

Christian Gruber

Dr. Fitzpatrick

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Godlike Authority: The Role of the Narrator in Jane Austen's

*Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*

*Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* are two of Jane Austen's novels with the most intriguing dynamic between the narrator and the protagonist. These different dynamics are so profound because they mirror where Austen was in both her writing and her life. *Northanger Abbey* was first completed when Austen was only twenty-four years old, and it was her first attempt at writing a novel that was not in epistolary form. The young, naïve heroine, who is far-removed from the mature, worldly narrator, is representative of where Austen was in developing her new method of writing. In contrast, *Mansfield Park* was completed when she was almost forty years old. The mature protagonist is much closer to and on the same level as the wizened narrator. Her characterization is indicative of how Austen's writing and Austen herself had developed by this point in her novels. While *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* display two vastly different narrator and protagonist relationships, the narrators in both novels serve to balance the heroines that Jane Austen has created.

*Northanger Abbey* is the first of Austen's novels written in the new narrative form to have been completed, although it was not the first to be published. Due to the novel's status as one of Austen's earlier pieces, it proves interesting to examine its protagonist. Catherine Morland is far from what has come to be considered the standard for Austen's heroines. The reader sees this from the very first line in the novel, in which the narrator states, "No one who

had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine” (NA 15). Right away, the reader knows that Catherine will not be the most conventional of Austen’s female characters. The entire first chapter is spent driving home the fact that Catherine is not a typical heroine. “Catherine, who had by nature nothing heroic about her,” and who “fell miserably short of the true heroic height,” is a most unconventional heroine, indeed (NA 17-18). This unconventionality is what makes her one of Austen’s most authentic protagonists.

Catherine is relatable to readers because she is raw and unfiltered. While she exerts a certain degree of the decorum expected of her as a woman, she also does what she wants to do. She does not adhere to the stereotypes of femininity. Growing up with brothers, she was more inclined toward boyish activities in her girlhood. All of this changed when she turned fifteen and began experiencing the desires of a young woman. Her “appearances were mending,” but her nature remained much the same (NA 16). Despite the fact that she transforms from an ugly duckling to a swan, Catherine remains the outspoken girl of her youth. This outspokenness is part of what contributes to Catherine being considered naïve. Women at this time were expected to keep their thoughts and impressions, especially improper ones, to themselves. Catherine lacks a filter in several cases. This does not make her naïve, but instead lends her a sense of honesty that not all of Austen’s female characters have.

The best way to describe this honesty is to say that Catherine is natural. Her actions are uninhibited. Catherine says what she feels, and she “can be truthful and direct even in difficult situations” (Cordón 45). Her propensity for the truth makes her unlike other women, and it is part of what makes Catherine so genuine. “Rather than following an artificial script, Catherine prefers bluntness and directness to elegance,” and she is more likable as a result (Cordón 46). This idea of Catherine’s naturalness comes from *Northanger Abbey*’s narrator herself. It is the narrator

who first describes Catherine as natural within the very pages of the novel. The word “natural” is important to consider in regards to the narrator applying it to Catherine. She has already used many words to describe Catherine as an atypical heroine. What, then, is the narrator’s purpose in referring to Catherine as “natural?”

Once again, this description becomes another way for the narrator to show how unusual Catherine is as a heroine. One would presume to have a good grasp on how the narrator feels about Catherine by this point. Yet, “[i]n delineating the difference between ‘natural’ and ‘heroic’ feelings, the narrator reveals the difference between her heroine, Catherine, who acts in a ‘natural’ way, and the other fictional heroines, who act in a ‘heroic’ manner, *heroic* here meaning stilted, stereotypical, and wrong” (Cordón 46). This idea comes full circle to the narrator’s description of Catherine in chapter one. Initially, the description may read like the narrator is mocking Catherine’s inability to be a typical heroine. However, as one reads further into the novel, the relationship between Catherine and the narrator makes it apparent that the narrator is not mocking Catherine’s nonconformity, but praising it.

From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator makes it apparent that she and Catherine are not on the same level at all. First, there is the notion that she is narrating Catherine’s story in the first place, which puts her on a level above the protagonist. Then, beginning the novel by describing Catherine’s childhood lends her a degree of power, as if she has seen what already happened in the past, and she knows what will happen in the future. Ending the first chapter by referring to Catherine as a “young lady” infers that the narrator is beyond the point of being a young lady. All of these small clues persist throughout the novel, and with just cause. The narrator *is* on a higher level than Catherine because she is the novelist, while Catherine, like the audience being addressed in this novel, is merely a reader. The narrator’s

admission of being a novelist is seen by some as a “refusal of omnipotence” (Nelles 122). However, it is this admission that gives her so much power. References to “[my] wild imagination...my reader...my fable...my heroine” give the narrator all of the power within this novel. The narrator cannot claim these things as hers without claiming power over the entire narrative. As she navigates through her fable, the narrator becomes a guide to not only Catherine, but the reader as well.

