Mansfield Park: Jane Austen's Bleak House

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JANE Austen has had some clever critics of late. So much so that Ian Watt has spoken of the criticism of the past two decades as 'incomparably the richest and most illuminating that has appeared'.[1] As a result there are substantial areas of agreement as far as five of the six major novels are concerned; the exception is *Mansfield Park*—'the most awkward item in the Jane Austen canon'—which continues to provoke very widely differing opinions.[2] Edmund Wilson finds it 'the most nearly perfect of the novels', whereas C. S. Lewis deems it 'the least satisfactory of Jane Austen's works'.[3] Lionel Trilling explains why it is the novel which depreciators of Jane Austen may 'cite most tellingly in justification of their antagonism' but at the same time he asserts that it is a 'great novel'.[4] On the other hand Kingsley Amis recognizes the view held by 'rational critics as well as by mere going-through-the-motions appreciators, that *Mansfield Park* is the best of Jane Austen's novels', but he then reveals it to be a corrupt and morally defective work.[5] Again, Marvin Mudrick condemns it as Jane Austen's 'grand apostasy', while Andrew H. Wright pleads that it is 'an extraordinarily honest book'.[6] The uneasiness about *Mansfield Park* which suggests itself here is perhaps underlined by W. A. Craik's evaluation: in some parts the perfection of *Emma* is exceeded, but in others there is such a feeling of 'moral insecurity' that, as far as total effect is concerned, *Mansfield Park* is 'not as completely satisfying even as *Sense and Sensibility*'.[7] Evidently *Mansfield Park* has achieved the status of a 'problem novel'. Is the fault Jane Austen's or ours?

Something which needs to be stated at the outset is that the subject of the novel is Mansfield Park rather than Fanny Price; the house, all that it represents and embodies, is at the core of the work, and is the target for some of Jane Austen's most undeviating criticism. It is tempting

to see as a germ of this criticism the teasing and elusive remark she attributed to Elizabeth Bennet who, when asked how long she had loved Darcy, replied: 'I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley' (ch. 59). Of course this is very 'light and bright and sparkling', but *Mansfield Park*, which contains many a 'long chapter of sense', develops and extends the idea and shows what ensues when places take preponderance over people.[8] It is Jane Austen's most profound and disturbing book: 'playfulness and epigrammatism' of style have no place for a humour that is increasingly corrective and reproofs that are increasingly pervasive. Wisdom is preferred to wit.

Mansfield Park has been regarded with reverent awe by most critics. For Trilling it is the 'Great Good Place' and Lady Bertram is 'part of the perfection'.[9] Mudrick tells us that the Bertrams are meant to be loved and admired, and Charles Murrah confirms that good of all kinds is constantly associated with Mansfield and its environment.[10] D. W. Harding sees 'virtuous' Sir Thomas Bertram as a pillar of society epitomizing standards 'worthy of a sensitive person's support and complete allegiance'.[11] And finally Tony Tanner maintains that Mansfield refines and 'perfects' people.[12] To my mind all of these critics have mistaken Jane Austen's intention in the novel, and interpretations dependent to any degree on Mansfield Park's being viewed as a kind of promised land seem to me to be ill-based. Charlotte Brontë was closer to Jane Austen than she knew when she wrote—to G. H. Lewes, 12 January 1848—'I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses'. The suffocating reality beneath the attractive exterior is precisely *Mansfield Park*'s subject—'the sameness and the elegance, the prosperity and the nothingness' of the existence depicted in *Persuasion* (ch. 1). Mansfield Park denies life.

