love is declared” (Austen). This brief passage is revealing on a number of levels. The first comes from the claim that the source of the information comes from a “celebrated writer” (Austen). The narrator hinges her supposed hopes for Catherine’s social propriety on the words of an authority figure, ostensibly to give her argument authority. And though I’ll opt not to repeat the entire philosophy 101 discussion on the fallacy of appeal to authority, know that the narrator is definitely appealing to authority in this instance and that her appeal ironically destroys her credibility. Beyond simply appealing to authority though, the narrator is appealing to an anonymous authority. She could be misremembering. She could be quoting herself. She could even be making the whole thing up, as if it were some sort of story. The reader would have no
idea, but the reader keeps reading, perhaps brushing off the narrator’s brief comment, because, after all, the story of Catherine continues.

Before we continue with Catherine’s story, however, it is important to note that the quote does have a source. The quote’s source is a letter from Samuel Richardson. It appeared in No. 97, Volume II of Rambler. The article was titled, “Advice to Unmarried Ladies.” Advice: don’t trust a narrator who uses slipshod methodology and shabby citation reports like this one. To compound matters further, the narrator’s measuring stick for Catherine’s social propriety are the words of a well-read aristocratic gentleman who was writing in a magazine written almost exclusively to other well-read aristocratic gentlemen (tragically, Richardson probably suffered a pretty wide intended audience versus actual audience gap there). Although the novel presents the quote in a way that any reader who isn’t comatose will understand the social satire, there is no textual evidence, no equally concise quote we can point to that suggests the narrator presents this information in any manner other than the strictest seriousness. Even as I attempt to merely anatomize the narrator’s in-text gymnastics in omniscience it is impossible not to note the tongue-in-cheek attitude the narrator takes towards supposed authority.

The narrator continues to falsely construct narrative as she holds Catherine’s unconscious mind to the same level of social propriety that one would expect of Catherine in a public setting. It isn’t reasonable to expect Catherine to not dream of Henry when Catherine has no input on what the subject of her dreams are. Additionally, this dream endures the rest of the novel unaccounted for. It never comes back to change Catherine’s life in any significant way. The entire discourse on propriety proves to be inconsequential. Juxtapose that with the first half of Catherine’s stay in Northanger Abbey, where her wild dreams of horror and intrigue
lead her away on all kinds of misadventures. Which dream does the narrator actually hope to suppress? Why? Examine a detail that clues the reader in to the supposed motivation of the narrator comes just before the narrator mentions that a woman is “never justified in falling in love before the gentleman’s love is declared” (Austen). The narrator drops the ruse of an objective, third-person storyteller and uses the editorial exclamation, “I hope” when describing the blatantly misogynistic opinion (Austen). All pretense of guide/mentor is obliterated by the insertion of this trivial personal opinion. In order to really support the claim that the narrator is a master quiz instead of simply a storyteller as absentminded as the heroine of her story, harken back to the quote from Rambler. As previously observed, the quote was in one of the foremost literary magazines of its day. This magazine was edited and partially run Samuel Johnson (the literary legend, the one-man dictionary writer!). A narrator who knows this quote and knows how to apply it to a situation so perfectly isn’t meandering through a plot; she’s building sentences as rich and complicated as the one I’ve just spent two pages outlining. She’s constructing a story for the gullible and then seeing who will follow the story along for the story’s sake.

As the novel continues, it remains difficult to wrangle with the real, the ironic, and the remarkable in Northanger Abbey. The narrator’s temperamental treatment of events often forces the reader to follow the story of Catherine and her sometimes imagined tragedies, even at the cost of side-stepping real tragedy. For example, examine the two following situations. While in Northanger Abbey Catherine snoops about in order to find incriminating evidence on General Tilney. She finds none. Later, a scandal between the General’s son, Frederick Tilney, and Isabella Thorpe emerges. What is most revealing about it is perhaps the exclusion of more
details concerning the very not imaginary scandal that Catherine’s brother faced with Isabella. As Henry Rogers puts it, Catherine’s grief for her brother “is real, not the product of self-delusion” (Rogers 12). The narrator chooses to ignore the real tragedies that occur in the lives of others in order to focus on the narrative that Catherine creates. The reader, in this instance more than others, is forced to take an interactive part in constructing an imbalanced and turgid narrative. Despite the fact that the story has plenty of ammunition for real romance and intrigue, Catherine’s story isn’t truly a romance. It is a satire. The reader follows the narrator from point A to point B and leave some of the heftier matters of the narrative to rest. Although perhaps the reader would also enjoy a story with more depth, a story like the ones that we know Jane Austen is capable of producing, he is confined to the words of the narrator. Any moment where the reader loses a skeptical mindset and begins to wallow in the pages of this faux romance, they become victim to the narrator’s trap. The narrator’s jest is the story, and her association with the reader is the genius of her craft. Even if the story contains straight-faced social commentary, as some scholars have suggested (Fergus) (Hopkins), the presentation of the story through this particular narrator makes all arguments built around the story guilty of being victims of a master quizzer simply by the reader’s association to the narrative through the narrator.