The narrator in *Northanger Abbey*, along with Henry Tilney, can be described as being a guide to Catherine. Why does Catherine need a guide? As the narrator makes clear, the young lady and atypical heroine has a “mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is” (NA 19). This immediately separates Catherine and the narrator, and makes it apparent why Catherine needs a guide. Catherine is still young and unwise. The narrator, mature as she is, has much more insight than Catherine’s seventeen-year-old mind. It is because of the narrator’s maturity that Catherine is allowed to be herself without having to hold back. The two provide a balance for each other. Catherine does not have to be the standard of femininity because the narrator (for the most part) fills that role for her. Also, by not abiding by this standard, she becomes someone the narrator can use to prove her own wisdom. Irony is prevalent throughout the novel as the narrator mercilessly mocks Catherine’s actions and interactions with other people. This mockery is never malicious because that would ruin the dynamic between the two of them. It is, however, the narrator’s way of laughing at Catherine and saying, “Oh, look what the young lady has gotten herself into again.”

Another aspect of the relationship between Catherine and her narrator is the almost mother-daughter bond the two share. In many ways, the narrator is more a mother to Catherine than her own mother is. When Catherine’s mother calls her simple for “fretting about General

Tilney,” it is the narrator alone who seems to know the truth of what is in Catherine’s heart (NA 224). After all, it is the narrator who has been with Catherine every step of the way. She is also a source of wisdom not just for Catherine, but for the reader. In volume one, chapter ten, the narrator ruminates on the idea that women take such care in their appearance to impress men, and men hardly take notice. She states, “Woman is fine for her own satisfaction alone. No man will admire her the more, no woman will like her the better for it...—But not one of these grave reflections troubled the tranquility of Catherine” (NA 72). Here, the narrator is showing her maturity in knowing that what other people think is of little consequence. Catherine, who is still young and impressionable, thinks that people, especially men, need to be impressed. She has not yet reached the point in her life where other people’s opinions become less important to her.

The narrator, on the other hand, has certainly reached the point of being old and wise. In conveying her wisdom throughout the story, she becomes the surrogate mother Catherine needs while she is away from her family. Like any mother, she is bound to think her child perfect. While Catherine thinks she needs finery to impress someone, the narrator thinks she is perfect the way she is. In this, she becomes a voice of reason to both Catherine and other young girls. When the narrator claims, “Every young lady may feel for my heroine,” she is acknowledging that Catherine is not the only young woman to experience the feelings that she does (NA 72). In fact, the only reason the narrator knows other young ladies are able to sympathize with Catherine is because she herself has been a young lady. The narrator is not giving a life lesson from a detached place of omniscience, but a place of experience. In treating both Catherine and her reader in a maternal manner, she becomes a wizened woman imparting her knowledge for all the young girls who need it.

*Northanger Abbey*'s narrator undoubtedly provides a good balance for her heroine. She is the voice of calm, collected reason to Catherine's unselfconscious outspokenness. The two could not be more different, or so the narrator would like the reader to believe. The truth is that Austen has employed a great feat of irony once again—Catherine and the narrator are not as dissimilar as the narrator believes. Only through the narrator does the reader know what Catherine is thinking, and “[b]y incorporating...free indirect discourse into her spectacle...Austen heightens the compelling quality of her emotional set-piece, while she also veils her heroine's appealing voice, flirtatiously enfolding it in the narrator's own” (Bennett 386). Essentially, their two voices become intertwined, which makes the narrator unable to completely distance herself from Catherine. Their relationship would not work if she did.

Additionally, while it may not be as obvious, the narrator is at times just as outspoken as her heroine. This can be seen in the mockery that prevails throughout the novel. The narrator, instead of masking her feelings, tells the reader exactly what she thinks, and “[w]ith obvious intellectual skill the narrator subjects her characters to the same kind of authoritative judgments that do not go along with the prescribed ‘feminine’ at all” (Cordón 47). She passes judgment onto everything from the relationships between certain characters to the very characters themselves. This honesty is the same trait that contributes to Catherine being thought of as naïve. Catherine is considered a non-traditional heroine for her willingness to speak and act. Being that the narrator is responsible for bringing Catherine's thoughts to the page, it is unsurprising that she would display this same propensity. However, while the two display instances of similarity, the narrator's tone and obvious maturity mark her as being on a different level than Catherine, which is exactly what the novel needs.

