

# Jane Austen's Exploration of Romanticism

*Teaching "older" Literature Through Northanger Abbey in the Swedish Upper-  
Secondary English Classroom*



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Term: Autumn 2022

Course: ÄEND14 English IV

Individual Paper (15 hp)

English Teacher Education

## Abstract

This paper argues that Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is a valuable pedagogical resource that can address the Swedish National Agency for Education's mandate on the coverage of "older" literature in Swedish EFL courses at upper secondary school in a flexible and thorough way. Presupposing that the novel comprises various literary genres and forms, the paper provides a close reading through a proposed perspective on Romanticism, in which a continuum consisting of domestic felicity, courtship and the Gothic is foregrounded. The major finding of the paper is that *Northanger Abbey* can be read as a movement across the continuum: an exploration of Romanticism that encompasses both Austen's treatment of romantic relationships in a rural setting and the Gothic adventures of the heroine. In addition, the paper presents an account of the theme of courtship where different attitudes, strategies and motivations among different characters are highlighted. Regarding the Gothic, the paper draws a critical distinction between how the Gothic becomes manifest in the novel, which is referred to as the use of the Gothic, and what the Gothic may signify, which is referred to as the function of the Gothic. This distinction, it is argued, is reflected by the narrative structure of the novel. Due to the paper having a didactical aim, these observations are discussed in relation to certain pedagogical approaches, and certain preliminary suggestions for educational implementation are subsequently proposed. In particular, pedagogical approaches that focus on narrative elements, genre, culture, reader responses, and creative writing are presented as viable when approaching different insights offered by the close reading. This paper can be read as a case study that highlights how *Northanger Abbey* can be addressed as an "older" novel in terms of content.

**Keywords:** *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen, teaching literature, literary genres, EFL

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## Introduction

Literature forms an indispensable part in EFL classrooms, not least because it can be beneficial to students. As Kathib et al. (2011) note, it is generally agreed among the current scholarship of teaching literature within the EFL/ESL context that literature has potential advantages to the learners. To the benefit of Swedish learners of English at upper-secondary school, the inclusion of literature is mandatory (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a). Importantly, this stipulation is not unproblematic. Swedish teachers of English are immediately faced with several complex issues, the most pressing of which may perhaps be the question: which piece of literature should be covered?

This question derives from the need to prioritise. Because all literature cannot be covered within three years, educators must prioritise the inclusion of some texts, at the expense of others. Moreover, the basis upon which this prioritisation takes place requires careful consideration. Since all literature-interested educators face this issue, a plethora of valuable considerations has been offered by the scholarly community (see for example Beach et al., 2021; Showalter, 2003; Coyle et al., 2010). Still, many possibilities remain, and a decision must be made.

One guideline worthy of consideration is representativeness. Because the Swedish National Agency for Education mandates that “older works” should be covered in English 6 and “older literature” in English 7<sup>1</sup> (2022a, pp. 5, 8), one efficient strategy could be to choose a literary work that encapsulates multiple characteristics that are emblematic of older literature. Instead of teaching many older novels to highlight different hallmarks such as literary periods and genres, one novel can be used to address several of these. It is against this background that Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) lends itself as a very appropriate choice.

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<sup>1</sup> ”[Ä]ldre verk”; ”äldre skönlitteratur”; these are two perfectly acceptable phrases in Swedish, but it should be noted that the absolute comparatives of the translation equivalents are not standard-English.

## **Aims and Research Questions**

There are several aims to this paper. The first one is to establish how *Northanger Abbey* relates to the Swedish National Agency for Education's stipulation on the coverage of literature in the English courses for upper-secondary school, and how the novel is a particularly viable choice that may satisfy the mandates thoroughly.

Second, this paper intends to address how *Northanger Abbey* can be seen as indicative of several literary genres and a literary period: in particular, satire, parody, the Gothic romance, and Romanticism. The topic that will be investigated is Romanticism because it is an expansive and flexible subject, which may benefit teaching purposes. Importantly, this paper's focus on Romanticism in *Northanger Abbey* can be seen as a case study, an example of a facet that is indicative of older literature. Nonetheless, other literary periods and other literary genres may be exemplars in this regard as well.

Third, this paper aims to provide some preliminary suggestions for pedagogical implementation. As Draxler et al. (2014) note, there has been surprisingly little research done on the teaching of Jane Austen even though her works are covered in educational settings across the globe. Furthermore, the findings from Lundholm (2016) indicate that the works of Jane Austen are not representative of the literature covered in the English courses at upper-secondary school in Sweden. With the intention of addressing the research gap recognised by Draxler et al. (2014) and counterpoising the trend implied by Lundholm's (2016) findings, the aim is to investigate how the insights concerning Romanticism might be approximated within the Swedish EFL classroom. The argument that *Northanger Abbey* can be used to access many different trademarks of older literature remains, but the intention is to ground some didactical implications on a critical reading.

The project is guided by the following three research questions:

1. Why is it particularly advantageous to teach *Northanger Abbey* to address the Swedish National Agency for Education's mandate on the coverage of older literature?
2. What insights regarding Romanticism may be derived from *Northanger Abbey*?
3. How may these insights be approached and taught in the Swedish EFL classroom at upper-secondary school?

## Background

### The Swedish Syllabi

In this section, the mentions of literature and fiction in the syllabi for the courses English 5, English 6, and English 7 at upper-secondary school will be discussed. The intention is to scrutinise how *Northanger Abbey* conforms to the syllabi. Specifically, it will be determined whether the inclusion of the novel in the different courses is an authorised possibility.

Progressive specificity is a prominent feature of the mentions of literature and fiction in the syllabi. For English 5, it is only mandated that the course should cover literature and other fiction as a part of reception; but English 6 should cover literature, including poems, and drama, both contemporary and excerpts from older works; for English 7, contemporary and older literature of different genres, such as drama, should be covered in the course<sup>2</sup> (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a, pp. 2, 5, 8, my translation). In sum, there is a linear progression of specificity regarding the distinction between older and contemporary literature, and the extent to which older literature must be included in the courses.

