



“Do not imagine that *I* often read novels”; or, Dangerous Fiction and the Regency Reader

James Gillray, *The New-Morality* (1798), Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, novels were criticized as . . .

Too New

Still relatively new and untested, the novel lacked the established conventions and prestige of genres like lyric, epic, and drama. Many novelists hesitated to use the label, instead preferring terms like “history” or “tale.”

Untrue

For many religionists, fiction was an affront to truth. Novels were also seen to valorize immoral behavior, to cause heightened sensibility, and to encourage readers to aspire to lifestyles above their station.

Too Easy

Novels were considered easy to write and insipid to read. This assumption was fueled by women’s prominence as novelists, and by prefaces claiming a text was dashed off leisurely within a matter of days or weeks.

“Novels, which used chiefly to be dangerous in one respect, are now become mischievous in a thousand Sometimes they concentrate their force, and are at once employed to diffuse destructive politics, deplorable profligacy, and impudent infidelity.”

—Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799)

“Mrs. Stanley lamented that novels, with a very few admirable exceptions, had done infinite mischief, by so completely establishing the omnipotence of love, that the young reader was almost systematically taught an unresisting submission to a feeling, because the feeling was commonly represented as irresistible.”

—Hannah More, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809)



Peter Vandyke, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1795), NPG 192

“I will run the risk of asserting, that where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind: it is such an utter loss to the reader, that it is not so much to be called pass-time as kill-time. It conveys no trustworthy information as to facts; it produces no improvement of the intellect, but fills the mind with mawkish and morbid sensibility, which is directly hostile to the cultivation, invigoration, and enlargement of the nobler powers of the understanding.”

-Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton* (1856)

“The best method, I believe, that can be adopted to correct a fondness for novels is to ridicule them; not indiscriminately, for then it would have little effect; but, if a judicious person, with some turn for humour, would read several to a young girl, and point out, both by tones and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments.”

-Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

John Opie, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (1797), NPG 1237

Discussion Questions

From *Northanger Abbey*

1. *Northanger Abbey* is arguably Jane Austen’s most self-conscious novel; from the very first chapter, the reader is made aware of Catherine Morland’s status as a fictional heroine (p. 5), and is encouraged to read plot elements in line with novelistic conventions. In one of the text’s most famous passages (pp. 23-24), Austen’s narrator indulges in a lengthy aside about novel writers’ views of themselves, their craft, and each other. Revisit these passages, thinking about the following: What do these moments tell us about *Northanger Abbey*’s relationship to evolving novel genres? About Austen’s? Where do you think Austen intends seriousness, and where is she deploying parody?
2. At various points in the novel, Catherine discusses her reading habits with other major characters: Isabella Thorpe (pp. 23-24), James Thorpe (p. 32), and Eleanor and Henry Tilney (pp. 77-80). What do these conversations tell us about those characters? How does “the well-read Catherine” (p. 133) herself change in her attitude toward reading? What dangers does she discover in her favorite novels? Why do you think Austen includes such a drastic (and mortifying) shift in her heroine?

Discussion Questions (continued)

From *Frankenstein*

3. *Frankenstein* contains only one explicit reference to a novel being read in the events of the text. In Volume II, the Creature finds Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) among the books in the leather portmanteau. Revisit the passage where the Creature describes Werther (p. 103). What does this novel mean to the Creature? How does the “man of feeling” convention (which Goethe's novel came to represent in the Romantic period) influence the Creature's development? How might his education have differed if he had read something else?

4. In the closing frame, Walton characterizes Victor's narrative as a “strange and terrific story” that should inspire horror, yet he also takes pains to prove its veracity (p. 178). How does Walton's description link *Frankenstein* with longstanding discussions of the novel as “history” or “autobiography”? In what other ways does this text align itself with novelistic (and specifically Gothic) conventions? How does Shelley's use of the novel parallel or diverge from Austen's?

Linking the Two

5. In both *Northanger Abbey* and *Frankenstein*, characters of both sexes read a variety of genres. And in both novels, those genres and specific texts have strong moral values and judgments attached to them. What kind(s) of reading does each text paint as dangerous? For whom is this danger strongest or most present? How do period gender norms affect opinions about reading practices?

Further Reading

The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists. Ed. Michael Bell. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012.

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Johnson, Claudia L. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.

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Sheriff, Mary D. *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

St Clair, William. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

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