

# An analysis of *Mansfield Park* from the Perspective of Feminism

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## Abstract

As one of the famous female writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century British, Jane Austen has left many popular works that embody feminism, among which *Mansfield Park* wins universal praise of people from worldwide. The heroine, Fanny Price, is a self-effacing cousin cared for by the Bertram family in their country house. Fanny's moral strength eventually wins her complete acceptance by the Bertram family and marriage to Edmund Bertram himself. The course of Fanny's growing up, from accepting her living condition, sticking to her marriage belief to her revolt against the patriarchy, all indicates that she has turned into a woman with feminine consciousness. Through the analysis of the novel, the paper aims to arouse women's awareness of their position in the society, and endeavor to pursue their independent personality.

**Keywords:** *Mansfield Park*; feminism; Jane Austen.

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## I. INTRODUCTION TO FEMINISM

### 1. Feminism

Feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.

Feminism as a strong trend prevailed from its first wave in the late 19th century when women asked for political rights. During this period, the dominant trend was to understand "gender equality" as "equal rights" based on the sameness of the two sexes. And because both women and men have rationality, they should enjoy equal rights. It is hoped that by minimizing gender differences as much as possible, women can fight for various equal rights and opportunities. The 1960s witnessed its second wave when women emphasized on the unity of sisterhood and brotherhood. Also, feminists in the second wave advocated for a direct attack on the male-dominated power structure. They believed that the various equal rights that women possess are often eroded and constrained by the power structure of gender inequality in society. Therefore, the acquisition of rights itself cannot truly liberate women or ensure true gender equality. The French existentialist scholar Simone de Beauvoir, with her work *The Second Sex*, played a significant role in the second wave of feminism.

Beauvoir bluntly pointed out that, for men, women are the "other". Like all oppressed groups, women suffer from exploitation and injustice. Women have always existed as an accessory to male society, deprived of political and economic rights, confined to small, scattered, and closed social circles, and unable to enjoy the personality freedom and political discourse they deserve. The third wave was identified in the late 1980s and 1990s when women voiced their demands in a broader sense. Feminists from different countries, ethnicities, beliefs, and demands have put forward their own views, forming anarcho-feminism, black feminism and so on. Today, it remains an influential movement calling for women's status and self-consciousness.

### 2. Feminine Consciousness

The core of feminism is to focus on feminine consciousness. It frequently occurs in writing by feminist authors. Women could realize their value thanks to feminine consciousness. Women question male power and would not accept the traditional idea of what it meant to be a woman. Women present their life experiences from a feminism-inspired point of view and cared about their own living circumstances. One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one. Because only biological qualities that have practical worth in action are important, and a woman cannot be viewed as merely a sexual entity. Women's self-awareness is not just determined by their sexual orientation; rather, it reflects a condition that is dependent on how society is organized

economically, which in turn reveals where humanity is in its technological evolution. Biologically speaking, as we've seen, women differ from men in two key ways: first, they have a narrower knowledge of the world, and second, they are more intimately bound to the species.

Literature that aims to advance women's independence is referred to as feminine literature. The works of feminism display gender traits and view women's freedom as a symbol. The articulation of the human experience through writing, however, is exceedingly uncomfortable for feminine literature in that most of them center on men's dominance. Female authors must initially reject the history and culture of that age in order to produce genuine feminine writing. Thus, feminine writers could be absent from male culture and created their own culture. Jane Austen is a female author who maintains her independence from modern literary circles and focuses on the awareness of women with a relentless exploring spirit. In her writings, Austen features strong female role models and revives female consciousness, which makes her one of the most significant women writers in the British literature.

In the 19th century, people strongly believed that women had innate obstacles in both their thinking and physical abilities. Men dominated the world while women were in a subordinate position. Jane Austen advocated for women's rights on the basis of gender equality. She created many female characters who can compete with men intellectually or rationally, indicating that women are not inferior to men and should be treated equally.

Women are always bound by the ancient concept of etiquette, which keeps them in their proper place and ensures that everything is done as it should be in a patriarchal society. Jane Austen criticized the feudal etiquette in her works. She opposed the dominant view in society that a woman's virtue is meekness. In her view, women should have the same right to express emotions as men. Forcing women to submit in society and in the family is inappropriate.