What constitutes “literature”, “other fiction”, and “older” is made explicit in the commentary material. For English 5, English 6, and English 7 alike, literature denotes an umbrella term that encompasses, for example, short-stories, novels, and plays, whereas other fiction refers to myths, animations, and narrative films, among others (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022b). The term “older”, according to the commentary material, refers to literature written before the middle of the twentieth century (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022b). Bearing this in mind, it follows that *Northanger Abbey* should be defined as an older novel.

The above definition of “older” is based on chronology. However, it may be argued that older texts are not worthwhile to study simply because of them being older than others; it is to

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<sup>2</sup> ”Skönlitteratur och annan fiction”; ”[s]könlitteratur, även dikter och dramatik, såväl samtida som utdrag ur äldre verk”; ”[s]amtida och äldre skönlitteratur inom olika genrer, till exempel dramatik.”

be implicitly understood that older fiction is somehow distinctly different from contemporary literature. There must be some difference in language, subject matter, or cultural significance that renders older literature important to study and include in teaching. Arguably, this view is supported by the mandate from the syllabus for English 6 that the course should cover authorship in relation to literary periods<sup>3</sup> (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a, p. 5, my translation). Hence, Swedish EFL teachers may consider teaching older fiction that also resembles the description of older in its language, content, and style.

Since the syllabi stipulate the minimum, mandatory content (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022b), it can be discerned that the difference resides only in the specificity of what literature must be included. Because there is no clause specifically stating that a piece of literature which would conform to the specificity described in English 7 cannot be covered in English 5, this thesis adopts the view that teaching *Northanger Abbey* in all three courses is an authorised possibility. Nevertheless, educators are obliged to account for other considerations as well, namely, whether it is preferable to act upon that possibility, and how one might teach the novel.

## **Teaching Literature**

The teaching of literature is an expansive topic. It can deal with what type of literature should be taught, how one might teach literature, and to what purpose. The following paragraphs are dedicated to describing some commonly discussed issues of teaching literature.

A major point of discussion is the potential advantages and disadvantages of including literature in the EFL classroom. In their survey of scholarship on teaching literature in the ESL/EFL classroom, Khatib et al. (2011) report on various arguments that surface frequently. The disadvantages relate to the inherent complexity of literature, be that on the phonological,

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<sup>3</sup> "Författarskap i relation till litterär epok."



lexical, syntactical, semantical, cultural, or literary level, and the difficulty that would entail for ESL learners is a major concern. However, literature has also been argued to be a collection of authentic language which can foster many qualities such as (inter-)cultural understanding, reading proficiency, and language skills (Khatib et al., 2011). To achieve such positive effects, McKay (1982) contends in an article that educators must pay close attention to the literature they choose to teach, examining “it for both its linguistic and conceptual difficulty” (McKay, 1982, p. 530). This recommendation ties into another frequent topic: considerations of selecting a text.

Difficulty is but one aspect to selecting a text that frequently returns in the scholarly discussion of teaching literature; there are others. For example, educators are encouraged to scrutinise the students, their background knowledge, and different textual factors (see Khatib et al., 2011), to consider the work’s length (see Showalter, 2003), to contemplate the work’s appeal and literary merit (see Beach et al., 2021), and to examine the text’s accessibility to students in terms of content, language, and genre (see Vardell et al., 2006, as cited in Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2011). These are some suggestions of the myriad available, which can be difficult for less experienced teachers to navigate.

One option for the less experienced is to consider what factors practising teachers tend to prioritise. For example, Lundholm (2016) surveyed what literature English teachers in Sweden at upper-secondary schools include in their teaching, and found, in part, that when choosing texts, the most prominent criteria that teachers mentioned concern “suitable themes for discussion, a suitable linguistic level, and the likeliness that the learners will find the texts interesting” (p. 17). This idea can be tied to another issue of the scholarly discussion on teaching literature: implementation.

Lundholm’s (2016) findings suggest that educators base their choice of text partly in accordance with intended pedagogical activities, which relates to the topic of *how* educators

may teach literature. Khatib and Nourzadeh (2011) present ten recommendations for integrating literature into the language classroom, such as including opportunities for creative writing, tasks which target “the four language skills” (p. 260), and the provision of scaffolding when students interpret the text and engage in group discussions. On the other hand, Khatib et al. (2011) present five “models” for teaching literature (p. 205). One of the more prominent ones is Maley’s (1989) “critical literary approach” in which “plot, characterization, motivation, value,” and other similar narrative elements are foregrounded in the teaching of literature (as cited in Khatib et al., 2011, p. 205). Another example is found in Carter and Long (1991), where one of their approaches focus on literature as a “vehicle” that can address “history, literary theories, theory of genres”, among other “cultural notions” (as cited in Khatib et al., 2011, p. 205). Furthermore, Carter and Long (1991) also include an approach which emphasises the connection between the students’ personal lives and the literature they read (as cited in Khatib et al., 2011). One final example worth mentioning is Pritchard (1993), whose article foregrounds writing prompts in conjunction with the study and teaching of literature, the learners’ individual impressions and interpretations of the text being prioritised (Khatib et al., 2011). In sum, the various models and approaches presented by Khatib et al. (2011) can be seen as different strategies that intend to achieve different results. Hence, educators may choose to adopt or adapt different methods so that they can teach a literary text with an aim in mind, or several, tailored to the context of a specific classroom. In the following section, two examples of such didactical conduct will be set forth, both concerning *Northanger Abbey*.

### ***Teaching Northanger Abbey***

The scholarship on Jane Austen and didactics is sparse (Draxler et al., 2014). Nonetheless, there are some educators who have chosen to present their teaching of *Northanger Abbey* in undergraduate courses. For example, Rehn (2014) presents her new pedagogical angle in which

*Northanger Abbey* and the Gothic tradition were taught through parodic practice and collaborative writing. First, the undergraduates were tasked with writing a parodic comment on a paragraph from the novel on a publicly available WordPress site. Second, students were prompted to cowrite a gothic narrative. Rehn (2014) argues that the new direction of the course developed student understanding and appreciation of the Gothic tradition, its parodic role, and their agency “in producing the meanings of a text” (Rehn, 2014).

