

JANE AUSTEN'S MORAL SENSE AND MANSFIELD PARK

by

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Critics of Jane Austen's writing have long been puzzled by Mansfield Park because the moral tone of this novel seems different from that of any of her other novels. There has been much critical discussion of whether or not the moral tone of this novel is different from that of the other novels, and there has been disagreement about what the moral tone of Mansfield Park implies about Jane Austen's moral sense. In this novel she seems to depart from her usual lively, perceptively critical point of view toward the manners and conventions of her time. In Mansfield Park some critics have seen evidence that she condones the very things she criticized in her earlier novels. In addition, her later novels return to the tone of critical satire characteristic of the novels before Mansfield Park.

Before going on, the term "moral tone" should be explained. In the context of this paper "moral tone" will refer to the specific attitude which seems to be expressed through the book by the writer on the behavior of characters in the book in relation to the ethical rightness or wrongness of that behavior. The term "moral sense" refers to the moral code or basis for judgment on moral questions.

This paper will attempt to survey the various critical opinions of this problem and formulate an interpretation which may add a dimension of clarity to the problem.

## CHAPTER II

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The criticism in relation to this problem is extensive and falls into certain general categories. First, there are those critics who seem to feel that Mansfield Park provides evidence that Jane Austen became or always was possessed of a "corrupted moral sense."<sup>1</sup> In the second group are critics who try to explain that, in spite of what Mansfield Park seems to indicate, Jane Austen is still herself and her moral sense is intact. Many of these critics take the point of view that although her moral sense may have been temporarily corrupted during the writing of Mansfield Park, she later recovered.

Most of the critics find certain basic points which must be explained. Fanny and Edmund are seen as prudish and lacking in charm as compared to the lively and vivacious Mary Crawford and her brother Henry. Sir Thomas is accused of unfairness and narrow-mindedness. Fanny's attitude towards her Portsmouth family is considered snobbish. Fanny is criticized as being too ready to judge others, especially the Crawfords, and Edmund is also criticized for this reason. The incident most often used as evidence that Jane Austen's moral sense was corrupted or that she suddenly became narrow-minded is

<sup>1</sup>Kingsley Amis, "What Became of Jane Austen?" in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Ian Watt, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 144.

the incident concerning the private theatricals. Much of the debate over the above listed points is based upon whether or not the opinions of the heroine are necessarily those of Jane Austen. Many critics give evidence which seems to support the idea that Fanny had the full approval of her creator. Others feel that the writer may not support everything about Fanny's personality.

Reginald Farrer regards Mansfield Park as radically dishonest and inconsistent with its author's nature. In an analysis of Jane Austen's writing first published in 1917, he theorizes that she wrote the book out of a sense of duty. He accuses Jane Austen of deliberately tipping the scales against Mary and Henry Crawford. He suggests that she approved of them from the point of view of an artist but disapproved of them from a moral point of view. He emphasizes the conflict within Jane Austen concerning what she felt she ought to feel about her characters as opposed to what she actually does feel about them. He concludes that in writing Mansfield Park, she succumbed to what she thought she should feel about them.<sup>2</sup>

O. W. Firkins finds a kind of meanness and unpleasantness about the heroine. He especially criticizes her attitude towards her Portsmouth home and says there is ". . . something narrow and mean in viewing these young and old

<sup>2</sup>Reginald Farrer, "On Mansfield Park," in Discussions of Jane Austen, William Heath, ed. (Boston, 1961), pp. 85-86.

ne'er-do-wells solely in relation to their success or failure in conciliating the taste of Mansfield, and I fear that Miss Austen can hardly be acquitted of complicity in the littleness and egotism of this view."<sup>3</sup>

Virginia Woolf, in a discussion of Jane Austen's writing first published in 1925, refers to parts of Mansfield Park as exceptions in Jane Austen's writing.<sup>4</sup> She (Miss Austen) cannot make use of her comic genius in describing Edmund as a clergyman because she takes this seriously and does not mock the things she truly believes in. Virginia Woolf, in describing Jane Austen's method of characterization, uses her treatment of Mary Crawford as an example. Jane Austen shows the mixture of good and bad elements in Mary Crawford's personality. She lets Mary rattle on in her delightful and charming manner, but occasionally she puts in a certain note or tone which makes Mary sound less attractive and more insincere.

H. W. Garrod finds almost all of Jane Austen's heroines dull and uninteresting. His criticism of Jane Austen's work emphasizes the limitations of her subject matter than the moral tone of that subject matter, but in his famous

<sup>3</sup>O. W. Firkins, Jane Austen (New York, 1920), pp. 78-79.

<sup>4</sup>Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen," in Discussions of Jane Austen, William Heath, ed. (Boston, 1961), pp. 25-31.

depreciation of her novels first published in 1928, he expresses a general dislike of all of the heroines as people except for Elizabeth Bennet in Pride and Prejudice.<sup>5</sup>

C. Linklater Thomson contrasts the earlier novels to Mansfield Park. He suggests that although she had previously avoided the expression of emotion and satirized the trait of sensibility, in Mansfield Park Jane Austen reverses herself and makes sensibility and expression of emotion important aspects of the heroine's character. In addition, he views the vivacity and wit of the earlier heroines in contrast to the reflection and moralizing of the heroine of Mansfield Park.<sup>6</sup> He concludes that Mansfield Park is less acceptable to modern readers than her other novels because ". . . it is the only one in which she attempts to preach, in which she drives her moral in and becomes directly didactic."<sup>7</sup> He, like several other critics, attributes this difference in tone to the possibility that at the time of the composition of Mansfield Park, she was under the influence of the great Evangelical movement.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>H. W. Garrod, "Jane Austen: A Depreciation," in Discussions of Jane Austen, William Heath, ed. (Boston, 1961), pp. 32-40.

<sup>6</sup>C. Linklater Thomson, Jane Austen: A Survey (London, 1929), p. 145.

<sup>7</sup>Thomson, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup>Thomson, p. 146.

He leans heavily on biographical references to draw some of his conclusions. With reference to the private theatricals, he seems to believe that Fanny's reaction reflects Jane Austen's attitude towards theatricals. He cites a reference to the theatricals by a Mr. J. E. Hubback, a grandson of Jane Austen's brother Francis. In this reference, Miss Austen's cousin, the Comtesse de Feuillide, was called a "prime mover" in the productions, and Hubback is quoted as stating that ". . . her engagement [the Comtesse de Feuillide's] to Henry Austen, whom she married in 1797, was a direct outcome of the rehearsals."<sup>9</sup> Thomson feels that perhaps Jane Austen herself ". . . may have noticed among those taking part in the Steventon plays signs of the heart-burning, perhaps also of the compunctions, attributed later to the party at Mansfield Park. James Austen, who in 1790 was, like Edmund Bertram, on the point of taking orders, might have demurred at the plays chosen by his frivolous cousin."<sup>10</sup>

The opinion that Jane Austen lost control of her creative power in Mansfield Park and made the Crawfords more attractive and sympathetic than she had originally intended appears rather frequently. R. Brimley Johnson

<sup>9</sup>Thomson, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup>Thomson, p. 147.

shares this opinion. He maintains that Henry was genuinely in love with Fanny and that the small reforms in his character which this love brought about caused him to take over the role of hero from the rather uncolorful Edmund. He suggests that although Jane Austen had intended for Henry Crawford to be a villain endowed with charm but completely lacking in moral principle, she accidentally ". . . indulged him with virtues not becoming the villain: a position to which the conventions of morality and novel-structure alike obliged her to drag him back, without quite realizing the inconsistency involved."<sup>11</sup> Johnson expresses a rather unusual opinion of Fanny as a character.