At that time, if women had no possibility of owning property, they would have nothing in the future. Therefore, women's survival depended on a good marriage that provided money and property. Austen believed that people had added too many benefits to marriage, making it increasingly commercialized. She fiercely criticized marriages based on money. Austen called on women to break free from traditional mercenary marriages and establish marriages based on love. Austen's depiction of marriage in her works reveals women's consciousness in marriage, especially their awakening consciousness. Through these female characters, Jane Austen not only conveys women's desire for freedom and equality in marriage, but also strongly challenges patriarchy.

Due to the limitations of the time and class, Austen's female consciousness is not more obvious and rational than that of later female writers, especially today's feminists. Although her attacks were not sharp and direct, it was still the first time in the history of British literature that different voices were heard, reflecting the independent personality of women. However, her novels center on women characters to show social life, which are different from traditional works that discriminate against women. Her novels have always been a highly courageous expression of women's rights, which have been suppressed and ignored in literature for a long time. In her novels, she rationalizes the issues of women's status, rights, and endowments to express a clear female consciousness and challenge the dominant position of men in literature. As a pioneer and enlightener of female consciousness, Austen has made great contributions to British literature.

## II. Introduction to *Mansfield Park*

*Mansfield Park* is a story about the protagonist, Fanny Price, as she moves through her teenage years and into young adulthood. When she was young, Fanny was sent to live with her aunt, Lady Bertram, and uncle, Sir Thomas, at their country estate, Mansfield Park.

Fanny grew up in Mansfield with her four cousins: Tom, Edmund, Maria and Julia. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield, she feels uncomfortable because she is not well-behaved and surrounded by luxury and wealth. She is homesick and misses her brother, William, with whom she has a very close relationship. During Fanny's first years at Mansfield, she is generally neglected by her relatives. Mrs. Norris is downright tyrannical and verbally abusive in her treatment of her niece. It is only her cousin Edmund who goes out of his way to make Fanny feel at ease, and an intense bond is formed between them.

As Fanny grows older, she becomes more accustomed to the Mansfield lifestyle. Fanny is Lady Bertram's maid, staying at home with her reclusive aunt when the rest of the family go out to socialize. After Mr. Norris passes away, Lady Norris moves from the vicarage to a house nearby. Edmund should have inherited his fortune, but Tom, who has a gambling problem, has to use the money set aside to pay off his debts. A new preacher, Dr Grant, moves into the vicarage with his wife, Mrs. Grant.

Frustrated by his son Tom's lack of responsibility, Sir Thomas takes him with him on a business trip to Antigua. It is during that summer that Mrs. Grant's half-brother and sister, Mary and Henry Crawford, come to stay with her. Both attractive and charming, they quickly make friends with the Bertrams. Tom returns from the West Indies, followed by Sir Thomas in the late autumn. Henry flirts with both Julia and Maria, in spite of Maria's engagement. The Bertram children, the Crawfords and Fanny go to Mr.

Rushworth's estate together, where Henry concentrates his flirting on Maria, leaving Julia feeling depressed. At the same time, Mary and Edmund begin to develop romantic feelings. This angers Fanny, who over the years has grown to regard Edmund as more than a cousin.

The young people decide to put on a trick after they hear that a friend of Tom's, Mr. Yates, has done the same thing at another party. Edmund and Fanny are reluctant on the grounds that it would be unseemly, but eventually Edmund joins in. But Fanny resists. Maria and Henry continue to flirt. Edmund and Mary become increasingly in love, but Fanny suffers great anguish as she watches the love scene unfold. They make all the preparations for the play, but Sir Thomas returns from Antigua just before it is ready. He is furious with them because he thinks that the theatrics of the play is completely inappropriate, and he puts an end to the fun.

Maria had hoped that Henry would marry her, but finally she gives up her dreams and marries Mr. Rushworth. She and Julia go with him to Brighton and then to London. Mary becomes more intimate with Fanny. Henry decides to seduce Fanny as a game, as the other young women have left him. At the same time, Fanny is still secretly in love with Edmund. She is in great pain knowing Mary and Edmund's romance. Edmund tries to find out if Mary will marry him, while Mary is reluctant to commit in that Edmund as a clergyman, is a younger son and has no money.

Fanny's brother William arrives for a visit. Sir Thomas, who has warmed to Fanny since his return from Antigua, throws a formal ball in her honour. Henry has failed in his game of seducing Fanny, but has accidentally fallen in love with her. In an attempt to win Fanny's heart, he travels to London, where he secures a promotion for William. Henry then proposes marriage to Fanny, but she rejects him. Shortly afterwards, Fanny returns to Portsmouth, her childhood home, for the first time in many years. Fanny dislikes Portsmouth, but becomes close to her younger sister Susan.