Another example is Krueger (2014), who argues that *Northanger Abbey* can act as a crossover text between eighteenth-century literature and Romanticism. The article describes the effects of teaching the novel in two separate undergraduate courses. Although the courses pertain to higher education, Krueger’s argument may still be valuable to secondary education. Krueger (2014) found that to position *Northanger Abbey* at the end of an eighteenth-century university course allowed the students to relate Austen to the writings of Swift, Johnson, Richardson, Burney, and Radcliffe. When *Northanger Abbey* was taught at the beginning of the Romantic course, on the other hand, Krueger (2014) understood “what it meant to teach Austen” prior to Wollstonecraft, Blake, and Shelley. Krueger (2014) contends that *Northanger Abbey* has great potential to act as a crossover text between these two periods since it exists in dialogue with both.

Both articles comprise informal pedagogical experiments at the undergraduate level. Nevertheless, Rehn’s (2014) focus on the relationship between the Gothic and parody in *Northanger Abbey*, and Krueger’s (2014) focus on Austen’s relationship to different literary periods are noteworthy. Their in-depth treatment suit higher education, but their foci are by no means restricted to this educational level.

## Literary Genres and Forms in *Northanger Abbey*

It has been noted that *Northanger Abbey* is more diverse than some of Austen's other work. As Fuller (2010) states, "[it] is the most exuberant and perhaps the most daring of her adult works, combining numerous literary genres, parody, and humor" (p. 90). Furthermore, the novel includes elements typically found in the sentimental novel, in the *Bildungsroman*, and in Gothic fiction (Ty, 1998). That is, *Northanger Abbey* seems to reflect various literary categories, some of which have been examined further.

Satire is a category through which *Northanger Abbey* is often described (see Oxford Reference, 2009a). In literature, satire is defined as a piece of writing which, through its critical and derisive commentary, intends to evoke delight, disdain, or displeasure (Oxford Reference, 2009b; Abrams, 1993). Regarding *Northanger Abbey*, there seems to be a consensus that the novel's satiric tone is elaborate. Jelínková and Dvořáková (2019), for example, argue that Austen satirised sensationalism and female novel-reading of Gothic fiction less harshly due to her own appreciation of the artform. Another example is Kearful (1965), who delineates the fluctuating properties of the novel's satiric tone, which counteracts the distortions and reductions of the novel to a superordinating theme.

Parody is another category which *Northanger Abbey* is typically associated with. Parody can be differentiated from satire by its focus on language and style (Oxford Reference, 2009c). According to Abrams (1993), parody is defined by the authentic imitation of the style and form of a writer, a "literary work", or a "genre" in combination with the "lowly" treatment of its subject matter (p. 18). Put differently, the style is authentically mimicked, but the content is ridiculed. Concerning *Northanger Abbey*, Hannoosh (1989) argues that *Northanger Abbey*'s imitation of the Radcliffian Gothic entails that the novel is simultaneously opening itself up for the same comical treatment due to the inherent reflexivity of parody. Moreover, Wallace (1988) argues that the parodic discourse becomes manifest in such a way that the reader, being involved

in construing the morale of the text, comes to understand that “*Northanger Abbey* contains within it a critique of all the forms it takes” (Wallace, 1988, p. 271).

*Northanger Abbey* is a complex composition, comprising various literary influences and genres, as this section has shown. Nonetheless, two pivotal topics of this paper remain to be addressed. The upcoming section is reserved for Romanticism and the Gothic.

## **Romanticism**

How Austen relates to Romanticism merits some explanation. Romanticism is a literary and aesthetic movement that celebrates the individual’s feelings and spirit, the influence of which peaked during the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, which has become described retrospectively as the Romantic period (Casaliggi & Fermanis, 2016; Abrams, 1993; Oxford Reference, 2009d). It has been noted that Austen’s work incorporates Romantic literary developments, such as the sentimental novel and the Gothic novel (Fergus, 1991; Oxford Reference, 2009d). Nevertheless, unlike some Romantic writers’ focus on cosmopolitanism, Austen’s subject matter deal with a more local setting in which the social relations within rural communities are foregrounded, which negotiated “a new sense of civic nationhood” (Casaliggi & Fermanis, 2016, p. 108). According to Doody (1997), Austen’s work comprises a “special mixture of eighteenth-century qualities of attitude and style combined with domestic seriousness and Romantic respect for both idealism and power” (p. 87). In sum, Austen may be described as a Romantic novelist, a voice that belongs to Romanticism, but she occupies a niche within that framework.

To recognise Austen as a Romantic novelist, as this paper will do, may facilitate a nuanced view of her subject matter, but it may also entail some complexities. For one, there is an inherent connection between the word ‘Romanticism’ and the word ‘romance’, the former being derived from the latter (Oxford Reference, 2009d). Problematically, ‘romance’ is

ambiguous. It can refer to a story about love (see Carter & McRae, 2016, p. 256), medieval romance stories that influenced the Gothic tradition (see Abrams, 1993, p. 132), sentimental novels (Oxford Reference, 2009e), as well as Harlequin novels and the everyday usage outside the study of literature. To facilitate the navigation of this complexity, this paper proposes the conception of Romanticism as a continuum. On the left side, this paper situates Austen's rural, and domestic treatment of affectionate relationships, which typically culminates in marriage. On the right-hand side, this paper positions the medieval, sentimental, and Gothic connotation, depicting the adventures of the heroine. In the middle of the continuum, this paper situates the term 'courtship', as it possesses a degree of overlap to the two sides. Regarding the word 'romance', the term's nuance will remain recognised. However, it will be used in this paper to refer to either love, affection, Austen's depiction of domestic felicity, and courting, or the Gothic connotation. Whether the term 'romance' refers to what approximates love, or the Gothic should not, it is hoped, be too unclear in the given context. Moreover, a distinction between the adjectival forms 'Romantic' and 'romantic' will be made. 'Romantic' will refer to the literary movement of Romanticism (i.e., a Romantic novelist), whereas 'romantic' will be used in conjunction with love and affection (i.e., a romantic relationship).