It has been suggested again, that Jane herself cared no more for Fanny than some of her readers. That she intended to illustrate the vast amount of mischief a weak and obstinate woman may accomplish by her power to cling where she is not wanted, and her stubborn refusal to see reason or advantage in any suggestions that others may provide.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the amateur theatricals, Johnson expresses some doubt that the author could really have disapproved of the scheme since theatricals were a popular entertainment in her own family.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Thomson, who investigated

<sup>11</sup>R. Brimley Johnson, Jane Austen: Her Life, Her Work, Her Family, and Her Critics (New York, 1930), p. 150.

<sup>12</sup>Johnson, p. 150.

<sup>13</sup>Johnson, p. 146.

the circumstances surrounding the theatricals in Jane Austen's home from a different viewpoint, Johnson regards this bit of biographical information as supporting his contention that Fanny's disapproval of the play does not reflect Jane Austen's personal point of view about acting in general.

In a brief introduction to Jane Austen, Lord David Cecil remarks that Jane Austen's view of life is neither puritanical nor provincial. He calls her philosophy "a civilized philosophy for civilized people."<sup>14</sup> In discussing the characters of Mansfield Park, he makes an interesting comment with regard to Henry Crawford. He, much like Johnson, suggests that originally Jane Austen intended for Henry Crawford to be the villain but that somewhere along the way in the composition of the book, she unintentionally made him a more sympathetic and likable character than would fit into her scheme for the book. "Under the pressure of his personality the plot takes a turn, of which the only logical conclusion is his marriage with the heroine, Fanny."<sup>15</sup> According to Lord David Cecil's analysis of the book, Miss Austen could not allow her plot to take this turn, so in the last three chapters ". . . she

<sup>14</sup> Lord David Cecil, The Leslie Stephen Lecture: Jane Austen, 2nd ed. (New York, 1936), p. 35.

<sup>15</sup>Cecil, p. 19.

violently wrenches the story back into its original course: but only at the cost of making Henry act in a manner wholly inconsistent with the rest of his character."<sup>16</sup>

In a critique of Jane Austen's writing first published in 1940, D. W. Harding says that the emphasis in Mansfield Park is on conventional virtues. He interprets Jane Austen as being on the side of conventional virtues and feels that she wrote the book to fulfill a kind of humble duty to her society.<sup>17</sup> He does, however, recognize a certain intentional ironic effectiveness in the novel. As an example of the effectiveness of this irony, he uses Sir Thomas's attitude towards Fanny at the beginning of the novel compared to his attitude at the end of the novel.

In an article in which she tries to trace the evolution of Mansfield Park from Lady Susan, Mrs. Q. D. Leavis points out several problems in Mansfield Park that she feels were not present in the other novels. One of these problems is that in Mansfield Park, ". . . not merely phrases but whole passages are clothed in a new, a religious idiom."<sup>18</sup> Another problem involves Mary Crawford. Mrs. Leavis sees

<sup>16</sup>Cecil, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup>D. W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," in Discussions of Jane Austen, William Heath, ed. (Boston, 1961), pp. 41-50.

<sup>18</sup>Q. D. Leavis, "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings (II): Lady Susan into Mansfield Park," Scrutiny, Vol. X, No. 2, Oct., 1941, pp. 114-143.

". . . a disparity between what she is and what she is represented as being, on the one hand, and what she is accused of, the basis for the feelings displayed by the author, on the other."<sup>19</sup> She finds the author more involved and less detached than in her other novels. Other problems that Mrs. Leavis sees are the moralizing tone of the novel, the attitude displayed towards the theatricals and the character of the heroine, Fanny.

In a continuation of her article on Mansfield Park<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Leavis emphasizes the moral tone of this novel and tries to account for it. She compares the passages of Fanny Price's moralizing to passages in Persuasion in which Anne Elliot is seen in a similar process of making moral judgments. She suggests that, "A deeply religious outlook, even if concealed (and with such a family code of unflinching jesting to live up to, her tendency would be to conceal it from her coevals as far as possible), would account for the castigation of worldliness in the novel, not only of the reprehensible kind but of varieties which in her previous novels she approves as worldly prudence."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Leavis, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup>Q. D. Leavis, "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings (II): Lady Susan into Mansfield Park (concluded)," Scrutiny, Vol. X, No. 3, Jan., 1942, pp. 272-294.

<sup>21</sup>Leavis (Jan., 1942), p. 277.

Mrs. Leavis finds an unnatural degree of censure of Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park. She blames part of the unpleasant moral tone of the novel on this almost personal animosity of the writer towards her character. She finds biographical reflections of Jane's attitude towards her cousin, Eliza de Feuillide, in her attitude towards Mary. This idea is similar to C. Linklater Thomson's theory cited earlier.

Mrs. Leavis regards Mansfield Park as a turning point in Jane Austen's style of writing. She sees it as ". . . the forerunner of a new technique, which made possible the sensitive reflections of Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot."<sup>22</sup> She blames part of the unsuccessfulness of the novel on the fact that, "In deliberate opposition to its predecessor, it is exaggeratedly undramatic," and "the irony that is characteristic of the later work is not underlined as in the earlier, it is part of the larger effects and can quite easily be overlooked."<sup>23</sup> Thus, while suggesting that there is a difference in tone in Mansfield Park, Mrs. Leavis does not regard it as evidence of a corruption or change in Jane Austen's moral sense. Instead, she views the difference in tone as a somewhat awkward and partially unsuccessful stage of Jane Austen's development as a novelist.

<sup>22</sup>Leavis (Jan., 1942), p. 287.

<sup>23</sup>Leavis (Jan., 1942), p. 288.

In Speaking of Jane Austen by Sheila Kaye-Smith and G. B. Stern, Fanny and Edmund's conversations about the Crawfords are cited and viewed as little and petty. Stern gives Fanny credit for being one of Jane Austen's favorite heroines.<sup>24</sup> With regard to the novel's moral tone, Sheila Kaye-Smith complains about ". . . the author's judgment of certain harmless things and certain pleasant people,"<sup>25</sup> thus suggesting that something was amiss in the author's moral sense. Like Johnson and Cecil, Stern sees Jane Austen as revising her original intentions with regard to the Mansfield Park quartette of characters.<sup>26</sup>

R. W. Chapman finds Mansfield Park puzzling in the sense that it is more difficult to determine the writer's intention than in any of the other books. He suggests that the subject of the book is the effects of environment.

The ostensible moral of the book, which is almost blatantly didactic, is that education, religious and moral, is omnipotent over character. It is true that this theory is oftenest voiced by the more priggish of the persons: solemn Sir Thomas, his virtuous son, and his pensive niece. But it is plainly endorsed by their author, who was perhaps at this time too much under the influence of her favorite divines or secular moralists.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Sheila Kaye-Smith and G. B. Stern, Speaking of Jane Austen (New York, 1944), p. 63.

<sup>25</sup>Kaye-Smith and Stern, p. 142.

<sup>26</sup>Kaye-Smith and Stern, p. 89.

<sup>27</sup>R. W. Chapman, Jane Austen: Facts and Problems (Oxford, 1948), p. 194.

Chapman considers this a serious fault which he does not find in the other novels.

On the question of the Crawfords' characters, he rejects the idea of vacillation. ". . . Jane Austen knew what she was about. She had, at least, searched her conscience, and believed herself to have dealt even-handed justice to her villains. . ." <sup>28</sup> With regard to the theatricals, he disagrees with the opinion that Fanny's disapproval is reflective of Jane Austen's moral judgment on the subject of acting. He uses biographical references to support his view that she could not have objected to amateur theatricals because they were a frequent source of recreation in her own family. He supports Fanny's disapproval of the play on the basis that she had good reasons to disapprove of the entire scheme quite apart from the traditional objection that impersonation of a bad character might result in the actor becoming like the bad character. "Sir Thomas was in the West Indies; his predictable reprobation, however based, was enough to condemn the scheme. Worse than this, the casting of the play made it clear that there must be some awkward situations and dangerous propinquities." <sup>29</sup>

Marvin Mudrick's opinion of Mansfield Park is expressed in his book on Jane Austen's writing. In the

<sup>28</sup>Chapman, p. 197.