*Mansfield Park* is the first of Austen's mature novels, as it was the first of her novels written and revised completely without a significant break in between. The protagonist of the novel, Fanny Price, is another of Austen's unconventional heroines. Fanny is closer to the standard for Austen's heroines than Catherine is, but she is unlike the others in that she is arguably the heroine that Austen readers like the least. When the reader first sees Fanny, "[s]he was small of her age, with no glow of complexion, nor any other striking beauty; exceedingly timid and shy, and shrinking from notice" (MP 13). The narrator never explicitly states that Fanny is unlike a true heroine, but her description of the girl makes this evident. While "there might not be much in her first appearance to captivate, there was, at least, nothing to disgust her relations" (MP 13). With this initial description of Fanny, the reader is introduced to the indifference that people consider Fanny with throughout the novel. She is neither totally disagreeable nor totally likable.

What makes Fanny stand apart from other female characters that Austen has created is her physical frailty. She tires easily in almost everything she does, and the only form of exercise she can handle is horseback riding. *Mansfield Park* provides many female characters that are a direct contrast, both physically and mentally, to Fanny. Fanny's cousins, Maria and Julia, are "decidedly handsome...well-grown and forward of their age" (MP 14). Mary Crawford, Fanny's rival for Edmund's love, is initially described as being "a sweet pretty girl" (MP 42). Each of these female characters, just in the first descriptions of them alone, could not be more different. Through their characterization, Austen makes it so that the differences in their physicality also mean differences in their temperament and personality. Maria and Julia are physically superior, so they act superior in all things, but their "stoutness of body belies their shallow minds" (Anderson 344). On the other hand, Fanny is frail and shy, but "[h]er petite physique as a child

believes her large heart and deep emotions” (Anderson 344). Fanny is constantly looked down upon by certain members of her family, but she actually has more depth than any of them.

Throughout the course of the novel, Fanny sees a subtle change in her bearing and appearance. What makes this change so interesting is that it is almost as if the narrator does not want the reader to know that it has happened. The reader must rely on cues from the characters themselves to know that Fanny has changed. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator wastes no time describing Fanny’s lackluster appearance. However, later in the novel, she does not imply that a transformation has taken place. The reader only knows this when Edmund tells Fanny, “Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny...Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained so much countenance!” (MP 183). If the reader were to depend solely on what the narrator explicitly states, this change in Fanny’s appearance would not be apparent.

A change also occurs in how Fanny carries herself. Part of what turns readers off from liking Fanny as much as other Austen heroines is that she is almost *too* weak. Some allusions to her frailty work, but “[t]he narrator continually reminds us of her fragility, her exasperating more-feminine-than-thou fatigue, headaches and prescribed riding excursions” (Anderson 353). The reader gets it—Fanny is fragile. What is more interesting to consider, and what the narrator seems to gloss over, is how this fragility influences her character as a whole. Critics of Fanny harp on her passivity and unwillingness to act. This passivity, however, is what makes her actions that much more genuine. Fanny is not going to act impulsively, which is not a bad thing, despite what her critics may think. She considers her actions before she actually carries them out. Her “patient, long walk through life with intermittent rests creates a sense of her thoughtful deliberateness and idealistic, determined holding out for her desired ends” (Anderson 353).

Fanny is not entirely passive. She simply thinks before she acts, something that not many of the female characters in *Mansfield Park* seem to do.

Fanny's passivity and fragility also allow her to grow as a character. By being deliberate in her actions, she is able to display a high degree of both thoughtfulness and morality.

Consequently, the reader is able to see how her character grows through the course of the novel.

Maria and Julia are the epitome of impulsivity. They are not hindered by physical limitations into thoughtfully considering their actions, so they do not bother. As a result, the reader does not see any change in their thoughts and behavior. By the end of the novel, they are the same girls who mocked Fanny when she first arrived at Mansfield Park. This is part of what makes the character development in *Mansfield Park* so interesting. One would typically expect the opposite of what actually happens—the physically inferior character would be the villain, while the physically superior character would be the beloved heroine. Their change would be reversed. Instead, Fanny, the physically inferior one, “begins with the foundation of a strong character and grows into herself, while her cousins [the physically superior ones] begin with strong selves devoid of character, and never grow” (Anderson 344). It is this character development that allows the narrator to act in the manner that she does.