Thus far, the Gothic has been mentioned a few times, and at this juncture it deserves some attention. Gothic fiction is described as a subcategory to "prose fiction", the name of which in conjunction with literature originated from the novel *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) by Horace Walpole (Abrams, 1993, p. 78; Oxford Reference, 2009f; Hogle, 2002; Miles, 2002). According to Hogle (2002), there are some elements which are held as quintessentially Gothic. A Gothic story often revolves around: "an antiquated space", such as an old and dilapidated "castle" or "abbey" with hidden "passages" and damp "dungeons"; an "innocent" and naïve "heroine"; a "cruel", aristocratic, or lascivious "villain"; and heinous actions such as kidnapping, imprisonment, "rape", and "murder" (Abrams, 1993, p. 78; Oxford

Reference, 2009f; Hogle, 2002, p. 2). Furthermore, as Hogle (2002) notes, the Gothic often involves physical and/or psychological distress among the characters which may have been provoked by the hauntings from “ghosts, specters, or monsters” (p. 2).

Importantly, one major writer within this tradition is Ann Radcliffe, who penned *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *The Italian* (1797), two majorly influential novels during the very late eighteenth century (Abrams, 1993; Oxford Reference, 2009f). According to Abrams (1993), “Jane Austen made good-humored fun of the more decorous instances of the Gothic vogue in *Northanger Abbey*” (p. 78). As will be presented, there has been considerable attention paid to the Gothic features of *Northanger Abbey*.

### ***Romanticism in Northanger Abbey***

Regarding the romantic plot of *Northanger Abbey*, there has been a considerable focus on the novel as a courtship novel. In his article, Magee (1987) argues that Austen adopted and conformed to the conventions of the courtship novel in *Northanger Abbey*, before developing the format thematically in her later novels: *Northanger Abbey* is rightfully considered as one of Austen’s earlier works despite it being first published in 1818 posthumously, because, as Berglund (1993) points out, the first draft was penned around 1798. Magee (1987) contends that the novel departs from parody towards the end to provide a conventional ending to a prototypical courtship novel: marriage. However, Dooley (2016), being sceptical of the degree to which parody is abandoned at the end, questions whether *Northanger Abbey* can rightfully be considered a courtship novel, whether the parody at the end nullifies the genuineness of *Northanger Abbey*’s courtship plot.

A different discussion concerns the propriety of traditional courting. In an article, Justice (1998) reasons that persuasive courtship in *Northanger Abbey* is portrayed as a negative practice. According to Justice (1998), the romance between Henry Tilney and Catherine

Morland bears fruit due to their genuine and “disinterested courtship” (p. 187); they find love through mutual selflessness, devoid of rhetoric and persuasive measures. Consequently, Justice (1998) concludes that *Northanger Abbey* is critical of courting and can be read as an anti-courtship novel. This view is acknowledged by Hinnant (2006), who argues that Austen makes use of different story-lines common in courtship literature. Like Justice (1998), Hinnant (2006) adopts the view that *Northanger Abbey* criticises conventional courting because the language of that conduct is a mere “seductive illusion” which obstructs a genuine understanding of love between Catherine and Henry Tilney (p. 303).

In all, courting seems to be recognised as a genuine plot device that is faithfully adhered to in *Northanger Abbey*. It is generally agreed that the novel conforms to some conventions of the courtship novel. Furthermore, some agree that there is a veil of criticism and social commentary on Austen’s part, either in terms of parody or her thematic development of courting.

Having situated the Gothic underneath the umbrella-term of Romanticism, some scholarship on the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey* should also be set forth. According to Berglund (1993), the prevailing view among critics for some time was that *Northanger Abbey* ridiculed and satirised Radcliffe, the reading of Gothic fiction, and its own delusional heroine. This view is uncritically conserved in Carter and McRae’s (2016) textbook on British literary history, and to some extent shared by Fergus (1991), professor of English at Leigh University, as he claims in his book *Jane Austen: A literary life* that Austen made use of the “conventions” of Gothic fiction to mock them (p. 113). Nevertheless, as Berglund (1993) aptly points out, Austen’s relationship to Gothic literature and Radcliffe “is by no means so simple as mere satire would indicate” (p. 196). There is now considerable academic work discussing a more nuanced view of the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*.



Some critics have investigated the role of Northanger, the edifice. On the one hand, Berglund (1993) demonstrates how Northanger is pivotal to the Gothic aesthetic and plot of the novel. She argues also that the abbey assumes a symbolic meaning which can shed light on “the conditions, the anxieties or the obsessions of middle-class women in their time” (Berglund, 1993, p. 18). On the other hand, Smith (2014) contends that the abbey’s Gothic associations are related to contemporary political debates; Austen appropriates an “architectural motif” to respond to “historiographical debates which emerged out of the French Revolution” (p. 182). That is, critics have drawn connections between the Gothic abbey and the experience of women as well as a politicised debate.

The fears provoked by the Gothic aesthetic have also been tied to these discussions. To Kelly (1997) and Miles (2002), Catherine’s Gothic fears exist parallelly to revolutionary fears; the fictitious and real fears are conflated in the mind of our heroine, later to be disentangled by Henry. As such, the Gothic fears become a tool for commentary on the contemporary political landscape and revolutionary violence. Importantly, Ty (1998) situates Catherine’s fears in the contemporary “literary and historical context”, illustrating how cultural anxieties are associated with “female bodies” (p. 248), which ties to a feminist discussion.

This discussion concerns primarily how the Gothic is a device to address female vulnerability, domestic fears, and patriarchal violence. The chief argument is that Catherine’s exaggerated fears, inspired by Radcliffian Gothic, are vindicated by the perils women face when encountering patriarchal domesticity, General Tilney being seen as a real threat to Catherine’s felicity (Dussinger, 1998; Ford, 2012; Bander, 2010). It is generally agreed that *Northanger Abbey* refuses to reject Gothic fiction as silly romance stories because it foregrounds the very reality of female vulnerability (cf. Fuller, 2010; Ford, 2012; Urda, 2020; Beard, 1998; Levine, 1975; Galperin, 2002; Ty, 1998).