<sup>29</sup>Chapman, p. 198.

introductory paragraph to a chapter dealing specifically with Mansfield Park, he summarizes his interpretation of the thesis of the book.

The thesis of Mansfield Park is severely moral: that one world, representing the genteel orthodoxy of Jane Austen's time, is categorically superior to any other. Nowhere else does Jane Austen take such pains to make up the mind of her reader. . . . To the thesis, everything else gives way: in the end, it subordinates or destroys every character; the function of the heroine is to ensure its full acceptance. Fanny Price is not simply the author's heroine but the example and proof of her thesis.<sup>30</sup>

Mudrick regards Mansfield Park as a deliberate sermon on the conventional morality of Jane Austen's time. He sees her as supporting convention. His title for the chapter on Mansfield Park is significantly, "The Triumph of Gentility." To him, this strain has been evident in all of Jane Austen's writing. Mansfield Park is merely the place where she brings her world of "genteel orthodoxy" into conflict with the threat of the "other world." Mudrick uses the phrase "a collision of worlds" to describe the action of the novel. He states that "the author intends to justify the ways of her world. . . ." <sup>31</sup> To him, Fanny's series of judgments "reflect the action as a conflict of worlds, and of themselves they prefigure its catastrophe.

<sup>30</sup>Marvin Mudrick, Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (Princeton, N. J., 1952), p. 155.

<sup>31</sup>Mudrick, p. 178.

Even more strikingly, the author vindicates them in every particular and from the beginning."<sup>32</sup>

Mudrick recognizes the incongruity of Fanny as a heroine of Jane Austen's. He recognizes that Mary Crawford more nearly fills the role and more closely resembles Jane Austen as a person. "However deliberately, Jane Austen is attacking much of herself in the image of Mary Crawford: the attack is on the most earnest ethical grounds."<sup>33</sup> He attributes her reason for the intolerant moral tone of Mansfield Park to a feeling of responsibility to the society in which she lived. He sees her, in spite of frequent expressions of a critical opinion of that society, as being influenced by that society.

Under such social and personal pressures, which must have become more insistent as she saw herself year after year less likely ever to disavow them, it is easy to believe that Jane Austen felt obliged to produce a work of uncompromising moral purpose, whatever the bent of her taste and imagination.<sup>34</sup>

In relation to his emphasis on the moral conflict of Mansfield Park, he criticizes the representatives of "the ethical foundation of Jane Austen's world"<sup>35</sup> as

<sup>32</sup>Mudrick, p. 157.

<sup>33</sup>Mudrick, p. 170.

<sup>34</sup>Mudrick, p. 172.

<sup>35</sup>Mudrick, p. 173.

unattractive and unlikable. Of Fanny he says:

We never take the author's word for Fanny. The surface is there: humility, shyness, unfailing moral vision; but behind them we feel something persistently unpleasant - complacency and envy, perhaps; certainly an odd lackluster self-pity.<sup>36</sup>

Whenever Mudrick refers to Edmund, it is in a tone of disapproval and even contempt. He points out Sir Thomas Bertram's many obvious faults concerning snobbery and narrow-mindedness. Thus, to Mudrick, the triad of characters representing Jane Austen's moral point of view are an unpleasant group. To Mudrick, the tone and message of the novel are unpleasant.

Andrew H. Wright describes Mansfield Park as being ". . . all too plainly limited to the didactic: it is a treatise on education."<sup>37</sup> Although he describes Fanny's nature as being without conflict, he does suggest that there is some complexity in her character. "Fanny is not always so inhumanly good as some critics have said; for she does feel deeply hurt when Edmund lets Mary Crawford ride the pony reserved for her own use; she has moments of jealousy when she must view the rehearsal of Edmund and Mary doing a love scene from the play; she is appalled by the vulgarity of her own father, and by the slatternliness

<sup>36</sup>Mudrick, p. 161.

<sup>37</sup>Andrew H. Wright, Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure, 2nd ed. (New York, 1954), p. 22.

of her mother, at Portsmouth."<sup>38</sup> He insists that although Fanny is not a sentimental heroine, she does lack depth. He maintains that the heroines of all the other novels have a certain rebellious attitude. "Only Fanny is a simple didactic figure, and the message is: good girls come out best after all."<sup>39</sup> Wright does, however, give Fanny credit for being possessed of deeply human qualities combined with a rather admirable steadfastness and courage in adhering to her moral values as is illustrated by her attitude to Henry Crawford and the private theatricals. He also emphasizes Edmund Bertram's human qualities: Edmund may be a prig, but the writer does not try to make him a paragon. Wright finds no evidence that Henry Crawford was ever intended to be anything but a villain. ". . . It is plain throughout that his final piece of folly is wholly consonant with the character that Jane Austen has drawn of him."<sup>40</sup> Thus, he disagrees with the idea that the character of Henry ever developed beyond Jane Austen's intentions.

Wright's comments do not express discontent with the moral tone of the book. His contention is that the book suffers because of the lack of depth or development strictly in relation to the intended heroine and hero.

<sup>38</sup>Wright, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup>Wright, p. 124.

<sup>40</sup>Wright, p. 130.

He finds a flatness about the central character, Fanny, which is not evident in Jane Austen's other heroines, but he seems to consider this an artistic failure rather than a failure or a corruption of Jane Austen's moral sense.

Another point of view is expressed by C. S. Lewis in an article which first appeared in 1954. He sees Mansfield Park along with Persuasion as the two Austen novels in which the heroine does not undergo a process of self-recognition or awakening. He suggests that both Fanny Price of Mansfield Park and Anne Elliot of Persuasion share the same characteristics: they are both quiet and insignificant to the other members of their family, both are Christian heroines with a strict moral sense, neither of them makes many mistakes, and both seem to have the writer's complete approval. However, Anne Elliot is a successful heroine and Fanny Price is not. Persuasion is not singled out as differing in moral tone from Jane Austen's other novels, but Mansfield Park is. Lewis suggests that the book fails because of Fanny. She is an unsuccessful character because she is insipid and uninteresting, and her central position in the novel is responsible for the misinterpretation and unsuccessfulness of the novel.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup>C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen," in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Ian Watt, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), pp. 25-34.

In a selection from his short history of the English novel, published in 1955, Walter Allen discusses Mansfield Park as a book in which ". . . Miss Austen became concerned with justice and her eye for the facts of reality became even more acute."<sup>42</sup> He views the Crawfords as an excellent creation. He does not seem to feel that they ever developed in a manner beyond the artist's intention. He blames their downfall on a faulty education that neglected giving them the necessary principles. He calls Fanny's visit to Portsmouth evidence of the writer's sense of reality. He does not consider Fanny a snob because of her attitude towards her family. He does not accuse her of being ashamed of her family but rather suggests that Fanny is seeing the situation as it really is. Importantly, he does see change and development in Fanny's character. An important part of this change occurs in her visit to Portsmouth. He regards Fanny's loss of illusions about her family as an important stage in the development of her self-knowledge.