There exists at the house a set of values inculcated by Sir Thomas and accepted, albeit passively, by Lady Bertram. In order that their worth might be assessed these values are subjected to hitherto unknown forces—namely Fanny Price, who is colourless and self-effacing, and the Crawfords,

who are dazzling and self-confident. Allowing the established pattern of life in a settled, and complacent, community to be upset by the entry of outsiders is a method typical of Jane Austen; it is found in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* also. We are shown how Mansfield reacts to the arrival of Fanny and the Crawfords in turn, and we see it throughout as the victim of its own inflexibility. It is worth remarking at this point that Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris, and Mrs. Price are sisters. Jane Austen was interested in marriages and their respective deserts (she was more interested in marriages than in marriage), and we perceive why Miss Maria Ward married Sir Thomas Bertram—'all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income' (ch. 1) were an unexpected harvest. But what also deserves consideration is why Sir Thomas should have married Miss Maria Ward. The answer is that he married her for her looks—there is nothing else after all—and he is almost as limited as she is. She likes the look of the establishment and he likes the look of her; there is nothing to choose between them. They are both pompous fools. But where does that leave Mrs. Price? Ay, there's the rub, for she has married so badly that the situation is beyond repair. Division between the sisters is the 'natural result' (ch. 1). Such an effect of ordination—'ordering, arranging, or disposing in ranks'—warns us against entertaining extravagant hopes for Fanny.

The arrival of Fanny Price confirms the rigidity of the system which prevails at Mansfield Park; she is inferior and she must learn her place. No allowance can be made for her shyness and sense of inadequacy, characteristics alien to the Bertrams who embody egotism and arrogance. To have her fully incorporated into the Mansfield household would be to debase the currency. Sir Thomas's problem is a grave one:

> How to preserve in the minds of my daughters the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram* . . . They cannot be equals. Their

> rank, fortune, rights, and expectations will always be different. It is a point of great delicacy . . . (ch. 1).

It is also a point of great delicacy that this speech occurs before Fanny has even set foot in the house. Sir Thomas is blinded by an inflated conception of his family's importance and merit—'His daughters he felt, while they retained the name of Bertram, must be giving it new grace' (ch. 2)—and Fanny is pre-judged, the book being essentially about the readjustment Mansfield Park finds itself forced to make so that Fanny is finally evaluated on personal and humane terms. But at the outset Mansfield Park is to be seen as a smug, self-satisfied establishment, its values so rigidly and narrowly fixed that its inhabitants are unable to make concessions for alternative attitudes. Not surprisingly Fanny is initially overwhelmed by everyone and everything:

> She was disheartened by Lady Bertram's silence, awed by Sir Thomas's grave looks, and quite overcome by Mrs. Norris's admonitions. Her elder cousins mortified her by reflections on her size, and abashed her by noticing her shyness; Miss Lee wondered at her ignorance, and the maid-servants sneered at her clothes (ch. 2).

'Disheartened', 'awed', 'overcome', 'mortified', 'abashed', 'wondered at', 'sneered at'; Fanny's growth and development are stunted by an environment which puts a stranglehold on life. As Mrs. Norris informs her, 'wherever you are, you must be the lowest and last' (ch. 23).

Mansfield, in its treatment of Fanny, betrays how appallingly inward-looking and insensitive a milieu it is. Fanny is suppressed, subdued, and so unfulfilled. It should be noticed that she is obliged to remain on the perimeter of experience and her role is constantly peripheral. Her position is indeed so uneasy that it provokes discussion as to whether she is 'out' or 'not out'. Her isolation is frequently remarked upon: Fanny 'sighed alone', Fanny 'remained alone', Fanny 'alone was sad and insignificant' (chs. 11, 14, 17)—the examples could easily be multiplied and all would illustrate her exclusion from the flow of life as a result of Mansfield's inability to absorb, on equal

terms, a person of Fanny's rank. She is firmly reminded that 'people are never respected when they step out of their proper sphere' (ch. 23). The visit to Sotherton (another impressive *place* containing ghastly *people*) effectively indicates the ancillary nature of her general position. The very fact of Fanny's being a member of the party occasioned considerable surprise, but we soon apprehend that she is a member in name only. During the journey she is 'not often invited to join in the conversation of the others' (ch. 8), and at Sotherton itself she is consistently neglected and quitted. The visit to Sotherton is one of the few endeavours in the book to achieve a sense of community and the abject failure of the attempt is noteworthy. After the lower part of the house has been inspected there is a universal desire for 'air and liberty' (ch. 9) and so the group moves outside. Unity is quickly lost, however, and three splinter-groups are formed comprising:

Miss Maria Bertram	Miss Mary Crawford	Miss Julia Bertram
Mr. Henry Crawford	Miss Fanny Price	Mrs. Norris
Mr. Rushworth	Mr. Edmund Bertram	Mrs. Rushworth

But complete fragmentation then ensues. Firstly, Edmund and Mary (who have been discussing the clergy as if Fanny were not present anyway) leave her on her own. She is discovered by Rushworth, Crawford, and Maria, but Rushworth soon goes off in search of a key, and Henry and Maria in turn leave Fanny. Next, Julia, who has broken away from Mrs. Rushworth and Mrs. Norris, stumbles on Fanny but she rapidly departs, and finally Mr. Rushworth returns, only to forsake her yet again. This comprehensive shunning of Fanny, and the enforced isolation in the wilderness it incurs, symbolises her alienation. She wishes to enter and be accepted by Mansfield society but she finds the way barred. Even when she is afforded the opportunity to penetrate the privileged circle, as she is during the theatricals, she is restrained by her moral sense. The point is nicely accentuated by the contrasting behaviour of the Bertram daughters who ignore all notions of propriety and decorum in their eagerness to escape just the society to

which Fanny aspires. In this respect a very important conversation between Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford takes place at Sotherton. She says:

> Yes, certainly, the sun shines and the park looks very cheerful. But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said.

And he replies:

> And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited.

This is obviously heavily loaded and the point need not be laboured. Appropriately enough Fanny sees the wrong here and warns Maria of the danger of hurting herself on the gate's spikes (ch. 10). As usual Fanny is ignored and 'again left to her solitude'.

Fanny knows then 'in apartness' and never constitutes a serious threat to Bertram standards and attitudes (ch. 13). The Crawfords, however, are a different proposition since they are rich and handsome. A lively, confident, and apparently engaging couple, they both make full use of their powers and the Bertrams fall like ninepins. Henry, a practised flirt, is able to play one Miss Bertram off against the other almost at will, assisted as he is by the exaggerated idea of their own consequence with which they are imbued. When Henry flirts with them he confirms them in their belief that they are 'the finest young women in the country' (ch. 5) and so they are willing victims. They betray too keen a propensity to depend upon aristocratic assumptions of social place; personal and individual values have been ignored in favour of a kind of revelling in dead-letter privileges pertaining to the Great House. Edmund too is slow to penetrate Mary Crawford's veneer of elegance and is beguiled by external éclat: 'I was playing the fool

with my eyes open' (ch. 35). Maria, Julia, and Edmund are all duped by the Crawfords; the house that Sir Thomas built falls down—the victim of its own delusions—its ideals redundant and its values otiose.

Yet Mansfield Park does possess a superficial allure. When Fanny arrives home at Portsmouth and compares it with Mansfield she remembers the latter as the acme of decorum and splendour. The contrast between the two houses is strongly conveyed: Mansfield Park is large and grand, Portsmouth is cramped and unimpressive. On the one hand tranquillity, formality, and restraint; on the other noise, confusion, and exuberance. But Fanny's vision has been blinkered and distorted as a result of Mansfield's insidious indoctrination and she is now as overwhelmed by the Prices, a lively and animated family, as she had previously been by the Bertrams. People 'rush' into rooms, 'burst' out again 'slamming' the door in this 'abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety' (chs. 38, 39). Mansfield's corrosion allows no comfort. The crucial point, however, is the similarity in the *people*. Neither the Bertrams nor the Prices have much affection for their daughters who, in turn, show little respect for their parents. 'Mrs. Price might have made just as good a woman of consequence as Lady Bertram' (ch. 39); the places are different but there are strong resemblances in the human situations. At the Great House, a picture of ostensible grace, order, and ease, limited and deficient human relationships; at Portsmouth, where squalor, disorder, and noise abound, limited and deficient human relationships. Jane Austen is at pains to stress that people and places must be distinguished between. The lesson is similar to that which Darcy is taught—people are to be seen as individuals, removed from their trappings. In her next novel, *Emma*, Jane Austen created a person with a rich sense of her own superiority, and with such an inclination for an undemanding, untaxing, and thoroughly comfortable existence that she becomes smug and complacent, being forced to make several painful blunders before she is jolted to awareness. So in *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen presents us with similarly constituted people whose definition is derived from their being para-