In sum, the novel's use of Gothic elements has been recognised as a complex narrative device and not merely for satiric purposes. Many critics treat the novel's use of the Gothic as a codified commentary on complex contemporary issues and anxieties, whether that be on the scale of the continent, nation, city, family, or individual. Hence, a distinction between the Gothic elements and what the Gothic may signify seems serviceable. The narrative elements that provoke the Gothic aesthetic can be described as the *use* of the Gothic, and what those elements may signify can be described as the *function* of the Gothic.

## Material and Method

### Material

The decision to investigate *Northanger Abbey* sprung from my suspicion that the novel could be a valuable asset for Swedish teachers of English at upper-secondary school; the novel possesses qualities that may be particularly advantageous to teaching. For one, the novel is relatively short when compared to Austen's oeuvre (Beard, 1998). Moreover, I suspect that the novel's linguistic demands would constitute an appropriate challenge for many classes, which is a factor Swedish EFL teachers are obliged to act in accordance with (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022b). Furthermore, the novel is considered more diverse than Austen's other works (Fuller, 2010), exhibiting qualities associated with satire, parody, Romanticism, and the Gothic, among others. For educators, this complexity entails pedagogical opportunities. Although this paper focuses on Romanticism, *Northanger Abbey* could be used to teach any of these topics, in isolation or in combination with others, and thus address the Swedish syllabi's stipulation on older literature in a new light.

Draxler et al. (2014) posit that Austen is covered in the educational context all over the world. However, the findings from Lundholm (2016) suggest that Austen is covered relatively sparsely in English classrooms at Swedish upper-secondary schools. Why this is the case is unclear. Based on Lundholm's (2016) findings, an unfavourable view on canonical literature among Swedish EFL teachers seems to be an unlikely reason. Maybe the linguistic demands are deemed to be too challenging; seemingly, there is no research on this, so the topic will be left to conjecture. In any case, investigating *Northanger Abbey* forms part in my objective of promoting Austen in English classrooms at Swedish upper-secondary schools. I suspect that *Northanger Abbey* would be appropriately challenging for many classes, and the novel is, to be sure, an educationally valuable text to cover.

## Method

At this juncture, some explanation as to how the research questions were approached is warranted. The first research question is intended to be addressed throughout the paper. To some extent, it has already been answered; why *Northanger Abbey* is particularly advantageous to teach as older literature has already been addressed.

To answer the second research question, which concerns insights regarding Romanticism, a close reading has been conducted. Close reading is a structured approach to reading a text which allows the reader to probe further into “its meanings” (Brummett, 2019, p. 8). This, according to Federico (2016), is achieved by the close reader’s intention of better appreciating craftsmanship of the work, its “*feeling*”, and the codified moral values within (p. 9, italics in original). The type of close reading that this paper has conducted is akin to Brummett’s (2019) deductive approach in which a fixed theory and method is adopted to navigate the text; this was the established theoretical framework on Romanticism. More specifically, when reading the novel, any instance that was reminiscent of the theoretical discussion or literature review on the topic was marked and later reviewed. The objective was to understand how the instances related to the topic at hand. Afterwards, some general trends were discerned upon which an argument was constructed. The analyses are relayed in the upcoming section in the form of an essay.

To address the third research question, pedagogical approaches to literature were discussed in relation to the insights offered by the close reading and the Swedish syllabi for English. That is, the answer to the third research question comprises, in essence, a didactical discussion that involves all aspects of this paper, conjointly considered to best delineate some preliminary suggestions for pedagogical implementation.

### **Analysis of *Northanger Abbey***

The close reading of *Northanger Abbey* through the proposed lens of Romanticism offers a complex web of insights. From the instances that were reminiscent of Austen's Romanticism, three cornerstones have been identified. The analysis will deal with the domestic felicity portrayed in the novel's opening and closure, three aspects that are connected to the world of courtship, and the use and function of the Gothic.

The novel begins with the narrator's presentation of Catherine Morland, a young girl who has been raised by a good-natured family of a modest, yet respectable, income, in the village of Fullerton. This opening establishes their situation in terms of domestic happiness, a good family that live in a rural environment. However, since the narrator is intent on Catherine being a heroine and noting that no suitable gentleman for Catherine exists nearby, "something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way" (Austen, 1818/2003, p. 18). Upon being invited by Mrs. Allen, the wife of a chief landowner in Fullerton, Catherine's adventure of finding her lover begins with her removal from the rural and domestic life at Fullerton and her entry into a world of courting: the city of Bath.

It is within the environment of Bath that the novel begins to develop the theme of courtship. The close reading offered a complex view of its treatment. The primary observations regard the tension between flirtation and sincerity, the differences in attitudes and strategies towards courting, and sentiments guided by financial ambitions.

Firstly, the novel can be said to explore the tension between sincere attachment and flirtation. This may be demonstrated by juxtaposing two opposing stances, one embodied by Henry Tilney and another represented by Isabella, the former being Catherine's love-interest, and the latter being Catherine's friend. Henry's stance can be said to represent sincere attachment, judging from his simile between dancing and marriage, both of which, to Henry, are predicated upon a mutual agreement of fidelity and devotion (pp. 74-75). On the other hand,

Isabella's stance represents flirtation. Her duplicitous encouragement of the flirtatious attentions of Henry's brother, Frederick Tilney, while being engaged to James, Catherine's brother, is what leads Catherine to pronounce Isabella as "a vain coquette", whose "tricks have not answered" (Austen, 1818/2003, p. 204), Isabella ultimately losing both James's and Frederick's interest. From the development of these two characters, it can be established that the novel depicts a contrast between restricting one's affection to one individual, and one's encouragement of someone else's attention, at any given time, as opposed to multiple people simultaneously.