Frank O'Connor, in a selection from The Mirror in the Roadway, published in 1955, describes Mansfield Park as the absolute failure of a major masterpiece. O'Connor concludes that Jane Austen failed to achieve her intended effect because he feels that the reader must find Henry

<sup>42</sup>Walter Allen, "Jane Austen," in Discussions of Jane Austen, William Heath, ed. (Boston, 1961), p. 54.

and Mary more attractive than Fanny and Edmund. In regard to the amateur theatricals, O'Connor concludes that Fanny's disapproval is reflective of Jane Austen's own idea that the arts provide an invitation to evil.<sup>43</sup>

Lionel Trilling in a perceptive analysis of Mansfield Park, published in 1955, finds it the one novel of Jane Austen's in which the irony characteristic of her writing does not seem to be at work.<sup>44</sup> He compares Mansfield Park to its predecessor, Pride and Prejudice. He finds Pride and Prejudice celebrating the characteristics of ". . . spiritedness, vivacity, celerity, and lightness,"<sup>45</sup> and associating these traits with happiness and virtue. By contrast Trilling says that Mansfield Park condemns the traits of spiritedness, vivacity, celerity, and lightness as having no connection with virtue and happiness.<sup>46</sup> He says that the impulse of the book as a whole is ". . . not to forgive but to condemn. Its praise is not for social freedom but for social stasis."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Frank O'Connor, "Jane Austen: The Flight From Fancy," in Discussions of Jane Austen, William Heath, ed. (Boston, 1961), pp. 65-74.

<sup>44</sup>Lionel Trilling, "Mansfield Park," in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, Ian Watt, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 125.

<sup>45</sup>Trilling, p. 127.

<sup>46</sup>Trilling, p. 127.

<sup>47</sup>Trilling, p. 127.

Trilling finds Fanny's sickly health, her self-effacing but highly successful virtue, and her lack of wit and vivacity very unattractive, especially in comparison to Mary Crawford. Trilling maintains that the amateur theatricals are important for several reasons. First, Fanny is given a chance to support convention through her refusal to act in the play. The significance of the theatricals extends to Edmund Bertram's choice of a profession. "The election of a profession is of course in a way the assumption of a role, but it is a permanent impersonation which makes virtually impossible the choice of another."<sup>48</sup> The idea of acting also suggests the insincerity of some of the characters. "Mary Crawford's intention is not to deceive the world but to comfort herself; she impersonates the woman she thinks she ought to be. And as we become inured to the charm of her performance we see through the moral impersonation and are troubled that it should have been thought necessary."<sup>49</sup> Trilling describes Henry Crawford as ". . . trapped by his impersonation of passion,"<sup>50</sup> in his flirtation with Maria Bertram.

Trilling emphasizes the point that Mansfield Park is different in moral tone from the other novels. He

<sup>48</sup> Trilling, p. 133.

<sup>49</sup> Trilling, p. 133.

<sup>50</sup> Trilling, p. 133.

blames this difference on ". . . a crisis in the author's spiritual life."<sup>51</sup> He speculates that part of that crisis might be due to fatigue and says that Mansfield Park may represent a desire to withdraw from the vulgarity of the world. Mansfield Park is a place which may be viewed as a haven.

Kingsley Amis discusses the things which make Mansfield Park different from Jane Austen's other novels. In his discussion of the novel first published in 1957, he charges that ". . . it is by moral rather than aesthetic standards that Mansfield Park . . . is defective. Although it never holds up the admirable as vicious, it continually and essentially holds up the vicious as admirable. . . ."<sup>52</sup> The tone of Amis' criticism is one of angry puzzlement. In his conclusion he asks, "What became of that Jane Austen (if she ever existed) who set out bravely to correct conventional notions of the desirable and virtuous? From being their critic (if she ever was) she became their slave. That is another way of saying that her judgment and her moral sense were corrupted. Mansfield Park is the witness of that corruption."<sup>53</sup> Amis sees much to criticize in Fanny's attitude towards her Portsmouth family. "She is ashamed of her own home in Portsmouth, where there

<sup>51</sup>Trilling, p. 138.

<sup>52</sup>Amis, p. 141.

<sup>53</sup>Amis, p. 144.

is much 'error' and she finds everybody 'underbred,' and how relieved she is when the 'horrible evil' of Henry lunching there is averted."<sup>54</sup>

David Lodge, in an article dealing with the amateur theatricals, points out the novelist's emphasis on judgment and the delicate balance between social and moral values. For example, Mary Crawford is unable to distinguish between "folly" and "vice" in relation to Maria's elopement with Henry.<sup>55</sup> Lodge defines the role of judgment in the novel. "The primary meaning of judgment in Mansfield Park is the ability to distinguish between the right and the wrong course of action. But this often involves the exercise of judgment in an almost legal sense - arriving at a verdict on another person."<sup>56</sup> He emphasizes the fact that the novelist stresses that ". . . the right to pass judgment is one that has to be earned: ' She [Fanny] would endeavour to be rational, and to deserve the right of judging of Miss Crawford's character, and the privilege of true solicitude for him [Edmund] by a sound intellect and an honest heart.'"<sup>57</sup> Lodge maintains that Fanny's disapproval of the amateur acting scheme is based on good judgment. "The point is that the would be actors

<sup>54</sup>Amis, p. 143.

<sup>55</sup>David Lodge, "A Question of Judgment: The Theatricals at Mansfield Park," Nineteenth Century Fiction, Vol. 17, No. 3, Dec., 1962, p. 277.

<sup>56</sup>Lodge, p. 278.

<sup>57</sup>Lodge, p. 278.

are not seriously interested in the play as an artistic production, but as an opportunity for showing off and bringing themselves into various piquant and intimate relationships with each other under the pretense of acting."<sup>58</sup> This point of view of the theatricals does not suggest any change or corruption of Jane Austen's moral sense.

Howard S. Babb maintains that the moral climate of Mansfield Park is essentially the same as can be found in the rest of Jane Austen's novels. He does not find the moral tone of the book distasteful or narrow-minded. Unlike most critics, he does not consider Fanny an unlikable character, although he does consider her rather unattractive and overly sensitive. However, "this sensitivity also fosters - somewhat as in the case of Anne Elliot - an almost unrelievedly accurate set of judgments."<sup>59</sup> In regard to the question of character development, he finds that Fanny, in contrast to Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, or Catherine Morland, does not undergo any real change. "Rather, her consciousness seems gradually to open out, its quality to become progressively clearer to us, as she more and more obviously takes on the function of the moral norm by which the other characters are to be evaluated."<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup>Lodge, pp. 278-279.

<sup>59</sup>Howard S. Babb, Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue (Ohio State U. P., 1962), p. 146.

<sup>60</sup>Babb, p. 145.

Babb sees Fanny as the only character in the book who is able to make judgments not influenced by self-interest, even when the judgments are of herself. He points out the misjudgments of others starting with Mrs. Norris's assurance to Sir Thomas that he need not fear that either of his sons will be attracted to Fanny. He accuses the characters, seemingly quite accurately, of being able to see only what they want to see. He uses the following examples: (1) Sir Thomas supports Maria's marriage to Rushworth even though he recognizes her indifference. He ignores her attitude because he knows that marriage to Rushworth would be a substantial connection for his daughter. (2) Sir Thomas refuses to believe that Fanny does not like Crawford well enough to marry him, because, again, the connection would be a good one and Fanny would be well taken care of. (3) Mrs. Norris approves, by her refusal to intervene, of the intrigue between Maria and Henry, because she hopes Maria will gain a more profitable engagement through the flirtation. (4) Yates assumes that Sir Thomas will approve of the acting scheme just because he wants it to be true. (5) Edmund ignores the Crawfords' weaknesses and faults.

Babb sees part of the problem in Mansfield Park as the need to make unequivocal and uncompromising moral decisions. Only Fanny is capable of fulfilling this need.