Henry visits Fanny in Portsmouth and reaffirms his affection for her. Fanny begins to be nice to him and Mary encourages her to marry him. But soon Fanny is told that Tom is seriously ill. She is worried and wants to return to Mansfield. Then Fanny hears rumours that Henry and Maria have eloped. Edmund's letter is a confirmation of the rumours, along with news of Julia's elopement with Mr. Yates. Fanny and her sister Susan return to Mansfield.

When Mary hears the news of Maria and Henry's affair, she does not condemn their actions but complains that they have been found out. As a result, Edmund is disgusted and breaks off his relationship with Mary, much to the delight of Fanny. Henry is completely banished from the Bertram household. Maria, now in disgrace, leaves Mansfield for a house far away with

Mrs. Norris. Julia and Mr. Yates attempt to reconcile with Sir Thomas and are forgiven. The Grants and Mary leave Mansfield and settle in London. Edmund first considers Fanny as an option of flirtation, but eventually falls in love with her. They get married and live happily ever after.

### III. The Feminine Consciousness of Fanny

#### 1. Fanny's Optimistic Attitude Towards Life

Fanny seems to be a maid in Mansfield, waiting for the requests of her two aunts. Mrs. Norris is quite peculiar. She is greedy and tries to find various excuses to cover up her greed. She tells Fanny to remember her identity and asks her not to enjoy the same treatment as her siblings. Although Mrs. Norris is boring, Fanny still accepts all her suggestions. The Bertram is not aware of Mrs. Norris's bad habits, but Fanny knows her well and never complains about her. Fanny is kind and warm-hearted, always thinking of others. She is the gentlest woman in Austen's novels. Sometimes, when she is treated unfairly at home, her attitude is not always negative. While her siblings play outside, she stays at home with her aunt. Fanny has no illusions and finds happiness in her own world. She has a cozy little room where she suddenly burst into tears. When faced with difficulties, Fanny could only stay at home and relax. Fanny is grateful and obedient to everyone in Mansfield, and her attitude towards life is always optimistic.

When the little Fanny comes to Mansfield Park, she is totally anxious. As it is mentioned in the book, "The grandeur of the house astonished, but could not console her. The rooms were too large for her to move in with ease...and the little girl who was spoken of in the drawing-room when she left it at night as seeming so desirably sensible of her peculiar good fortune, ended every day's sorrows by sobbing herself to sleep." At the time, Fanny is only ten years old and does not know that social wealth could become a virtue. In fact, she is a spectator watching everything in Mansfield. Due to her humble family background, Fanny is subordinate to others. Although she is Lady Bertram's niece, she does not enjoy the same treatment as other children. Fanny seems to be a servant in Mansfield. Before Fanny arrives at Mansfield, Sir Thomas has considered how to draw appropriate boundaries between his children and Fanny.

Fanny seems to be a maid in Mansfield, always waiting for others' requests. Mrs. Norris always reminds Fanny of her identity and asks her not to have any illusions. Mrs. Norris is always a very annoying woman, but Fanny is still very gentle to her. Due to her low status, Fanny is ignored in various occasions such as dances, trips, and camping. Although almost no one cares about her feelings, she has never shouted out her true thoughts.

Fanny comes from a poor family in Portsmouth. In fact, her identity has already been defined before she arrives in Mansfield. She could be friends with the children of Mansfield, but she is always different from

them in terms of identity, wealth, and power. Therefore, Fanny's life could be imagined. Almost everyone persuades her to do something stupid, but her cousin Edmund is an exception. Whenever she gets into trouble, Edmund always rescues her from the predicament. To make her happy, they read and share knowledge together in her small room. Sometimes, he takes her to go horseback riding to keep her healthy. For Fanny, when she is immersed in disappointment and loneliness, Edmund is her hope and belief. In the course of growing up together, Edmund is her best friend.

In the course of growing up, Edmund is an indispensable guide for Fanny, as he guides Fanny to prepare for her future. Fanny is seen as a servant and is bullied by her aunt and sisters. She has no confidant at all. Fortunately, her cousin Edmund is a smart person. When others make fun of Fanny, he helps her and fairly executes justice. He knows she is not well, so he lends her his horse without hesitation. Therefore, they could ride horses together to stay healthy. In addition, he often lends her many books, tells her many anecdotes, enriched her knowledge, and broadened her horizons.

