
The Purpose Of Women's Education

Historically, during the late 1700s and 1800s, many pieces of literature as well as conduct books were written as a way to demonstrate how the conduct of how women should portray themselves as well as what a woman's education should involve. Mary Wollstonecraft delivered her powerful and revolutionary thoughts on education in her famous piece, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as she deeply criticized the societal obsession with the superficial accomplishments of women rather than women being seen as rational creatures that are capable of both feeling as well as rational and logical thinking. She attributes blame to the faulty education system in which women do not have equal educational opportunities, as well as pinning blame on the oppressive standards set by both men and society. The purpose of women's education was at the forefront of Wollstonecraft's argument as she argued that the goal in educating women is very different from the goal of educating men.

In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen creates her heroine, Fanny Price, in a way that she challenges the societal expectation that the purpose of women's education was to secure a husband. Rather, Austen's heroine educates and improves herself through the social constructs of her surrounding environment in order to attain virtue and morals instead of simply securing a husband. In this essay, I will look closely at how Austen subtly intended to make *Mansfield Park* a novelization of Mary Wollstonecraft's, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in order to demonstrate the purpose and the effect of Fanny's education that is attained through self-discovery and environment. Wollstonecraft deeply rejected society's prevailing belief that it was natural for women to be intellectually inferior to men. Rather, she attributed this inferiority to women's lack of educational opportunity. She argues that rationality is natural for all people, and that both men and women are given the same ability to reason and attain virtue.

However, virtue and morals can only be attained through intellectual exercise of educating one's mind. Austen presents a different and subtle argument to this idea in which women's education and improvement are cultivated by the environment in which they are raised in. The character of Fanny Price is appeared to be seen as a shy and stupid and intellectually inferior by her cousins as she lacks any formal education that matches her cousins when she first arrives at *Mansfield Park*. Her character is seen as timid, shy, and ignorant as she is seen as more of a listener and observer than an active participant in conversations, "She was not often invited to join in the conversation of the others, nor did she desire it" (58). However, she has a rational mind that is closely aligned with Wollstonecraft's concept of a rational woman, as she observes her family's behavior and manners as she begins to understand the world. Women in this society were valued and praised for their accomplishments like music, drawing, and dancing rather than their intellect.

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The Bertram's had hoped in adopting Fanny that she would improve by association from the shallow education of Maria and Julia. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield Park, Mrs. Norris alludes to the idea that Fanny's mind will be educated through the association of her environment, "It will be an education for the child said I, only being with her cousins; if Miss Lee taught her nothing, she would learn to be good and clever from them" (10). However, Fanny has in fact closely observed the behaviors of her upper-class family, especially the women. Wollstonecraft discusses the idea that from childhood, women are conditioned to believe they must render themselves to be appealing and desired by men in order to secure marriage. "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man" (394). In this way, she argues that mothers perpetuate this cycle of faulty education as they cultivate their daughter's minds to elevate superficial accomplishments over improving one's mind to secure a husband. Mrs. Norris sees marriage as a business and as a way to secure financial and societal security. She also views women's education as a means for "settling well" (7).

This viewpoint further supports the idea that Austen and Wollstonecraft aimed to challenge- the purpose of women's education is not solely for securing a husband. On the other hand, at the end of the novel, Sir Thomas Bertram regrets the shallow education that his daughters, Maria and Julia had received in that their purpose was not one of self-discovery, "Here had been grievous mismanagement; but, bad as it was, he gradually grew to feel that it had not been the most direful mistake in his plan of education. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments- the authorized object of their youth- could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind" (314). In this way, Sir Thomas admits that formal education may not have had any moral effect on his daughter's minds regarding their conduct and virtue. Additionally, he attributes his daughters' impropriety of the environment which they were raised in, "He had meant for them to be good, but his care had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them" (314).

At the same time, one could make the argument that Fanny received a similar formal education as Maria and Julia; however, Edmund's character and his influence were crucial in educating Fanny through self-discovery and virtues. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator offers a glimpse into difference of education that Fanny receives. "Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of History; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise" (18). Edmund cultivates her mind as he serves as a moral character for Fanny to look up to and embody the example he has set for her. Wollstonecraft raises the point on the dependency of women to

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securing the affections of men. She does not believe that women's primary goal in life is to secure and allure a man's affections and to submit as an obedient wife. Rather, she views marriage as a friendship between a virtuous man and a virtuous woman. "The woman who strengthens her body and exercise her mind will, by managing her family and practicing various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband" (396).

Throughout the novel, Edmund alludes to the dear friendship that has developed between him and Fanny. Wollstonecraft's ideal marriage is one that is built on a mutual friendship, understanding, respect, and appreciation for one's moral compass. Fanny Price resembles a similar idea of marriage as she strongly denies Henry Crawford's proposal. Fanny closely observed Henry's past behaviors with Maria and has seen that he is not a virtuous man with a moral compass similar to Edmund's, "I think the difference between us too great, indefinitely too great; his spirits often oppress me- but there is something in him which I object to still more. I cannot approve his character" (237).

In this way, Austen aims to demonstrate the effect of Fanny's improved mind in which she refused to submit herself to a marriage with a man like Henry that she cannot approve of his virtue and character, even though the people around her tell her it is her duty to marry him and accept his proposal (226).

To conclude, Fanny's character develops and improves throughout the novel by the means of education. However, this education was affected and guided by her environment, Edmund's influence, and by the observations of impropriety displayed by other characters that she recalls in her memory. The purpose of Fanny's education was not to secure a proper husband, instead it was to improve her character and her understanding of virtuous behavior and of herself. Through this education that has been attained through her environment and experience, Fanny is empowered to resist everyone's expectation of her to marry Henry as she puts her moral compass and virtues above everything else. Wollstonecraft's ideas are echoed through Fanny's improved education in which she says, "The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent" (394).

In this way, Austen intended to make Mansfield Park a novelization of Mary Wollstonecraft's, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in order to demonstrate the purpose and the effect of a women's education that is attained through learning from environment and experience.

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