A. Walton Litz points out that Mansfield Park is often viewed as a ". . . deliberate rejection of the artist's true nature (as figured forth in Pride and Prejudice)."<sup>61</sup> He states further that the novel is considered a reversal of her characteristic irony and that this reversal is prompted by social pressures. "The novel is viewed as a triumph of conventional morality over the perceptive artist."<sup>62</sup> Litz credits part of the change in tone to the fact that Jane Austen was older when she wrote Mansfield Park and was perhaps somewhat disillusioned by life. He also suggests that she may have been influenced by the Evangelical religion.<sup>63</sup> He sees throughout Jane Austen's work:

. . . a tension between two fundamental attitudes which may be called, for want of better terms, neoclassicism and romanticism. One attitude embodies the claims of society, the other the claims of the individual; one stresses reason, the other imagination.<sup>64</sup>

Litz sees Mansfield Park as emphasizing one side of this dialectic in contrast and as a corrective to Pride and Prejudice. What puzzles him is that the expression is ". . . so uncompromising. For once in Jane Austen's art the familiar tensions and qualifications are resolved into

<sup>61</sup>A. Walton Litz, Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development, 2nd ed. (New York, 1965), p. 113.

<sup>62</sup>Litz, p. 113.

<sup>63</sup>Litz, p. 114.

<sup>64</sup>Litz, p. 116.

bald didacticism."<sup>65</sup> In expressing his attitude towards the moral tone of the novel, he calls attention to the fact that the indignation which the author expresses seems disproportionate to its subject.<sup>66</sup> It is this disproportionate indignation which suggests a temporary corruption of the author's moral sense. He discusses the acting controversy in detail using biographical references to try to explain the tone of disproportionate indignation. He suggests a parallel for the relationship between Mary and Fanny in the relationship of Jane Austen's cousin, Eliza de Feuillide, to another cousin, Philadelphia Walter. References to this famous cousin (the Comtesse de Feuillide) are frequent in the criticism dealing with Mansfield Park, but Litz makes the strongest and most revealing use of the facts. Litz feels that Mary is not a direct portrayal of Eliza because Eliza was still alive when Mansfield Park was written, but he does recognize the qualities emphasized in both Fanny and Mary as being similar to personality traits of Philadelphia and Eliza as revealed in their letters to each other. He even finds an incident similar to Fanny's refusal to join the theatricals. He quotes Philadelphia's account of proposed theatricals at Steventon. Philadelphia mentions Eliza's strong support of the scheme and tells

<sup>65</sup>Litz, p. 116.

<sup>66</sup>Litz, p. 117.

of Eliza's invitation to her to take part in the play. "They [Eliza and her mother] wish me much of the party and offer to carry me, but I do not think of it. I should like to be a spectator, but am sure I should not have courage to act a part, nor do I wish to attain it."<sup>67</sup>

Litz also quotes Eliza's letters to Philadelphia attempting to break her resolution not to act. He states that, "The young Jane Austen must have been clearly aware of the influence her beautiful cousin exercised over Henry and James Austen, and there was a tradition in later generations of the Austen family that Eliza's marriage to Henry in 1797 was the outcome of renewed theatrical parties at Steventon."<sup>68</sup> Litz gives further evidence to explain Jane Austen's disproportionate indignation by indicating that Eliza wanted Henry Austen to give up his plans for the church in the same way that Mary Crawford wanted Edmund Bertram to give up his plans for the church.<sup>69</sup>

Apart from the moral significance of the amateur acting incident, Litz emphasizes Jane Austen's constant plays upon the word "acting" in Mansfield Park. A distinction is continually made between genuine and impersonated emotion.

Litz gives the novel full credit for technical

<sup>67</sup>Litz, pp. 118-119.

<sup>68</sup>Litz, p. 120.

<sup>69</sup>Litz, p. 120.

achievements. However, he insists that the novel as a whole:

. . . lacks a sustained vitality. The problem is one of tone, most of all, and is related to the novel's general themes. In a work which questions the values of wit and imagination, which seems to say that virtue must involve dullness, the redeeming force can only be the author's presiding personality, and this Jane Austen refuses - or is unable - to assert.<sup>70</sup>

Robert Liddell suggests that in her portrayal of the Crawfords, Jane Austen ". . . wished to explore the extreme possibilities of the Crawfords for good and evil"<sup>71</sup> He theorizes that in her presentation of both the good and bad sides of the Crawfords, the writer was attempting to create a mood of suspense. He agrees with the criticism of Fanny and Edmund as prigs and explains it by saying, "One may however guess that she may have been going through a phase in her religion."<sup>72</sup>

In the introduction to his book on Jane Austen, W. A. Craik makes the claim that, "She is a moralist beyond dispute, yet it is plain that her characters and situations are not primarily vehicles of moral philosophy."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Litz, p. 130.

<sup>71</sup>Robert Liddell, The Novels of Jane Austen, 2nd ed. (London, 1964), p. 67.

<sup>72</sup>Liddell, p. 88.

<sup>73</sup>W. A. Craik, Jane Austen: The Six Novels, 2nd ed. (London, 1966), p. 2.

He regards the question of Edmund's ordination as forming the central dilemma of the novel. In contrast to the other novels, the issue of Mansfield Park is seen as a straightforward moral issue. The solemnity of the subject makes humorous treatment less appropriate.

Craik sees Fanny's disapproval of the theatricals as indicative of a change in moral tone. The bases on which Fanny disapproves are considered as reflective of the author's point of view. According to Craik, the disapproval is based on ". . . questions of expediency and social decorum and Jane Austen's usual genius for making social decorum a practical manifestation of moral value seems to fail her here."<sup>74</sup> Craik suggests that Fanny functions differently from Jane Austen's other heroines. Her role in the novel is to provide ". . . a means by which the reader may observe the actions of the group, and discern how much they are in the wrong, a means by which he is able to judge their true value and see how important they will be in the rest of the novel."<sup>75</sup> Craik maintains that seeing Fanny in her proper role in the novel makes her more attractive because she no longer appears too feeble or too uninteresting to be a heroine.

<sup>74</sup>Craik, p. 96.

<sup>75</sup>Craik, p. 98.

## CHAPTER III

## A THEORY: MISCALCULATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

It is possible that Mansfield Park is misinterpreted as being an example of Jane Austen's corrupted moral sense because she mishandled her materials.

In the other five novels Jane Austen emphasizes the expanding consciousness of her characters. In every case the thoughts of her major characters clearly reveal their self-recognition of personal limitations and misunderstandings. It would not be as easy to forgive Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliot, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood or Catherine Morland for their misconceptions about themselves and others if their recognition of these misconceptions were not revealed to the reader. There is a place in every novel, except Mansfield Park, in which the characters express regret that the misconceptions existed and often seem to resolve inwardly to be different in the future. The problem with Fanny Price is that the author does not so carefully delineate Fanny's process of self-recognition. The writer suggests that certain of Fanny's illusions about herself are recognized by her as illusions, but unlike the other novels, there is no one point at which Fanny's thoughts are revealed emphasizing the process of self-recognition. Instead, in Mansfield Park, the emphasis is on the matter of Fanny's thoughts about moral questions. C. S. Lewis, in an article previously

cited,<sup>76</sup> suggests that Fanny does not go through the experience of expanding consciousness with regard to her own faults. However, it seems equally possible that Fanny's perception of her limitations is not obvious because of the writer's stress on the aspect of moral judgment.

Sometimes it is too easy to suppose that a writer like Jane Austen always knows exactly what she is doing. Such a supposition leads to the idea that whatever a writer does is done intentionally. Several critics have already suggested that Jane Austen lost control of her materials when she created the characters of Henry and Mary Crawford. It may be difficult to believe that a writer's work could take a different direction from her original plan, but that must have been similar to what actually happened when Jane Austen wrote Mansfield Park. She made a series of miscalculations which left her book open to misinterpretation. It is this element of misinterpretation that leads to the conclusion that Jane Austen was possessed, at least temporarily, of a corrupt moral sense.