Fanny is a thin and weak girl. She spends a poor childhood in her hometown and then lives a simple life in Mansfield. Without Edmund, she might have become a very depressed girl. When Fanny is immersed in disappointment, Edmund is her only hope. With the guidance of her cousin, she gradually becomes an elegant, gentle, and intelligent girl. She can communicate with others in appropriate language and politeness. In addition, she always maintains her character and wisdom in special situations. When Edmund is completely confused, she offers appropriate advice. Finally, she becomes Edmund's best friend and gives him some valuable advice.

Fanny lives in Portsmouth when she is young. At that time, she contacts with all the crude people at the bottom of society. She is sent to Mansfield when she is young. Growing up, she has to face the superiority of her two sisters. Mrs. Norris is a questioning person, so Fanny often receives her blame. Sometimes, Fanny is mocked by the servants. That is Fanny's life in Mansfield, where she often feels anxious and fear all day long. However, Fanny does not complain about this, and she keeps a calm heart all the way. She tries her best to adapt to the family, learn knowledge and politeness. As an adopted daughter, no one really cares about her except Edmund. She falls in love with Edmund because Edmund pulls her back from the edge of the abyss. But Edmund sees Fanny as a sister and doesn't realize she loves him. Although Fanny is not rich and beautiful, she is intelligent and kind, especially with the character that a lady should have. Fanny is grateful for everything she has and everyone she meets.

## 2. Fanny's Marriage Beliefs

If a couple loves each other and wants to live together, marriage is their best choice. Especially for women, marriage is their spiritual home. Austen follows a principle that her works reflected women's views on marriage. Through creating a series of female characters in her works, she revealed the true situation of 18th century British women. Before her, whether it is romantic novels or realistic novels, love is idealized. Austen points out that how women deal with love and marriage issues has certain practical significance.

On Fanny's first arrival at Mansfield, everyone thinks her very unhappy and utterly devoid of any redeeming quality. Her aunts always command her to do various things, but she never complains or rebels. When Fanny is helpless, Edmund extends his hand to her. From then on, Edmund becomes her only support and faith. At Mansfield, Fanny seems to be a servant who could be treated by anyone at will. Especially since she is always bullied by her two sisters, Edmund is willing to stand up for her. Edmund could put himself in her shoes and sincerely treat her as a sister.

When Fanny is treated unfairly, Edmund gives her great comfort. She wants to exercise to stay healthy, and he does his best to find her a new horse. Under Edmund's positive influence, she gradually learns to interact with others in appropriate language and manners. She has always been an elegant and intelligent girl. In the face of events, she could firmly maintain her position and wisdom. Day after day, Fanny finds that she does not want to leave Edmund. She has fallen deeply in love with him.

The journey of true love is never smooth, and neither is Fanny's. When Fanny visits Sotherton with the young people, she realizes that Edmund has fallen in love with Mary, which causes her great pain. Although she knows Mary's true intentions, she remains silent to maintain superficial harmony. Moreover, Fanny sees things very clearly and knows that Henry is a hypocritical and frivolous man, so she refuses his pursuit. Fanny firmly refuses a marriage without love, and she does not see her own marriage as a transaction. Despite the advice of her family, she still sticks to her belief. Even when Sir Thomas Bertram scolds her, she does not give up her love for Edmund, because she wants pure love. In fact, Fanny knows Mary very well, but because of her kindness, she remains silent. She does not want to talk about Mary behind her back, she just prays that Edmund wouldn't fall into a broken heart.

Fanny is adopted by Mansfield, so she is initially seen as an outsider. She often describes everything inside and outside Mansfield from her own perspective. She judges everything fairly based on her moral standards. Faced with despair and pain, Fanny can learn to self-regulate, so she does not go to extremes. Despite often being treated unfairly, she still treats others

kindly. Her outstanding qualities make her more outstanding. Fanny never speaks ill of Mary in front of Edmund because she knows Edmund would soon get to know Mary. After that, she believes that she would definitely get love and happiness. Fanny believes that marriage should be based on mutual respect and equality, which will bring her the happiness she deserves. Fanny is the most ordinary woman in the novel, but she is a pioneer of her time because she challenges the attitude towards marriage that women face in patriarchal society. She is different from other women in that she does not judge her future husband by wealth and social status. She independently chooses her own happiness. Mrs. Norris always tries to belittle herself so that her cousins and others do not care about her. However, she eventually marries Edmund and becomes the spiritual mistress of Mansfield. Due to her correct attitude towards marriage, Fanny can obtain happy, love and marriage. Her attitude towards marriage shows that possession becomes so trivial if love and morality are in perfect harmony. Sometimes, women may be troubled by money, but if they always firmly believe in true love, they are sure to get true happiness eventually.