sites on The Great Good Place, people who are almost obsessed by the desire to be comfortable, people whose potential is, however, to be probed when exposed to revealing pressures which threaten their hitherto unruffled supremacy. What happens to refinement and elegance in a crisis? These inhabitants of great houses—how do they fare when props of position and rank count for nothing? Jane Austen tried to answer questions such as these in *Mansfield Park*—and in *Persuasion* where Sir Walter Elliot is confronted with the degradation of having to let Kellynch Hall. (But that's another story.)

When the Bertrams are challenged by personal experience they are found wanting, and nowhere more prominently than at the head. Sir Thomas lacks warmth and openness and is incapable of forming close and affectionate relationships with his children. He is 'no object of love' as far as his daughters are concerned—'the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him' (chs. 2, 3). He impedes natural human contact. Fanny is awed by his presence and frightened by his gravity; instead of receiving the encouragement and love conducive to her development she comes under the stultifying influence of the Great House and her individuality is denied. The Bertrams, we note, hate noise and Mansfield Park excludes 'noisy pleasures' (ch. 19). Vitality and energy are suppressed, and it is unable to assimilate liveliness (the Crawfords, of course, are a lively couple)—instead, stability, tranquillity, and conformity are nourished to such a degree that animation and informality are regarded as undermining forces. This is well brought out during the theatricals. Lady Bertram informs her husband on his return: 'We have been all alive with acting' (ch. 19). But now everything is 'sameness and gloom'; their party is rarely 'enlivened', and even Edmund allows that they are in want of 'animation'. But, as Fanny points out, Sir Thomas values 'quietness'—'the repose of his own family-circle is all he wants'. And we learn in this same chapter—21—of Maria's eagerness to marry a man she hates in order to escape 'home, restraint, and tranquillity'. Henry Crawford sums up the 'novelty' of the theatricals: 'There was such an interest, such an

animation, such a spirit diffused! Every body felt it. We were all alive.' (ch. 23). The play is such an attraction to the inhabitants of the claustrophobic circle at Mansfield Park because it affords them the liberty of coming alive, and it is such a failure because their shackled and stunted upbringing has not rendered them capable of coping with this extension of experience. As at Sotherton the sought sense of community is not found; Mansfield Park is unable to come to terms with the intrusion of the Honourable John Yates and his, in the context, finely titled play *Lovers' Vows*. Edmund himself is a part of the disintegration, descending as he does from 'that moral elevation which he had maintained before' (ch. 17). We have here a society ill-equipped to assimilate its newly acquired permissiveness. Once more Fanny is left alone and insignificant.

It is clear that Mansfield Park is unable to absorb a person of Fanny's rank—to absorb her, that is, on equal terms. She can, obviously, be assimilated at a certain level: as comforting satellite to the greatest zombie of them all, Lady Bertram, who surely epitomises the aridity of the abortive ritual daily enacted at Mansfield Park and often confused with life. In his seminal essay Lionel Trilling has gone so far as to say that in her attitude to Lady Bertram Jane Austen 'is turning her irony upon her own fantasy of ideal existence as it presented itself to her at this time . . . she wants to withdraw from the exigent energies of her actual self . . . Lady Bertram is . . . her mocking representation of her wish to escape from the requirements of personality'.[14] It is difficult to take this seriously. Lady Bertram is synonymous with indolence. The second page tells us that she is of 'a temper remarkably easy and indolent' and this sets the tone for the rest of the book. She gives up the house in town because of 'a great deal of indolence' (ch. 2); she does not go into public because she is 'too indolent' (ch. 4), and it is partly because she is 'so indolent' that the Grants are reluctant to ask the Bertrams to dinner (ch. 25). Furthermore she is incapable of thought. When Mrs. Norris suggests that Fanny be installed in the little white attic Lady Bertram 'made no opposition' (ch. 1); when Mrs. Norris makes arrangements for all on the occasion of the Sother-