From what is known of her method of composition, this idea does not sound so preposterous. One of her

<sup>76</sup>Lewis, pp. 25-34.

biographers has reported that she was almost casual at times about her writing. She often wrote while she was in company, paying attention to her companions all along. In Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters by William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, an eyewitness account of Jane Austen's habits of composition is reported.

. . . we learn something of her process from an eyewitness, her niece Marianne Knight, who related her childish remembrances of her aunt . . . 'Aunt Jane,' she said, 'would sit quietly at work beside the fire in the Godmersham library, then suddenly burst out laughing, jump up, cross the room to a distant table with papers lying upon it, write something down, returning presently and sitting down quietly to her work again.'<sup>77</sup>

There are certain points at which this process of miscalculation occurred. Moving from the minor characters to the major characters, Mrs. Norris provides the first example of miscalculation. At the beginning of the book, she is caricatured as an unpleasant, even a hateful woman. This impression remains consistent up to the end of the book where she voluntarily goes into exile with Maria. Standing by Maria at this time seems somewhat admirable of her, and although it is an inconsistent act, it makes her appear better than she is and makes Sir Thomas appear worse by contrast. Sir Thomas provides the second example

<sup>77</sup>William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters, A Family Record (New York, 1913), p. 290.

of serious miscalculation. Throughout the book he is presented as strict and unyielding. Although he acknowledges his complicity in the tragedy of his daughters, he is unyielding in his condemnation of them. The Crawfords are also mishandled. In the attempt to present a fair picture of both the good and bad aspects of their characters, the writer portrays their good qualities so convincingly that their faults tend to be overlooked by the reader. A similar mistake is made in the presentation of Fanny and Edmund. They are meant to be good characters, but in the process of showing that human weaknesses are a part of their characters, the wrong impression is created. For example, Fanny's wistful admiration of Mary sounds very much like jealousy. Fanny and Edmund's private conversations about the Crawfords sound too much like self-righteous sessions of gossip. Also, Edmund does not seem worthy of all the attention he gets from Mary and Fanny.

At the beginning of Mansfield Park, Jane Austen is unquestionably herself. Her treatment of Mrs. Norris is quite characteristically humorous and effective. Throughout the book Jane Austen continues to show Mrs. Norris with the double edged irony that is both amusing and incriminating. In her treatment of Mrs. Norris towards the end of the book, she makes a mistake. When Sir Thomas refuses to re-admit his "fallen" daughter to

the family circle, he appears very unlikable, especially since he is so much to blame for letting her become what she is. At this point, Mrs. Norris is the only one who stands by Maria. One might have expected a Mrs. Norris to do the disowning. She cannot possibly have any hopes of deriving any benefit from Maria's acquaintance and association as she once did. Since Maria will no longer be admitted to society, Mrs. Norris will also lose her position in society. In standing by Maria, Mrs. Norris manages to perform one of the kindest, most unselfish acts in the book. She accepts Maria in spite of her mistake and evidently stands by her to the end. This act seems something like what Sir Thomas should have done. Mrs. Norris takes the responsibility for the outcome of her influence. Sir Thomas, although he admits that he is partly to blame for his daughter's downfall, refuses to accept the responsibility. He simply banishes her, evidently forever. He is completely unyielding in his decision and does not seem concerned with what may happen to her in the future.

From this distance the principles Sir Thomas applied in judging his daughter were very unjust. Realistically, however, these were probably the very principles which would have been applied. Maria had every advantage except that of her father's interest and concern. In

Jane Austen's time, it may not have been considered the father's duty to pay much attention to his daughters beyond providing them with food, clothes, shelter and possibly education. It seems that Jane Austen did intend to censure this attitude because she has Sir Thomas express a recognition of his poor behavior as a father. The probability that Jane Austen intended to censure the attitude of fatherly neglect epitomized by Sir Thomas is supported by a similar instance in Pride and Prejudice in which the father permits his daughters to grow up under the sole influence of a silly, irresponsible and indulgent mother with similarly tragic results. In both instances the father recognizes his mistakes, but in Mansfield Park it is less obvious that the recognition of his mistakes makes any impression. In Pride and Prejudice Mr. Bennet is of such a disposition that it is believable when he lets his wife talk him into admitting their prodigal daughter for occasional visits. It would not be consistent for Sir Thomas to overlook his daughter's error in this manner because all along his temperament has been shown to be determined and firm in contrast to Mr. Bennet's malleable will. When Jane Austen shows the adamant stand taken by Sir Thomas, she is only being realistic. She makes an effort to show her disapproval, but she does not make her attitude clear enough. Disapproval of negligent fathers is more evident in almost all of her other novels.

Like so many of Jane Austen's characters, Lady Bertram is a caricature, but her constant languor and her exaggerated lack of concern with the world around her are so consistent that these overstatements become almost believable. Like Fanny, the reader becomes immune to surprise at Lady Bertram's slow motion life. Her behavior is sometimes exasperating but most often it is humorous. With respect to this character, it is more obvious that Jane Austen intends to criticize what she represents. The criticism is gentle but effective. When Fanny is a success at the ball her uncle gives in her honor, dear Lady Bertram cannot help thinking she has been the cause of that success. In response to every compliment directed at her niece, Lady Bertram languidly observes, "I sent Chapman to her." Of course, the reader knows that Chapman, the maid, got there too late to help Fanny dress. Although Lady Bertram has a right to be proud of her niece and pleased with herself, her reason for pride and pleasure is wrong. She should be proud of Fanny's charm and manners and pleased that she and her husband were instrumental in providing a background for their development. But Lady Bertram credits Fanny's success to the shallowly generous gesture of sending her personal maid to help Fanny dress. To Lady Bertram, Fanny's success is due to the fact that she looks

good. This idea is obviously meaningless. It is both exasperating and funny, and Jane Austen manages to make her point.

At the same time that Miss Austen gently criticizes Lady Bertram's languid selfishness, she cannot help showing that it is in a way preferable to the behavior of Fanny's family at Portsmouth. This is one place where Jane Austen's moral sense is most often criticized. Fanny is accused of being snobbish and ashamed of her own home and family. But Fanny is not a snob. She realizes that her mother cannot really help the way things are. She is too much like her languid sister, Lady Bertram, and not enough like her hustle bustle sister, Mrs. Norris. Nevertheless, Fanny, who is accustomed to orderliness, cannot help wishing the house were better managed, her father were more refined and her mother more in control of the children. It seems a rather natural reaction that she should not want her family's weaknesses to be on display before a person like Henry Crawford. This is delicacy, not snobbery, and her delicacy is more with regard to her family than it is to herself. The same kind of ambiguity exists here as in the rest of the book. It is easy to conclude that Fanny is a snob in spite of the fact that Jane Austen tries to show that Fanny is not a snob. She shows that Fanny does not blame her mother for the state of things

at Portsmouth. Nor is she ashamed of her mother. Fanny is aware of her own inability to cope with such a situation. The writer says with regard to Fanny's two youngest brothers, Fanny soon ". . . despaired of making the smallest impression on them; they were quite untameable by any means of address which she had spirits or time to attempt."<sup>78</sup> Later, she recognizes how much more capable her sister, Susan, is in this matter. "Susan tried to be useful where she could only have gone away and cried; and that Susan was useful she could perceive; that things, bad as they were, would have been worse but for such interposition, and that both her mother and Betsey were restrained from some excesses of very offensive indulgence and vulgarity."<sup>79</sup> Even when Fanny is feeling disappointed in her Portsmouth home, she wishes she could be useful to her family. Her diligence in sewing for her third youngest brother, Sam, displays this eagerness to help. Her sincere interest in Susan must certainly be regarded as evidence of Fanny's natural good nature. There is every indication that she would have taken a similar interest in others of her brothers and sisters if she could have reached them.

