

Study of Mansfield Park

We were treated to a novel study of Mansfield Park on a beautiful day in March.

Kathleen was the first to stand and she provided a detailed synopsis of the novel starting with a summary of the three Ward sisters who became Mrs. Norris, Lady Bertram and Mrs. Price; and all of their children. Next, she described the main settings of the novel. First, Mansfield Park which was the epitome of order, elegance, and tranquility; but lacking in any warmth. Secondly, Portsmouth which was the reverse being chaotic, noisy, and dirty. Finally, London, which is the scene of immorality, from Thomas Bertram's drinking and gambling, to the scene of Maria Bertram's adultery.

Next Kathleen went through the plot of Mansfield Park with very helpful insights into the characters and the backgrounds of each. Fanny, just ten when she is taken from her family and brought to live at Mansfield where she is befriended by Edmund, ignored by Thomas, and treated with condescension by Maria and Julia under the guidance of their aunt Mrs. Norris. The entrance of Henry and Mary Crawford upsets the quiet and tranquility at Mansfield and ultimately, the lives of most of those within.

In the absence of Sir Thomas, Mary and Henry become intertwined with the children of Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. Henry flirts with both sisters despite the elder, Maria, being engaged to Mr. Rushworth. Mary finds herself drawn to Edmund but disapproves of his intention of becoming a clergyman. Upon the return of Tom Bertram from London with his friend Mr. Yates, it is decided that the young people will put on a theatrical and Lovers' Vows is decided upon being one of the least appropriate plays for the group that could have been decided upon. Fanny resists any involvement. Eventually Sir Thomas returns and the plans for the theatrical are put to an end. Henry leaves, Edmund is to be ordained and Maria marries Mr. Rushworth, despite concerns by Sir Thomas that she will be unhappy. Julia accompanies the new Mrs. Rushworth on her honeymoon, leaving Fanny at Mansfield Park. In the absence of Maria and Julia, Fanny is seen in a new light, Henry falls in love with her and proposes marriage but Fanny refuses, believing he is simply playing his same old games. Upon her refusal of Henry, Sir Thomas sends Fanny back to Portsmouth hoping she may be given cause to reconsider. Instead of finding the warm, inviting family she had dreamed of upon her arrival, Fanny finds herself ignored and uncomfortable. After several months, word arrives that Tom has fallen ill and later that Maria has run off with Mr. Crawford. Fanny is brought back to Mansfield to be of comfort to her aunt, Lady Bertram. Edmund finally sees the corrupt nature of Mary Crawford and gradually comes to see Fanny's virtues. Edmund and Fanny marry, her sister Susan takes her place at Mansfield, Tom grows up, and Mrs. Norris is sent off to live with Maria.

Next up Randie and Jane did character studies. Randie provided us with a character study of the Ward sisters, all failing, each in their own way, to be a good mother to Fanny. Fanny's own mother, Mrs. Price, is a slattern and neglects her daughters. She welcomes the opportunity to send one of her girls away. Upon Fanny's return to Portsmouth she is confronted with her mother's failures and discovers that Mansfield Park has become her real home as she misses its order, tranquility, and cleanliness. Mrs. Norris is a busybody who wants all of the credit of doing a good deed without any of the inconvenience of having to put forth any effort. Her energy makes her actively abusive toward Fanny; constantly berating her and reminding her of place. Her treatment of Fanny guides Maria and Julia not to respect Fanny and she fails to assert any moral guidance on any of the girls. Lady Bertram, while not cruel to Fanny, fails her also but less so because she mainly sat on the couch doing needlework. Lady Bertram is

indolent and lacks vigilance. She uses Fanny as a servant and is a poor chaperone to the young people as she is oftentimes asleep or generally inattentive to them. Though provided with three potential motherly figures, Randie pointed out that all three failed to be successful mothers to Fanny.

Jane spoke next and provided a humorous discussion entitled 'Nothing But Buffoonery' about all of the young people surrounding Fanny Price. The young ladies of the story are all conceited. Mary appears to be the antithesis of Fanny: easy going, selfish, strong, and her lack of morality evidenced through her open dislike of Edmund's plan to be ordained. Poor Mr. Rushworth's only evidence of any wisdom throughout was to be jealous of Henry Crawford. Henry, as Jane pointed out, goes from being quite plain to most desirable in only one paragraph. Finally, Tom Bertram's preference for comedy in the theatrical describes his lack of ability to take life seriously in much of the novel.

Kathleen then presented a second time, this time on Fanny as a heroine. There is a great deal of debate about the likeability of Fanny Price. This debate was referred to in a *Persuasions* article as "The Fanny Wars". She was a favourite heroine of the nineteenth century but much less so in the twentieth. It seems that as women have changed, so to has the general opinion of Fanny. Kathleen discussed the proposition that Fanny is the epitome of Fordyce's ideal woman: intellectually accomplished, domestic and elegant, modest, pious, meek, delicate, reserved, and active in pursuit of good works. Indeed, in reviewing this list, it is a most convincing argument that Fanny Price was intended to be this ideal woman. Kathleen then drew upon her professional training to describe Fanny as suffering from a social anxiety disorder. Her fears of performance, early exposure to abuse, instability and being subject to high expectations, together with her lack of exposure to social situations all apply to Fanny's character. Kathleen did urge us not to be too harsh in our judgment of Fanny as she reminds us that in the novel Fanny is only a teenager!

Finally, Judith treated us all to a discussion of Antigua and the slavery at the sugar plantations up until the Slave Trade Act of 1807 which abolished the slave trade in the British Empire. She discussed the absentee owners of plantations such as Sir Thomas Bertram. These owners generally only visited their plantations every one or two years to address any problems on the plantation, they were typically influential members of society, and sometimes were less harsh than resident owners. Interestingly, Judith advised that the use of term "park" in describing a property meant that the estate was from new wealth. Sugar politics were volatile in Jane Austen's time. Sugar production relied heavily on slavery. Antigua was secluded and ill-defended and was often invaded by the French. Abolition was brought about by George Whitefield, an evangelical, and William Wilberforce, an anti-slavery activist. The name "Mansfield Park" has interesting implications as well. Lord Mansfield was the Chief Justice in Britain prior to the abolition of the slave trade and made some landmark decisions against slavery. Judith believed that the trouble that Sir Thomas was in Antigua to deal with centered around rebellion of the slaves on his plantation and she noted the irony that he was away dealing with rebellion only to return home to a rebellion of sorts within his own family. Throughout her presentation, we were all treated to some illustrative photos that Judith had taken during her own visit to Antigua. Thank you for all the photos Judith.

Once again a successful meeting! Thank you to Kathleen, Randi, Jane and Judith for all of your hard work in preparing these instructional presentations!