ton expedition Lady Bertram 'made no objection' (ch. 6); when the question of the theatricals was raised Lady Bertram 'did not evince the least disapprobation' (ch. 13); when Mrs. Norris suggests that one of the Price children be accepted Lady Bertram 'agreed with her instantly' (ch. 1). Nor does she see anything of what is happening round about her. During her husband's prolonged absence abroad she has been usefully employed at a 'great deal of carpet work' and 'many yards of fringe', and 'she would have answered as freely for the good conduct and useful pursuits of all the young people as for her own' (ch. 19). As Jane Austen says, Lady Bertram 'might always be considered as only half awake' (ch. 34). This is the shot we are most frequently given:

> Lady Bertram, sunk back in one corner of the sofa, the picture of health, wealth, ease, and tranquillity, was just falling into a gentle doze, while Fanny was getting through the few difficulties of her work for her (ch. 13).

It is interesting that we are told on a number of occasions that Lady Bertram is beautiful, yet this is never conveyed other than in a decadent form; physical attractiveness is not matched with even a suspicion of intellectual exercise or mental agility. The overall impression, then, is of a sluggish personality degraded by wallowing inertly in ill-used luxury. But Lady Bertram does, at one moment, give advice to Fanny —when Henry Crawford proposes to her. Lady Bertram's reaction is fitting: 'You must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this' (ch. 33). Fanny has been offered marriage by a man of fortune; this at last is on Lady Bertram's wave-length. Had not she herself been 'raised to the rank of a baronet's lady'? Was not she herself intimate with 'all the comforts and consequences' to be derived from an advantageous alliance? (ch. 1)

But to give her her due it must be said that E. M. Forster has a word for her: he has seen the following as the moment when Lady Bertram attains rotundity:

> Lady Bertram did not think deeply, but guided by Sir Thomas, she thought justly on all important points; and she saw, therefore, in all its enormity, what had happened, and neither endeavoured herself, nor required Fanny to advise her, to think little of guilt and infamy. (ch. 47)

But he seems to miss the deflatory 'nor required Fanny to advise her'. And we know that Lady Bertram is 'guided in everything' by Sir Thomas (ch. 2). There are numerous suggestions that she relies on him automatically and unthinkingly: when Fanny is invited to dine with the Grants Lady Bertram 'will ask Sir Thomas . . . whether I can do without her' (ch. 23); at another time 'somebody had whispered something to her' but 'she had forgot to ask Sir Thomas what it could be' (ch. 29). But to my mind what particularly damns her is her reception of Fanny on her return from Portsmouth. Mansfield Park has crumbled under shame and scandal and is invested with a 'melancholy aspect'; Fanny gets down from the carriage, passes the 'solemn-looking' servants, and is approached by Lady Bertram, at last exerting herself as she comes from the drawing room. She moves, for the first time, with 'no indolent step' and says, after 'so dreadful a humiliation', 'Dear Fanny! Now I shall be comfortable' (ch. 46). Experience has neither enriched her mind nor broadened her horizons, and at the end all she wants is a replica of Fanny, Susan becoming the 'stationary niece' responsible for her 'hourly comfort'. Lady Bertram, it should be noticed, is the sole character to remain at Mansfield Park throughout and this is appropriate as she typifies the depersonalisation and deanimation that the place encourages. The general isolation of the Mansfield environment has not been stressed sufficiently; there is no Marianne bumping into Willoughby, no Miss Bennet nipping into the village to see the militia, no Miss Smith coming up against Mr. Martin in the local shop, no glimpse of Captain Wentworth from a passing carriage, none of the animation of Highbury. At Mansfield life is drained by 'the toils of civility' (ch. 28).