### 3. Fanny's Rebellion against the Patriarchy

Fanny has many virtues: gentleness, kindness, honesty, and bravery. In fact, she doesn't always obey others' wishes. Her inner self is full of persistence and tenacity. To defend her own freedom of marriage, Fanny boldly rebels against patriarchy. She wanted to choose her future husband according to her own opinion, so she refuses to marry Mr. Crawford. But this angers Sir Thomas, one of the representatives of patriarchy. Sir Thomas believes Fanny should obey him silently. Meanwhile, Edmund and her relatives convince her to accept Henry. However, Fanny persists in her own thoughts regardless of others' opinions, and eventually wins her own happiness with courage and determination.

Henry Crawford is considered the perfect man that almost all women wanted to marry. Henry's annual income exceeds 4,000 pounds and he owns vast lands. Sir Thomas hopes that any of his daughters would be fortunate enough to marry Henry. However, Fanny's cold attitude towards Henry piques his interest. He feels a sense of pride hurt for the first time and decides to ruthlessly pursue her. His goal is to make Fanny fall in love with him, without intending to give his true feelings. On the contrary, he falls in love himself, causing a huge change in his thoughts. He not only plays with her affections, but also wants to propose to her. Although Henry satisfies everyone, Fanny refuses his pursuit because she believes he is not a qualified husband in that his moral principles are low. Therefore, Fanny is different from other women. She is so rational that she is accustomed to detailed consideration of any subtle phenomenon. Although she remains silent, she has so many inner thoughts. She could calmly analyze the behavior and words of others. Faced with Mr. Crawford's pursuit, she firmly refuses because she has

carefully observed him and knows that he is very flirtatious. Fanny believes that love should transcend social status and possession, and the ideal of family superiority allows her to achieve a happy and ideal marriage.

Fanny not only rejects Mr. Crawford's pursuit, she also ignores Sir Thomas' pressure. Sir Thomas is the authority figure in this family. It suggests that women in Mansfield have no independent consciousness and should fully comply with men's wishes. In order to persuade Fanny to change her mind, Sir Thomas plans to treat her kindly, so he no longer forces her to accept Mr. Crawford. Sir Thomas knows Fanny's kind heart, and his gentle attitude may eventually change her mind. Meanwhile, Henry has left home, which makes Sir Thomas happy because Fanny may realize her mistake and start to miss Henry. On the contrary, Fanny still maintains her position. More importantly, Sir Thomas decides to let Fanny return to her hometown of Portsmouth with the hope of Fanny would marry Henry after her relatives' persuasion. However, Fanny's overturning of her previous compliant image surprises Sir Thomas. Even though Fanny returns from her hometown, she still wanted to marry the man she loves, rendering Sir Thomas's tactics ineffective. A beautiful young woman should encompass two aspects at that time. Firstly, they should have upright behavior and education. Secondly, for women, devout faith is necessary. Fanny is considered a model of virtue and can be seen as a beautiful girl, which has earned her the admiration of Sir Thomas. At the same time, she makes Sir Thomas acknowledge his correct attitude towards marriage and gains his understanding and respect.

In Mansfield, Fanny is the first person to challenge patriarchy with a strong sense of independence. In fact, her rebellion is initially with a skeptical and uncertain attitude, because ingratitude is a despicable vice. However, she eventually opposes patriarchy because she knows that a marriage without love is quite poor. Everyone has the right to decide their own life and destiny, and has the right to choose their own future happiness. Fanny sets a good example for people because she defends her inherent rights.

### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes Jane Austen's work *Mansfield Park* from the perspective of feminism, through which the author finds that the book is filled with the feminine ideas on behalf of the protagonist Fanny. Her optimistic view about her living conditions and future marriage as well as her persistent efforts of fighting against the patriarchy fully demonstrate her feminine consciousness, calling on later women to face up to their own living conditions and endeavor to seek proper rights for themselves in the society. Furthermore, after appreciating *Mansfield Park* in detail, it is acknowledged that Jane Austen's works are full of

feminine consciousness that enlightens the readers all the time.

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