The narrator in *Mansfield Park* has extremely clear convictions, probably even more so than Fanny. Her judgments are most evident in how she feels about the female characters. Fanny is the obvious favorite, which is unsurprising because she is the heroine. The reader sees this favoritism in how “[t]he narrator continually sings Fanny's praises; she has ‘heroism of principle’ and a ‘delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling’ that we are told Mary Crawford lacks” (Parker 231). It becomes difficult for the reader not to feel bias toward certain characters because the narrator herself is biased. As likable as Mary may be to some readers, it is difficult to favor

her because “in the contest between her [Mary] and Fanny the narrator always weighs in on Fanny’s side, encouraging us to champion her” (Parker 231). The narrator’s partiality ensures that Fanny is not entirely disagreeable. With someone championing Fanny, the master of the novel no less, the reader becomes more willing to give her a chance.

The narrator’s bias toward Fanny also translates into a sense of protectiveness often seen between the Austen narrator and her heroine. Throughout *Mansfield Park*, the reader often does not get an exact representation of Fanny’s thoughts and feelings. Fanny’s speech is often “folded into the protective third-person distance of the narrator’s position” (Bujak 46). This is why it proves almost pointless to judge Fanny based upon her passivity. One cannot accurately evaluate her character based upon the premise that she does not act if “her thoughts, feelings, actions, and words evade, or are protected from detailed narrative representation” (Bujak 46). It is no secret that Fanny does not like attention. Until she becomes more comfortable with herself and clear in her convictions further on in the novel, the narrator provides a protective barrier between Fanny, the other characters, and even the reader. The narrator’s protectiveness over Fanny makes her seem almost maternal toward the heroine.

When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield Park, it is clear that she is in need of a mother figure. Mrs. Norris, with her obvious disdain for the girl, is certainly not going to fill that role. Lady Bertram is the one who fills a somewhat maternal role for Fanny, and that is merely a consequence of her being the only one who is kind to Fanny. Upon Fanny’s arrival at Mansfield Park, “Lady Bertram smiled welcomingly at her and was the least intimidating person at her new home, [and] the two formed a relationship critical to Fanny’s development” (Anderson 345). However, Lady Bertram does not entirely fill the role of surrogate mother for Fanny. Fanny is in need of more, which is where the narrator comes in. From the first, she shows her obvious

affection for the girl. Her willingness to both protect Fanny and come to her defense is something any mother would do for her child. The narrator may not be there for Fanny in a physical sense, but her protection, merely in the way she favorites Fanny while showing the utmost disdain for other characters, can be felt. By allowing her feelings to so clearly shine through, the narrator displays her willingness to intervene on Fanny's behalf.

The reason the narrator in *Mansfield Park* is able to interfere between the characters and the reader is because she has admitted to being the writer of the story. By the novel's end, she states, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery" (MP 428). She is admitting to several things with this claim. First, there is the obvious, that she is in control of the story being told because she is the one writing it. Her other admission is that she is purposely manipulating the information available to the reader. When she says, "I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can," she is disclosing that the novel is the portrayal of events as seen through her lens (MP 428). Therefore, the reader does not know everything that has happened, only the parts that the narrator has deemed important enough to tell. The narrator becomes an even more interesting entity for her admission that she has manipulated the narrative representation. She has already proven herself to be a biased narrator in how she treats the characters. In choosing to not go over the "odious" details of her own story, the narrator shows that she is biased in her depiction of the story as a whole.

The narrator of *Mansfield Park* is complementary to her heroine. The two are extremely similar in their temperaments, especially in how they think and feel about certain things and people. The major difference between the two is in their willingness to act. Clearly, the narrator has no problem with acting. Throughout the course of the novel, she shows that she has no compunctions interfering with how the reader might view people and their actions. Fanny, on the

other hand, is much more reticent. Not only is she the complete opposite of a person willing to act and take charge, but she also displays a clear reluctance to voice her thoughts and feelings. While the two may feel the same way about most matters, they differ greatly in how they act upon those feelings. This perfect balance of their similar temperaments and their differing actions makes Fanny and her narrator such a well-matched team.

*Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* were written at two very different points in Austen's life. As her writing changed considerably the more she wrote, so did two major aspects: the Austen narrator and the Austen heroine. The two elements that all six of Austen's novels have in common are the narrator and the heroine. These two elements also happen to be the features of her novels that see the most change. Because of the way Austen's writing develops across her novels, the identity of her narrator is often debated. Some argue the narrator is a separate entity, while others argue the narrator is Austen herself. The two ideas are dependent upon each other. The narrator *must* be a separate entity because it *cannot* be Austen herself, "because spinsters are pathetic, [so] Austen herself could never appear in her novels" (Bautz 2535). Who, then, is Austen's narrator?

In order to identify who Austen's narrator might be, one must look at the role the narrator plays in each of Austen's novels. The narrator's presence can be felt as clearly as if she were one of the living, breathing characters in Austen's works. Her tangible presence denotes a degree of power, but she is not all-powerful. She is not omniscient, although she enjoys certain attributes of omniscience. Of the four abilities that come with being omniscient, "[t]he single privilege of omniscience that her narrators enjoy, then, is their ability to read characters' minds" (Nelles 124). However, this is not a trait that is special only to Austen's narrator. One need only look at Austen's heroine to see that "[m]any of Austen's characters who share that 'something more of

quickness' that characterizes Elizabeth Bennet read minds with nearly the frequency, if admittedly not the accuracy, of the narrators" (Nelles 126). Why is the narrator so vital to Austen's work, then?

To understand the importance of Austen's narrator, one must look at the relationship between Austen's narrator and her heroines. As Austen's narrator evolves, so does her heroine. What makes this transformation so interesting is that it is twofold. Austen's narrator and her heroine change not just in the way they act in the novels, but in the way they interact with each other. Each of Austen's novels features a heroine, who, while different in temperament, meets certain criteria. In her creation of her heroines, Austen has created characters who "are not born like people, but manufactured like monsters, and also like monsters they seem fated to self-destruct" (Gilbert and Gubar 129). How do Austen's heroines escape their inevitable self-destruction? The narrator, of course. Austen heroines can avoid self-destruction by obtaining their happy ending, "the happy ending of an Austen novel [that] occurs when the girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man who has been her teacher and her advisor" (Gilbert and Gubar 154). However, a heroine can never reach this happy ending on her own. This is where the relationship between Austen's narrator and her heroine comes into play, as "a girl without the aid of a benevolent narrator would never find a way out of either her mortifications or her parents' house" (Gilbert and Gubar 169). While the dynamic between the narrator and the heroine changes across the novel, one thing remains the same: their existence is dependent upon each other.

The narrator, tangible as she is, is not a character in Austen's novels. Without the characters themselves, she would not have much purpose. Her reliance on them, especially the heroine, is why the "narrator possesses a psychology that is similar in kind to that of the

characters she narrates” (Bujak 47). She is similar to her characters without actually being one of them. The heroine is also dependent on the narrator’s existence, and this reliance is double—she relies on the narrator’s benevolence that helps her find a happy ending and also the narration that ensures her thoughts are known. In Austen’s works, “[n]arration comes as near to a character’s psychic and linguistic reality as it can get without collapsing into it” (Miller 59). Without the narrator, the reader might never know what the characters are thinking. “[T]he character does as much of the work of narration as she may without acquiring its authority,” but the element of authority is what makes the narrator necessary (Miller 59). The narrator’s authority over the novel lends her the credibility necessary to cede the story to her control.

The relationships between the narrators and the heroines in *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* are different, but they both meet the aforementioned criteria that allow such relationships to exist. The narrators themselves are similar in many ways. They both admit to a certain degree of power by admitting that they are in control of the narrative being told. Both of them are opinionated and show no compunctions about letting the reader know what their opinions are. They are quick to act and ready to defend their heroines at a moment’s notice. Lastly, they are both mature and wise to how the world works. The heroines are where these two novels diverge. Because the protagonists are so different, the narrators, despite being similar in many ways, must act differently in each novel.

Catherine Morland is a young woman who is somewhat naïve to how the world works. At any given point in *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator becomes exactly who Catherine needs her to be. For the majority of the novel, Catherine needs a guide, so that is the role that the narrator fills the most. She guides Catherine through society and friendships, and leads her to the ultimate end goal—a happy life with her hero, Henry Tilney. Fanny Price and her narrator are much more

similar than Catherine and her narrator, but Fanny's narrator still becomes whoever Fanny needs her to be. In *Mansfield Park*, this means that the narrator mostly takes on the role of defender.

The narrators must take on different roles according to their heroines, but they both act in ways that make them perfect complements to their heroines.

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