Secondly, the novel portrays different strategies and attitudes towards courting. It has already been illustrated by Justice (1998) how the courting strategies differ between John Thorpe and Henry Tilney, insofar that John employs a rhetorical and persuasive mode of courtship, whereas Henry succeeds to win Catherine's affection through a sincere disinterestedness, through a strategy of anti-courtship (Justice, 1998). Nevertheless, it should be added that Henry does not object to the result that traditional courting sets out to achieve: marriage. Henry and John do indeed embody different strategies, but they share the same objective: marrying Catherine. This can be contrasted with Frederick, who embodies a radically different attitude. His flirtation with Isabella is not intended to result in marriage; rather, it is surmised that he only flirts "for mischief's sake" (Austen, 1818/2003, p. 204). In sum, Henry employs an anti-courtship strategy with the intention of marrying Catherine; John Thorpe, on the other hand, uses a strategy of rhetorical courting also in the hope of marrying Catherine; and Frederick also makes use of rhetorical courting, much like John, but without any intention of securing Isabella as a wife.

Thirdly, there is the facet of financial ambitions, which play a large part in the courting theme in *Northanger Abbey*. One character whose intention in courting is swayed by financial situations is the General, Henry Tilney's father. It is made explicit that the General only

“courted” Catherine because he was misinformed by Thorpe as to her “possessions and claims”, Catherine being “less rich than [the General] had supposed her to be” (Austen, 1818/2003, p. 228). Isabella is another character who values financial standing when courting. When Catherine learns that James has ended his engagement with Isabella due to his conviction that Isabella is duplicitous, Catherine, Henry, and Eleanor surmise that Isabella’s desire for money is what has driven her to accept Frederick’s attentions (pp. 189-190, 193-194). In all, the novel uses financial situation as an intrinsic plot device; it guides the interests, motivations, and actions of the General and Isabella. Both characters are guided by ambition when engaging in their courting practices, championing the notion that the richer the love interest is the better.

Now that the theme of courtship has been addressed, the right-hand side of the proposed continuum shall be considered. *Northanger Abbey*’s connection to Gothic fiction is chiefly established through three methods: the use of tropes from the literary genre, the self-reference to romance, and its intertextuality. Firstly, concerning the tropes, it should be noted that the eponymous edifice is an abbey, which would equate Hogle’s “antiquated space” (2002, p. 2). Moreover, Catherine may be characterised as a naïve heroine who encounters a cruel villain in the form of General Tilney (cf. Abrams, 1993; Oxford Reference, 2009f; Hogle, 2002). Also, General Tilney’s alleged imprisonment and murder of his wife are crimes that are prototypical of Gothic fiction (Abrams, 1993; Oxford Reference, 2009f). Furthermore, Catherine is subjected to severe psychological distress in chapter six of the second volume, the mental state of which is not uncommon in Gothic fiction (Hogle, 2002). Secondly, *Northanger Abbey* is metafictionally connected to Gothic fiction in the sense that Catherine is referred to as a heroine throughout the novel and her Gothic delusions are described as “visions” and “alarms of romance” by the narrator (Austen, 1818/2003, pp. 187, 189). Lastly, the novel’s connection to Gothic fiction resides in its intertextuality. Prominently, there are various references and allusions to: Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Italian*, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), and

*The Romance of the Forest* (1791); Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1795); Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, among others, throughout the novel (see Butler, 2003). The intertextuality, and Catherine's reading of Gothic novels, reinforces the connection to Gothic fiction. In all, the *use*, the evocation of the Gothic is achieved through the reliance on tropes from the literary genre and the allusions and references to influential Gothic novels.

A distinction between the *use* of the Gothic and the *function* of the Gothic was proposed earlier. Based on the reviewed literature, the scholarly discussion can be said to have treated the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey* as a mean through which different insights or messages may be conveyed. Different aspects of the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*, such as the architecture of Northanger, the frightening ambiance of the Gothic, and Catherine's Gothic fears, have been analysed as codifiers for contemporary political debates, revolutionary fears, and female vulnerability. Hence, a distinction between how the Gothic manifests in the novel (i.e. the use) and what the Gothic may signify (i.e. the function) was made. Interestingly, the novel seems to, at least to some degree, perpetuate the same distinction in relation to Catherine's understanding and the comprehension of the implied reader: the use and function of the Gothic seems to be reflected in the narrative.

On the one hand, Henry can be observed to prime Catherine to notice the use of the Gothic. The most compelling evidence for this assertion is Henry's jesting account of Northanger's semblance to Gothic tropes. During their journey to Northanger, Henry narrates to Catherine a Gothic-inspired description of what she may and may not expect upon her arrival (pp. 149-152; cf. Butler, 2003). To her great distress, once Catherine is at Northanger, she finds examples of objects that Henry has primed Catherine to notice (pp. 158-162), and she is terrified. Wallace (1988) quite rightly points out that Catherine's fear cannot be attributed to her Gothic reading alone; on the contrary, her distressing experience is largely caused by Henry's priming. Put differently, Henry's jesting is the very reason for Catherine's subsequent



recognition of the tropes of Gothic fiction within her own apartment at Northanger. He has primed her to notice the use of the Gothic.

On the other hand, the narrator can be read to have primed the reader to notice the function of the Gothic. In the novel's opening, the narrator describes how Catherine's upbringing has been very different from conventional Gothic stories; for example, her father is not "addicted to locking up his daughters" and her mother did not die in childbirth (Austen, 1818/2003, p. 15). However, once it has been established that Catherine has lived a life free from Gothic horrors thus far, the narrator mentions that Catherine is about to be introduced to "all the difficulties and dangers of a six weeks' residence in Bath" (Austen, 1818/2003, p. 19). The reader, I argue, is primed by the narrator during these first allusions to notice any injustice or distress that befalls Catherine henceforth. Moreover, due to the nature of the tropes mentioned by the narrator, the reader is particularly susceptible to notice instances that place women in dangerous situations (i.e., female vulnerability). Further to that point, the narrator's sarcastic tone counteracts the expectation that Catherine will be kidnapped, imprisoned, or sinned against in that conventionally Gothic manner. The reader does not expect Catherine to be the victim of such crimes. However, the reader may expect less vile injustices, such as the scene in which John Thorpe lies to Catherine and refuses to stop his carriage, despite Catherine desperately pleading him to do so (pp. 82-84).