<sup>78</sup>Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, R. W. Chapman, ed. (London, 1953), p. 391.

<sup>79</sup>Austen, pp. 395-396.

The Portsmouth visit is very important because it is during this visit that some very subtle changes take place in Fanny. Although Jane Austen leaves room for argument on this point, Fanny's reaction to her Portsmouth home and family, as Walter Allen suggests in a previously quoted discussion of Mansfield Park,<sup>80</sup> does not represent snobbishness but a process of awakening and self-recognition similar to that through which Jane Austen's other heroines pass. Incongruous as it may seem in view of the constant discouragement she has received from Mrs. Norris, Fanny does have certain illusions about herself. From Mansfield Park, she has always regarded her Portsmouth home and family as a special haven where she will always be loved and respected. She has felt rather persecuted at Mansfield Park and has failed to realize how kind the Bertrams have really been to her. She has felt neglected and taken for granted and has always blamed the neglect on the fact that her status is that of a poor relation. She has assumed that her position at Portsmouth would be quite different. She soon recognizes her mistake. At Portsmouth, she receives even less attention than she did at Mansfield Park. It is obvious that this would have been the case even if she had never left Portsmouth. Betsey is her mother's favorite, and there is no indication that things would have been

<sup>80</sup>Allen, p. 54.

changed by Fanny's weak personality. In addition, Fanny is forced to recognize her own limitations. She went to Portsmouth with great ideals of improving things there. As the situation turns out, however, she finds herself completely unable to accomplish anything on nearly as grand a scale as she had anticipated. Her accomplishment with Susan would have been impossible if Susan's personality had been more like those of her unruly brothers. The important thing is that Fanny realizes this fact.

Besides snobbery, the two criticisms most frequently made of Fanny are that she is insipid and prudish. Again Jane Austen is ambiguous on this point. She has been too realistic. At the beginning, Fanny really is somewhat insipid and prudish, and Jane Austen does not emphasize the development of Fanny's character enough to change the original impression. Under the circumstances, it is quite believable that Fanny would be insipid. From her arrival at Mansfield Park, Mrs. Norris continually carries on a campaign of intimidation against her. Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram never interfere with her attempts to keep Fanny in her place. Fanny's unsympathetic cousins (except Edmund) do not provide much support either. Fanny grows up a loner with an inferiority complex actively cultivated by her Aunt Norris. C. S. Lewis remarks that, "One of the most dangerous of literary ventures is the little, shy, unimportant heroine whom none of the other

characters value. The danger is that your readers may agree with the other characters."<sup>81</sup> He is quite right about this, and this is exactly what happens in the case of Fanny. She is not given any traits outstanding enough to compensate for this undervaluation until it is too late to erase the impression which has already been too firmly established. This is a mistake which does a great deal of damage to the book as a whole. It is hard for the majority of readers to sympathize with or support an unattractive character, even if she is only slightly unattractive, when there is a really attractive character like Mary Crawford around. Such a character as Fanny who has this disadvantage must unfortunately suffer from having all of her faults, large or small, over-emphasized.

With regard to the interpretation of Fanny as being prudish, the main problem is that Jane Austen over-emphasizes Fanny's moral concerns. She shows too much of Fanny's thought processes. This is a problem that cannot really be helped, because under the circumstances, Fanny's thoughts and decisions on moral problems must be shown in detail. Unfortunately, Miss Austen does not succeed in creating a satisfactory balance between moral concerns and other things as she does in her other five novels. Jane Austen must not have realized how prudish she was making her heroine appear. The thing that makes Fanny seem prudish

<sup>81</sup>Lewis, p. 31.

is her methodical approach to making value judgments. She is too logical and strict. This should be an admirable quality, but because she applies her strict moral standards in disapproving of her rival, she appears to be more jealous than anything else. Jane Austen makes it possible to interpret Fanny's attitude as being strict because she wants to convince herself and Edmund that she is more suitable as a wife for him than Mary is.

Jane Austen, in trying to show both sides of the Crawfords, makes them such charming and attractive characters that Fanny's disapproval of them seems unfair. Beyond the idea that Jane Austen was only trying to be fair to her characters in showing their appealing side as Chapman suggests,<sup>82</sup> it is possible that she was concerned with showing how attractive a villain can be. Fanny cannot resist Mary in spite of her strong disapproval. She even begins to soften towards Henry. Not only is Jane Austen giving the Crawfords a fair trial, she is making a realistic point that "bad" characters are often nice people who do bad things because they cannot help themselves.

At Fanny's first acquaintance with Mary, it is said that, "In a quiet way, very little attended to, she paid her tribute of admiration to Miss Crawford's beauty."<sup>83</sup> When Fanny is first asked what she thinks of Miss Crawford,

<sup>82</sup>Chapman, p. 197.

<sup>83</sup>Austen, p. 48.

it is after Miss Crawford has made some disrespectful (although evidently quite accurate) remarks about her uncle, Admiral Crawford.

'Well, Fanny, and how do you like Miss Crawford now?' asked Edmund the next day after thinking some time on the subject himself. 'How did you like her yesterday?'

'Very well - very much. I like to hear her talk. She entertains me; and she is so extremely pretty, that I have great pleasure in looking at her.'<sup>84</sup>

At this point Fanny only expresses praise of Mary and only expresses an opinion at all because Edmund asks her. It is not until Edmund brings out some doubts about her remarks concerning her uncle that Fanny allows herself to express her own misgivings on the matter. But she wants to be fair to Mary, and she points out that Mary's behavior is due to the education she received from her aunt, Mrs. Crawford.

'Do you not think,' said Fanny, after a little consideration, 'that this impropriety is a reflection itself upon Mrs. Crawford, as her niece has been entirely brought up by her? She cannot have given her right notions of what was due to the admiral.'<sup>85</sup>

Fanny tries to be fair to Mary. She is not a jealous person, although she does suffer as she sees Mary's growing power over Edmund. She very humanly and understandably suffers when Edmund forgets her needs because of Mary.

<sup>84</sup>Austen, p. 63.

<sup>85</sup>Austen, p. 64.

However, Fanny does try to explain and justify Mary's actions. Gradually, she cannot help disapproving of Mary completely. She disapproves of Mary at first because of certain improprieties in her behavior and conversation, but Fanny justifies this because of Mary's disadvantageous associations. Later, Fanny's disapproval becomes more serious because of Mary's attitude towards the clergy. Fanny is less willing to forgive her for this, although she recognizes that the justification of disadvantageous upbringing applies here too. But where Edmund is concerned, she is much more strict. It is easy for Fanny to see how much Mary's attitude and criticism of the clergy hurts Edmund. This is enough to make Fanny dislike Mary. She recognizes Mary's good qualities as much as Edmund does and is just as attracted by them. She might love Mary as a sister if it were not for Edmund, because Mary is very kind to her. Mary genuinely likes Fanny and probably wishes she had more of Fanny's sweet and uncorrupted nature. Fanny, however, is much quicker than Edmund to see the fact that Mary's unfavorable qualities are much too deeply imbedded for hope of improvement. She sees the impossibility of Mary and Edmund ever being happily married. She recognizes the bad effects Mary can have on Edmund. When the situation of acting in the play comes up, Edmund at first adamantly refuses to act in it. He has been asked to play the role of Anhalt in Lovers' Vows. He objects to

this role, although it would place him in close contact with Mary. Mary herself appeals to him to take the part, but Edmund refuses. Fanny also disapproves of the acting scheme; she is often criticized as prudish for this disapproval.