It is precisely because Jane Austen's criticism of the

aristocratic assumptions of Mansfield Park's parasitic inhabitants is so complete that the conventional happy ending is even more qualified than usual. During a recent B.B.C. Study Session programme Margaret Drabble had some remarkable things to say about Jane Austen:

> I'm deeply suspicious of the way every single one of her novels ends with a happy marriage, and none of them can describe one. Their fairy-tale endings . . . are . . . very superficial and irritating . . . Jane Austen shouldn't have left her books on such a happy note . . . She might just have hinted, delicately, that these perfect matches might not have been so perfect. (*The Listener* 4 April 1968)

This is extraordinarily short-sighted; what does Miss Drabble think that the Palmers, Hursts, Bennets and Bertrams of Jane Austen's world are doing? It does not seem to me that any of the novels have a happy ending, pure and simple. All her conclusions are modified by her incisive exposure of human frailties and absurdities and they are not to be judged in a vacuum. Her so-called perfect matches are so hard won and surrounded by such folly that further, more explicit, comment is redundant. Certainly to regard the ending of *Mansfield Park* as happy makes nonsense of what has preceded. All of Jane Austen's novels are concerned with the achievement of personal definition and self-fulfilment: Catherine Morland, Elinor and Marianne, Elizabeth and Darcy, Emma, Anne Elliot gain in awareness; an obscuring veil is removed, an obsession is attenuated, appearances are penetrated, and they see with increased clarity. Mansfield Park makes similar progress. Sir Thomas appreciates his errors and adjusts his values; Julia advances gradually; Tom's illness acts as a purgative; Edmund's eyes are opened; Maria is to be brought to her senses by having to live with Mrs. Norris. But this is not to shrug off without a residuum the earlier severe and unrelenting condemnation of the Great House and its residents. Significantly Sir Thomas finally derives most pleasure from Fanny's excellence, William's good conduct, Susan's usefulness; and none of them is a Bertram.

Jane Austen's irony is no more apparent than at the end: Fanny and Edmund remove to the parsonage which 'soon grew as dear to her heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park, had long been'.

Of course, the perfection of Mansfield Park is a laugh. But perhaps it has learnt its lesson; time will soon tell, for although egotism, arrogance and self-importance have supposedly been replaced by self-denial, humility, and interdependence (finding their apogee at the home of Edmund and Fanny where comfort *and* affection are united), who can ignore the ominous vision of Susan seated on the sofa with Lady Bertram and the pug? The situation has turned a full circle; if there is something Shakespearean in the precarious balance of *Mansfield Park*'s harmonious reconciliation, I doubt whether the rest is silence.

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NOTES

[1]Ian Watt (Ed.), *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1963).

[2]Ibid.

[3]Edmund Wilson, 'A Long Talk about Jane Austen', *Classics and Commercials* (1951). C. S. Lewis, 'A Note on Jane Austen', *Essays in Criticism*, Oct. 1954. Both included in Watt collection.

[4]Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (1955).

[5]Kingsley Amis, 'What became of Jane Austen?', *The Spectator*, Oct. 4, 1957. Included in Watt collection.

[6]Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (1952). Andrew H. Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels* (1953).

[7]W. A. Craik, *Jane Austen: The Six Novels* (1965).

[8]See Jane Austen's letter to Cassandra, Feb. 4, 1813.

[9]Trilling, op. cit.

[10]Mudrick, op. cit. Charles Murrah, *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad* (1958).

[11]D. W. Harding, 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen', *Scrutiny* VIII (1940). Included in Watt collection.

[12]In his 'Introduction' to the novel in the Penguin English Library Edition (1966).

[13]Cf. 'This old maid typifies "personality" instead of character, the sharp knowing in apartness, instead of knowing in togetherness' (D. H. Lawrence on Jane Austen).

[14]Trilling, op. cit.