Arguably, it is because the narrator primes the reader to find injustices that are less conventionally Gothic that the function of the Gothic becomes more impactful. Close to the mentions of Gothic dangers, the narrator also hints that Catherine will be turned "out of doors" (p. 21). Consequently, the dangers women may face in Gothic stories become associated with Catherine's dismissal from Northanger. Hence, once the General has decided to send Catherine home most rudely (pp. 208-210), a hint of the Gothic can be traced. This could be one reason why several critics posit that the General is, to some extent, a tyrant, villain, or monster (cf.

Bander, 2010; Fuller, 2010; Levine, 1975; Ty, 1998; Beard, 1998). Put differently, the narrator's priming of the reader to notice injustices perpetrated against women has facilitated the identification of a Gothic connotation to the General's character, which, in turn, highlights the functions of the Gothic. In this case, it displays that women are vulnerable to tyrannical patriarchs in ways that may be less extraordinary and more commonplace than Gothic fiction would lead one to believe.

After Henry's reproach of Catherine's suspicion about the General (p. 186), Catherine undergoes a substantial change. Catherine realises the ridiculousness of her fears. Interestingly, she attributes them to the romance novels she has been reading (p. 188). However, as Wallace (1988) notes, Catherine does not expect to be distressed at Northanger solely based on the novels she has been reading; that outcome is largely Henry's doing as he has primed her to notice all the terrors that the edifice may occasion. In any case, the outcome is the same: Catherine wakes up from her fantasies. This can be interpreted as Catherine no longer being fearful of the use of the Gothic; she recognises that the General is not a murderous villain. Nonetheless, she remains cognisant that, "upon serious consideration", he is not "perfectly amiable" (Austen, 1818/2003, p. 188). Catherine is at the verge of uncovering a function of the Gothic: that the General's character accentuates female vulnerability. Nevertheless, Catherine fails at putting this insight into words. She is, however, better informed because of her experiences at Northanger.

The final topic to be discussed relates to Catherine's return to the domestic rural life. Once she has been so rudely sent back home from Northanger, Catherine's glum return to Fullerton is not on par with the endearing opinion of the country she once communicated to Henry (p. 76). This time, she is unhappy because she fears that she has offended Henry's family. Even with her own family, Catherine's visions of domestic felicity are disillusioned. It is only when Henry asks for her hand in marriage, and they finally receive the General's consent, that

the rural happiness may manifest anew upon their being married. In other words, Catherine's return from the courting realm of Bath, and her awakening from the encounter with romance at Northanger, serves to give way to Catherine's personal happiness through marriage with Henry; the domestic felicity found in a rural environment is reinstated.

In closing, the analysis has presented different aspects of Austen's Romanticism, which seem to be somewhat sequentially developed. Based on the proposed continuum of Austen's Romanticism, the narrative of *Northanger Abbey* can be conceptualised as a movement across the continuum. The narrative departs from one of domestic and rural happiness to enter a world of courtship, explore it, and advance towards the Gothic, before returning to a new domesticised felicity in the form of a marriage in a rural setting. Thus, *Northanger Abbey* can be read as an exploration of Romanticism: an examination of the realistic forces and archetypes that affect romantic relationships and the fictional fantasies that inform visions of romance, which serves to establish a happiness, achieved through marriage, and localised in the countryside of England.

## Didactical Discussion

The above section dealt with insights offered by the close reading of *Northanger Abbey*. The major insights were presented as three cornerstones: domestic felicity, the theme of courtship, and the use and function of the Gothic. This section intends to delineate some preliminary suggestions for pedagogical implementation by discussing the three cornerstones in relation to the reviewed approaches on teaching literature and the teaching of *Northanger Abbey*. The intention is to suggest which approaches would allow students to engage with the contents of the analysis.

There are three notable approaches that would enable educators to approximate the topic of domestic felicity. The mentioned approach from Maley (1989, as cited in Khatib et al., 2011) in which the characters and the plot are highlighted could be appropriate for educators to make use of because the cornerstone largely concerns the opening and closing of the novel, requiring students to keep a track of the different characters and the plot to approximate the cornerstone; this could highlight how domestic felicity is achieved and what it comprises: marriage and rural life. However, to further hone in on the novel's portrayal of domestic felicity, educators may draw on Carter and Long's (1991, as cited in Khatib et al., 2011) culture-inspired model, focusing on theoretical perspectives on literature and genres. This approach entails possibilities of addressing domestic felicity as a larger cultural issue, which, in turn, could be related to Austen's Romanticism. Lastly, educators may wish to bear in mind Krueger's (2014) argument that we can approach the novel as a crossover text between eighteenth-century literature and Romanticism. Krueger's (2014) perspective could assist educators to further nuance and develop the idea of domestic felicity from a literary and cultural perspective, which, for English 6, would conform to the core content of authorship in relation to literary periods<sup>4</sup> (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a, p. 5, my translation). Following Krueger's (2014)

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<sup>4</sup> "Författarskap i relation till litterär epok."

example, this could be achieved by providing students with questions for discussion, allowing them to reflect upon Austen's authorship to the best of their ability.

Several approaches seem helpful to address the theme of courtship. For one, Maley's (1989, as cited in Khatib et al., 2011) model would seem highly appropriate again because the insights deal with multiple characters, their characterisations, their motivations, and their values. This focus would most likely be a sufficient tool for educators to approach this cornerstone and its nuances. Nonetheless, educators may want to consider making this focus more appealing and engaging, which is encouraged by Beach et al. (2021). This could be achieved by drawing inspiration from Carter and Long's (1991, as cited in Khatib et al., 2011) approach where the students' personal experiences are reflected upon in conjunction with the reading of the novel. Moreover, if introspection is desirable, educators can draw on Pritchard's (1993) methodology of focusing on writing prompts to foster students' interaction with the text and their responses as readers. On a different note, collaborative writing might also evoke engagement among students. Educators wishing to opt for this possibility may draw on Rehn (2014), who focused on parody and the Gothic, but whose exercise in conjoint writing may be tailored to the topic of courtship. For example, educators could organise an activity in which students conjointly write a short story about a love triangle, using Isabella, James, and Frederick as archetypal models, but which may be supplemented with personal experiences. In sum, educators may consider a reader response approach centred around a writing activity to further the treatment of the theme, and to make it more engaging.