The disapproval of the amateur theatricals has often been misunderstood. Some critics feel that Jane Austen is expressing through Fanny a traditional disapproval of theatricals. However narrow-minded and prudish Fanny may seem on this point, she is in fact right in her disapproval. The issue is not really whether or not acting is wrong. The fact is that everyone involved knows that Sir Thomas would disapprove. Because the acting is being done in Sir Thomas's house, his wishes should be respected. He would not want the play. In disapproving of the acting scheme, Fanny is not being prudish, she is being obedient. In addition, Fanny foresees quite a bit of trouble in relation to the play. There are only two leading female roles, and she knows that one of the three girls who would want to be in the play will be left out. Fanny knows that this will cause hard feelings. This is exactly what happens. Henry chooses Maria to act the role which will place her in a close relationship with the role he is going to play. By choosing Maria over Julia, he creates a nearly permanent rift between the two sisters. Fanny also anticipates trouble in the fact that the roles which Maria and Henry will act will cause them to be in a close relationship

to each other. This will cause trouble because Maria is engaged. Being close to Henry will undoubtedly result in a flirtation which may make Maria break her engagement with Rushworth, who is also in the play. At any rate, Fanny knows Rushworth will be angry when he sees the flirtation going on between his future wife and Henry Crawford, a known ladies' man.

Later, Fanny's agitation increases when Edmund changes his conviction against acting in the play for Mary's sake. Fanny is made aware of the full impact of Mary's power over Edmund. She recognizes the damaging effect such power is likely to have over Edmund. To Fanny, his reluctant consent to be in the play represents only one of many instances to come in which Edmund's judgment is to be overwhelmed by the desire to please Mary. The disastrous effect of such power over Edmund as a clergyman is fully recognized by Fanny.

From this point on, Fanny is firmly opposed to Mary. It is easy to misinterpret Fanny's attitude as jealousy because her genuine recognition that things simply cannot work out between Edmund and Mary is combined with a sincere love for Edmund. Fanny is suffering from a dread of losing Edmund forever as well as a dread that he will be made unhappy by a marriage with Mary. Everything that happens adds to Fanny's conviction that Mary is not good for Edmund. Mary continues to try to convince him not to become a

clergyman. These attempts make him unhappy, but his attraction continues to grow. He refuses to see anything about her except those things that he wants to see. He confides his hopes that Mary will eventually accept him and his profession to Fanny. She is distressed by the knowledge that he wants to marry Miss Crawford in spite of her attitude.

Fanny's discomfort is heightened by the fact that Mary continues to be kind to her. She becomes, in fact, very fond of Fanny; and when her brother, Henry, proposes to Fanny, Mary gives her full approval and expresses only the highest regard for her.

In the incident of Henry's proposal to Fanny, it is easy to see how she would mistrust him. She has already seen him disappoint her cousins, Julia and Maria. She is never unfair to him. As she sees evidence of improvement in him, she thinks less harshly of him. Still, she would not marry him without loving him, but if his improvement had continued, she might have grown to love him. His relapse shows him incapable of moral reclamation. The influences of a bad upbringing are too strong to be eradicated. If Fanny had encouraged him more, the relapse might not have occurred when it did, but it would almost certainly have occurred sometime.

It is because of this incident that Edmund finally becomes convinced that he cannot marry Miss Crawford.

After it is all over between them, he tells Fanny what happened at their last meeting. Here again they are both open to criticism. If an unfavorable opinion of their attitudes has been received earlier, their conversation might be interpreted as a self-righteous passing of judgment on the absent Mary. Such a conversation, however, might reasonably be expected and need not be regarded as gossip. Both Edmund and Fanny are deeply involved in this situation. Edmund must talk things over with Fanny for the sake of getting it off his mind. He must tell Fanny the worst he knows about Mary because he has been deeply hurt and disappointed. Their conversation is a kind of purgation for both of them and they must have it. The scene ends with them continuing to ". . . talk of Miss Crawford alone and how she had attached him, and how delightful nature had made her, and how excellent she would have been, had she fallen into good hands earlier."<sup>86</sup> Mary doesn't go through the necessary process of self-recognition. She never recognizes any of her faults, so she can never improve.

The rapidity with which Jane Austen brings things to a close also contributes to the possibility of receiving an unfavorable impression of Fanny. At the end of the book, Fanny is accepting Edmund as a husband, when only ten pages earlier she has been discussing the unsuitability

<sup>86</sup>Austen, p. 459.

of Mary for this honor. It looks very much as if Fanny's opinion of herself is quite elevated after all. Actually, the writer must again be blamed for allowing a false impression to be received. The ten pages in which all of this takes place is a summary of events which could have taken place over a very long period of time. The actual period of time is left to the reader's imagination, and this allows the possibility that Fanny just might be more self-confident than she is supposed to be. This makes her look like a self-effacing person who actually dominates by pretending to be less assertive than she really is.

Jane Austen has indicated an expanding degree of self-recognition in both Fanny and Edmund. In Fanny the awareness of her own weaknesses is most strongly asserted by her realization that she is unable to cope with the situations in her Portsmouth home and the shattering of her illusions about that home. In the case of Edmund there is his realization that he and Mary Crawford are too unlike to ever be happily married. He recognizes the fact that in his hopes that things would work out between Mary and himself, he was only fooling himself and refusing to see anything he did not want to see. If Jane Austen had succeeded in presenting her characters in accordance with her original aims, she would not have appeared to be suffering from a lapse of her personal moral sense. She would not have appeared to be supporting

basically narrow-minded characters with unlikable personalities. Edmund would have emerged as a sincere and dedicated young clergyman with an expanding awareness of his own weaknesses and an increasing capability for overcoming these weaknesses. Fanny would have emerged as an attractive and likable young lady who is aware of her personal limitations. The changes and attractions by which Henry Crawford was so influenced would have been more obvious to the reader. Her sweetness and the developing trend of her personality would have been more apparent.

The similarities of Mansfield Park to Persuasion have already been mentioned. Mansfield Park does not represent a lapse of Jane Austen's moral sense. It represents a series of miscalculations in handling her material. In Persuasion she was more successful in creating the kind of character she had tried to create in Mansfield Park.

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JANE AUSTEN'S MORAL SENSE AND MANSFIELD PARK

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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The question of the moral tone of Mansfield Park has represented a major problem to many critics of Jane Austen's writing. There is varied opinion about whether or not there is any difference in the moral tone of Mansfield Park as compared to the other five novels, and if there is a difference, what it implies about the author's moral sense. Some critics maintain that Mansfield Park represents evidence of a temporary corruption of the writer's moral sense. A few critics suggest that there is no essential difference in the moral tone of the book and that the author's moral outlook while writing this novel is no different from her moral outlook while writing the other novels, both before and after Mansfield Park. The aim of this paper is to survey and present representative critical opinions on this problem.

It was concluded from a study of the critical data and the novel itself that in writing Mansfield Park, the author made a series of miscalculations which have resulted in frequent misinterpretation of the book as evidence of a corruption of Jane Austen's moral sense.

If Jane Austen had succeeded in presenting her characters in accordance with her original conception of them, it would not have appeared that she was supporting characters who were basically narrow-minded and unattractive in personality. In both Fanny and Edmund the author has indicated an increasing degree of self-recognition.

There is some suggestion at the end of the book that they will continue to develop in self-awareness and perceptiveness. In her other books, Jane Austen emphasizes the development and change of her characters. In Persuasion, for example, the heroine clearly recognizes her mistake of several years ago and is able to correct her mistake. In Mansfield Park the expanding consciousness of the characters is suggested by Fanny's recognition of her inabilities to cope with things in her Portsmouth home and the shattering of her illusions about that home and by Edmund's realization that he and Mary Crawford are too unlike for marriage. However, in Mansfield Park this factor of the expanding consciousness of the characters is not emphasized enough.

