

## Jane Austen: Mansfield Park

By Austen's third novel we are starting to see some trends emerging in her themes.

### CLASS AND AUSTEN

- Rigid class distinction existed, but at this time they were starting to break down a little as minor nobility sometimes married up into the higher ranks and some rich middleclass families started marrying into the sons and daughters of the country gentry. Austen's family were not in the first rank of the nobility, they were classed in the country gentry. Fortunes varied greatly within this group.
- **Women from this class married as advantageously as they could** bringing dowries with them generally from \$1000 to \$30000. **The ideal husband had an income** from his estates of at least \$5000 to \$10000 a year, although younger sons often had far less. This group had members who were in danger of slipping down the ladder of wealth. Austen bases her novels on the ways in which the less wealthy members of this group were sometimes struggling to hold onto their social position. Others were starting to rebel against the social rules they were required to follow.
- **The newly emerging wealthy middle class**, mostly situated in London or the northern manufacturing towns, were starting to marry into the ranks of the gentry, bringing much needed cash into depleted families.
- **A rigid set of employment option for men of the country gentry.** Eldest sons inherited the farming estates which were the main source of the wealth of this group. Younger sons had the choice of entering the army or navy by buying officers commissions. It was also acceptable for them to become ministers and often be gifted with a country church that had a farming estate attached to provide them with an income. Entering the legal profession was also acceptable and in Austen's time the profession of banking was also starting to be acceptable in the large towns.
- **In many County Shires** county gentry were being infiltrated by middle class wealthy and a few significant nobles. Barriers were slowly starting to crack.

One key result of this which we as C20th people notice was that sons of the gentry frequently had no gainful employment as their family wealth supported them. Austen looks at this group of young men, although it's doubtful that she speculated how damaging this was for so many young people. Their time was taken up with hunting, empty social visits, dinners and balls. There was no real challenging focus to their lives. Many of the escapades that young men and women got into in her novels were because of their need to fill empty hours with some sort of amusement or distraction.

### AUSTEN'S KEY PURPOSE

**Mansfield Park starts to unpick the behaviors of young people facing these emerging social dilemmas and changes.**

## KEY CHARACTERS

### TWO MAIN SETS OF PROTAGONISTS:

- **Henry and Mary Crawford**, siblings to Mrs Grant the Rectors wife. Wealthy, Idle and mischievous, they were facing the problems of who to marry. London based and came into the country with new London ideas. Brought up by an uncle, an Admiral, who has moved his mistress into his house after his wife died. Austen suggests their moral scruples degenerated because of the bad examples given by their uncle
  - **Mary** despised parsons and was put off marrying Edmond Bertram because as a younger son he was destined for the Church and about to be ordained. She recognised his worth as a person but couldn't envisage herself as a Rector's wife. She was a realist and couldn't persuade Edmond to choose another profession. Strong and radical views on many issues.
  - **Henry** hunted and chased girls to amuse himself. As a flirt he intended to amuse girls but never took them seriously. He felt engaged women were the safest to court as they had already made their choice of a husband and so wouldn't bother him with matrimony. He flirted with Maria Bertram during the theatricals at Mansfield Park, but accidentally fell in love with Fanny Price, a niece of the Bertrams. When rejected by her, he induced Maria to leave her boring husband and run away with him.
- **Fanny Price and Edmond Bertram**
  - **Not the main characters . Boring, earnest , moral and helpful. Are there any less appealing but worthy characters in an Austen novel?** Eventually they marry, after Edmond gets over his attraction to Mary Crawford and Fanny realises her crush on Edmond, who had always been very kind to her.

**Around these two major pairs of young people , Austen continues to use some typical foils**

- **The negligent parents:** Lord and Lady Bertram. He reserved, silent, moral and busy with his estates; she indolent and disinterested in her children. Her pug dog was her chief attention.
- **The unpleasant and interfering older female, Mrs Norris,** former rector's wife and aunt to all the Bertram children. She indulged them all with unwarranted praise, and undermined Fanny Price as a poor relative with no real claims on her affection. Miserly, dictatorial and interfering.

### Themes

1. **Discussion of the true worth a a responsible churchman to his flock.** Discussion with Mary Crawford /Edmond. She discounts the profession; he gives a good account of its importance in country areas. Austen seems on the side of this traditional explanation of the role of a good pastor.

**See Chs 22** [Also why Maria thinks wealth is a necessity]

2. **Austen does not appear on the side of major changes or controversies.**
  - a. She makes only one passing reference to slavery, which is the basis of the Bertram's wealth in the Caribbean.
  - b. **Very easy with the idea of cousins marrying.** [in the times before genetics reviewed this practice] Possible inbreeding in many of the County Shires if families married into each other over a long period of time.

**Some starter questions:**

1. How would Mary Crawford fare if she lived today? Her ideas? Her behaviours?
2. Henry Crawford: [and Maria Bertram] how would his behaviour be regarded today?
3. Your favourite character in Mansfield Park?
4. Many of the characters are still teenagers [or just out of their teens] How responsible should we expect them to be?

END