So far all of the instances used as examples to compile evidence against the narrator’s seriousness have come in the form of narration. The narrative itself has been left standing as an almost totally separate piece of work, which although constructed in an imbalanced manner, hasn’t been called into question. Although perhaps at times one scene is given too much emphasis or perhaps the narrator is omitting information occasionally, the reader has had no
reason to question the integrity of the actual story. But the narrator does admit to crafting particular events in the story. The narrator states, “If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? [...] Let us not desert one another” (Austen). This passage continues for a few paragraphs detailing why novel writers should formulate scenes where the heroines in their novels read from other novels. This is an example where the narrator states that she has contrived a scene solely to satisfy her own purposes. And the structural integrity of the whole novel is now fair game for questioning. The narrator gives the reader an excuse to call into question each passage of the text, not just the passages given in narration. Similarly, it adds a layer of depth that makes all of the previous editorial inserts from the narrator seem sly. As Honan observes, the readers more than the characters are “the most important objects of Austen’s irony” (13). Once again, the novel is debased and the astute reader is left to guess blindly between the actual and the imaginary when there isn’t enough evidence to compile a case for either. Meanwhile, the lay-reader probably overlooks the statement and is able to construct an imagined narrative fed to him by the narrator in much of the same way that Catherine constructs the narrative of the villainous General Tilney.

And even though this scene is singular in the sense that the narrator admits to crafting the story, the repercussions of this confession resonate throughout the book. Susan Wolfson suggested that perhaps the narrator is used in the novel to quiz the reader, a theory also proposed by Park Honan, but this scene suggests a more intimate relationship between narrator and novel. Catherine’s character is advertised as a reader starting in chapter 1: “But from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines
must read” (Austen). The narrator suggests that Catherine is in training for a heroine through reading novels, as if reading novels were some sort of preparation for the future. That theory is debunked through Catherine’s actions, but the narrator had her read novels in order to make it understandable that Catherine would instantly jump to such romantic conclusions about the general. Catherine’s heroinism is absolutely vain because her circumstances don’t require a heroine, and even when circumstances do conspire against her, the villain is too powerful to be questioned and too far away to matter. In this sense Catherine is in many ways not a hero of her story but an anti-hero. Just as she is helpless to stay at Northanger Abbey after the general bid her leave, she is helpless in love. As discussed earlier, Henry took no interest in Catherine during their first visit. Afterwards, Catherine is left to wait until she sees Henry again. Her inability to take the situation into her own hands subverts her descriptions as a heroine. And, if the purpose of the narrator is to quiz the reader, then Catherine’s incompetence and incapability isn’t applicable to just Catherine, it’s potentially applicable to the reader. Catherine’s incompetence, her fantastical imagination, her utter inability to control her life, all of which is underscored by her absolute unawareness of how crippling debilitated she is, is supposed to be a mirror for the reader.

The detail that comes as a nail in the coffin (an odd analogy for a comedy), comes towards the end of the narrator’s story. The end of the novel comes totally in narration. Beyond all reasonable hope, Catherine marries Henry, and Eleanor marries a Deus ex machina of a viscount; the narrator even outlines a few possible morals of the story. And it is a story. Just like when Catherine assumes the worst of the general and is found to be only indulging in fantasy, so too is the reader found to be merely indulging in fantasy if he believes an ending like the one
in *Northanger Abbey* is happy, if even possible. Throughout *Northanger Abbey* the reader is led
to question the narrator, and the deft use of this overtly colloquial narrator allows the meaning
of the novel to shine through. Life isn’t a horror, and Catherine was a fool to believe so. Life
isn’t a romance, and the reader would be a fool to believe it.

But the narrator’s purpose in the novel extends beyond merely mocking an unobservant
reader. The self-aware narrator nourishes an ecology in which critical conversation between
reader, character, and text are allowed to engage one another in instructive discourse. Burlin
asserts that the novelist, Austen in this instance, uses her craft to prove “that it is the
responsible novelist who protects us by *teaching* us through... art to recognize and discriminate
among the fictions of life and art alike” (90) [emphasis added]. The reader is asked to
discriminate among the fictions of art as they follow Catherine’s attention throughout the story.
And it is precisely because of the self-awareness and inventiveness of the narrator, Catherine’s
follies transcend the mishaps of an overly romantic young woman and can work as a stand-in
for the reader. The reader is made to become aware of the purposelessness of Catherine’s
romanticism, the falsity of grotesque or gothic conspiracy in day-to-day transaction, and the sly
and slipshod methodology of the entire fictive presentation. The major plot points still function
as narrative, satire, and comedy, but they also gain another dimension of purpose as the reader
is asked to discern and discriminate between the fictions within the text.

The narrator’s key instructions come as she asks the reader to discriminate among the
fictions of life beyond art. When the narrator quotes from *The Rambler*, she integrates a source
of what was popular perceived as *actual* appropriate social commentary. The reader, primed by
the self-aware, tongue-in-cheek narrator to question methodology and narrative, is implicitly
asked to turn a discriminating eye from the pages of fictive narrative and towards a source
commonly understood as serious authority. And that’s where the true instruction takes place.

Earlier I mentioned that the pages of *Northanger Abbey* are meant to show Catherine Morland
as a reflection of the reader. The narrator, quiz as she may be, elevates her social game beyond
mockery in order to teach the reader the importance of discernment, not only within the
context of Catherine’s story but also as it applies to real-life interactions.
Works Cited