Some already discussed combinations of approaches could be reused to approximate the use and function of the Gothic. Firstly, Krueger's (2014) argument combined with Carter and Long's (1991, as cited in Khatib et al., 2011) culture model could once again make for an appropriate starting point. Considering that the use of the Gothic concerned the tropes and conventions that *Northanger Abbey* borrows, as well as the Gothic stories that the novel

references or alludes to, these two resources would be serviceable as they foreground genre theory and the complexity of situating the novel within a literary tradition. More concretely, educators could provide extracts from Radcliffe's novels and questions for discussion that allow students to draw connections between the two authors, which may result in an informative treatment of the novel's use of the Gothic. Secondly, Rehn's (2014) creative writing task in conjunction with Carter and Long's (1991, as cited in Khatib et al., 2011) experience-based approach could make for an engaging activity in which students can rewrite Gothic passages from *Northanger Abbey* and base them on personal experiences. This starting point could entail an approximation of the function of the Gothic. However, the observations pertaining to this topic may be more elusive to upper-secondary students; for example, revolutionary fears in England during the 1790s may not be a topic with which many Swedish upper-secondary students are acquainted. Therefore, to believe that the students would be able to approximate such connections is perhaps inordinately optimistic. In light of that, educators should perhaps be satisfied with the approximation of the use of the Gothic, and any tangential hint at the function of the Gothic.

In all, some preliminary pedagogical suggestions have been delineated. It should be remembered that McKay (1982) prompts educators to consider the "linguistic and conceptual difficulty" of the text before using it in the classroom (p. 530). Therefore, it should be left to each individual educator to determine whether the pedagogical suggestions from this section and the discerned topics are appropriately challenging for their students. Just as the Swedish National Agency for Education (2022b) prompts educators to determine the extent to which literature should be included in teaching on the basis of student ability, the offered insights and the extent to which those are addressed should likewise be moderated in accordance with student ability. This is, of course, a consideration which will be left to the educator. This paper has only suggested how the analysis's observations may be approached pedagogically.

## Conclusion

In brief, this paper has provided a close reading of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* through a constructed perspective of Romanticism, from which several observations were presented, and followed by some preliminary pedagogical suggestions for educators teaching English at Swedish upper-secondary school. The arguments made throughout this paper are numerous, some of which deserve to be repeated in conjunction with the answers to the research questions. Moreover, a comment on areas that would benefit from future research will be provided.

With regard to the first research question, this paper contends that *Northanger Abbey* is particularly advantageous to teach when addressing the Swedish National Agency for Education's (2022a, pp. 5, 8) mandate on the coverage of "older literature" due to its complexity and versatility in style and literary traditions, and its comparative brevity. That is, *Northanger Abbey* possesses textual and literary qualities that are serviceable for the educational context. Furthermore, it has been purported that Austen's works do not seem to be particularly covered in Swedish upper-secondary school, a trend which this paper hopes to counterpoise. Related to that point, it has been noted that the teaching of Austen's works has received little scholarly attention, which is an observation this paper has intended to address, albeit limitedly. Importantly, this paper suggests that further scholarly attention is paid to the linguistic complexity of *Northanger Abbey* in comparison to Austen's other major works, the novels covered in English classes at Swedish upper-secondary schools, and the investigation of teaching of Austen's novels, the final suggestion being the next step in expanding the field to which this paper belongs.

Concerning the second research question, the Romantic close reading of *Northanger Abbey* provided several insights. The key observations were divided into three cornerstones: domestic felicity, courting, and the use and function of the Gothic. The overarching conclusion from the Romantic reading of *Northanger Abbey* is that the novel can be read as a movement

across the proposed continuum of Austen's Romanticism; the novel seems to travel from domestic felicity, venture into the realm of courtship, and explore the realm of the Gothic, before ultimately returning to a new domestic felicity in the shape of Catherine Morland's marriage with Henry Tilney. As such, the novel is seen as an exploration of Romanticism.

Regarding the third research question, the three cornerstones were discussed in conjunction with a few pedagogical approaches, which were argued to facilitate the approximation of the offered insights. Prominently, domestic felicity was argued to be best approached by perspectives that either highlight the story elements of a novel, such as its characters and plot, or its relation to theoretical discussions on genres and literary traditions. The approximation of the insights that pertain to courtship centred around approaches that either foregrounded story elements, individual responses, or writing tasks. To gauge the Gothic, it was argued that approaches focusing on genre and the complexity of categorising the novel would be appropriate; furthermore, pedagogical approaches highlighting individual responses and creative writing could also be fruitful. Let it be reiterated that this topic, teaching one of Jane Austen's novels, could benefit from future research.

To conclude, it should be emphasised that this paper purports only to provide some preliminary didactical suggestions concerning one close reading of *Northanger Abbey* through a proposed lens of Romanticism. There are other genres and literary forms through which the novel has been analysed and that may still prove worthwhile to investigate. This has, ultimately, been one case study: one attempt at discerning valuable insights from a particular perspective that can be approximated within the context of a Swedish upper-secondary school. That is not to say that other perspectives cannot yield valuable results: both in terms of literary analysis and in terms of didactics. On the contrary, there is much more to be explored, and further investigations would be most beneficial. This is why *Northanger Abbey* has been contended to be an incredible resource for educators throughout this paper; it is a complex novel which



represents many literary trademarks that educators can address. As opposed to treating older literature as only being defined by chronology, this paper conceives of the novel's qualities as a resource through which the mandate can be covered flexibly and assiduously. *Northanger Abbey* is not only an older novel in terms of chronology: it is a novel whose style and form are characteristic of older literature.

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