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## Ethics of possessing slaves and sexual awareness

The novels of Jane Austen primarily reveal satirical glimpses into the inner workings of Nineteenth-century England's upper classes. With a mocking overtone, the author ridicules the plight of young women as they desperately seek a worthy husband. Ultimately, the heroine happily weds the man whom she loves, and the corrupted character is condemned to live unhappily ever after. However, the plot of Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* differs slightly from her typical formula. Although the book narrates the story of Fanny Price, a young woman attempting to discover her place in the social order through marriage, the writer delves deeper into the era's current issues. Austen touches upon the ethics of possessing slaves and sexual self-awareness. She displays the constructive and damaging effects of Fanny's demure nature. The author also hints at the devastating effects which alcoholism can cause a family. Unlike the author's other novels, marriage is not directly on the forefront in *Mansfield Park*. Atypically Jane Austen, the book is refreshingly socially aware and discusses issues of consequence, not simply the insignificant gossip of dinner parties and wedding arrangements. In *Mansfield Park*, the author confirms her legitimacy as a writer through her ability to weave the current social issues of the time with the story of a painfully shy young woman struggling to balance the wishes of others with her own virtues.

In the opening chapter of *Mansfield Park*, the author describes the reality of urban poverty. The mother of Fanny Price writes a letter begging her well-to-do sisters to rescue one of her children, for she and her husband, an impoverished, drunken sailor, cannot afford to properly care for all of their ten children. In addition to acknowledging poverty, the author also suggests the detrimental effects of alcohol on a family. Alcoholism is introduced in Fanny's father, and later in the novel, Tom Bertram places serious financial strain on his family with his drinking problem. Through drinking, Tom incurs sizeable debts which force his father to tend to his plantations in Antigua, where he owns slaves.

*Mansfield Park* presents Austen's first effort to address serious moral issues. Sir Thomas's slaveholdings in the Caribbean support the lavish lifestyle of the Bertram's, yet the writer suggests that trafficking humans may hold a moral liability. Fanny raises a question about her uncle's holdings in the West Indies, and though her query is not hostile, a "dead silence" ensues (166). Although Austen only describes slavery as an undertone in the novel, she still makes a statement about its ethics.

The author again raises a moral question in her novel when she describes the licentious sexual behavior demonstrated by the characters. Austen utilizes symbolism when Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram squeeze around a locked gate at Southerton. The two creep around a previously

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forbidden area, which is an allusion to a sexual act. The spikes on the gate threaten to rip Maria's dress, which foreshadows how Maria will eventually destroy her social reputation through her adultery with Henry. Additionally, the author uses symbolism when Fanny attempts to find a chain for the cross pendant which she received from her brother William. The chain given to her from Henry does not fit through the pendant's clasp, yet the chain from Edmund is a perfect fit, suggesting that Edmund is the only proper match for Fanny.

Sexuality is discussed further with the play the young adults attempt to perform. *Lover's Vows* is a play brimming with sexual references. The play is ironic in the fact that it literalizes the events brewing at Mansfield Park. Henry and Maria act in scandalous scenes with one another, as do Edmund and Mary. The play's theme of overt sexuality can be construed as unquestionably immoral when Sir Thomas's intervention brings the performance to a halt. Interestingly, Fanny refuses to act in the play. Her refusal to participate signifies not only her disapproval of the play; on another level, it also shows that she is unwilling to be false about her emotions.

Acting is presented in two different lights at Mansfield Park. The play-acting in *Lover's Vows* represents the underlying emotions of the young adults. However, acting also signifies assuming a character that is not sincerely oneself. Henry and Mary Crawford are both adept at acting insincerely. Throughout the novel, Mary "acts" to win a place in Edmund's heart, yet her true self is exposed near the book's conclusion when she declares her wish for Tom to die so that Edmund may inherit his fortune. Likewise, while Henry is wooing Fanny, he is also "acting." Although he plays the part so well that he convinces himself that he loves Fanny, his true nature is revealed when he eventually seduces Maria and elopes with her. Thus, Fanny's refusal to act is significant, for her refusal demonstrates her sincerity on all levels of her being.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen also addresses the inner turmoil which Fanny experiences. Fanny is a victim of the "Cinderella Complex," for she feels as if she belongs to a family which does not fully welcome her. She struggles with her shyness and is often torn between remaining passive or asserting her opinion. Fanny is hurt when Edmund is attracted to Mary, yet she will not admit to herself that she is in love with him. When Edmund asks for Fanny's opinion of Mary, she replies with silence and fails to state her beliefs. On one occasion, Fanny and Edmund are gazing at the stars as he tries to justify Mary's poor qualities. When Fanny tries to change the subject, Edmund leaves. Upon her rejection of Henry's proposal, she cannot explain to her uncle that Henry's inappropriate behavior with Maria and his overall insincerity are what caused her to refuse him. In her attempts to please everyone else, she consequently ignores her own needs and wants.

However, Fanny's virtue ultimately triumphs over her timidity. No amount of entreaties can coerce her into participating in the improper *Lover's Vows*, and not even Edmund can convince her to accept Henry's proposal. Although she has difficulty articulating her emotions, Fanny, in

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the face of criticism, remains confident in her convictions. Ultimately, Fanny's unwavering allegiance to herself enables her to marry Edmund, the only man she has ever loved all along.

Mansfield Park is the most pragmatic and least romantic of all Austen's novels. In this story, she writes of more than simply marriage, romance, and social status. The book touches upon the miserable reality of urban poverty and the effects of alcoholism on the family. She alludes to the moral accountability of slavery, the effects of fleeting lust on permanent reputation, and the ultimate consequences of insincerity. Complicated even by the standards of Jane Austen, Mansfield Park discusses the social issues of the time, yet the book also shows, through the outcome of Fanny Price, that virtue and loyalty to oneself ultimately triumph.

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