
Comforts and Consequences: A Study of the Impact of Urbanization on Rural Spaces in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

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Abstract

Mansfield Park, Jane Austen's third published novel, first appeared in 1814 and the first edition sold out in six months. In spite of its initial success and positive reviews, it has garnered diverse criticism over time—from being one of Austen's mature works, to one of the most complex and realistic of Austen's novels, to being one of the most controversial and problematic. This may partly be due to the plethora of issues this novel encompasses, namely class, gender, education, morality, theatricality, religion, and colonialism. In addition, it incorporates a diverse range of characters some of whom go on to become 'types'. Another discernible aspect Austen depicts in the novel is the clear bifurcation between the country of Mansfield and the city of London, be it in terms of lifestyle, mores and manners, or even personalities. These two worlds of rural and urban spaces collide when the Crawfords arrive from London to Mansfield Park. In this paper I intend to highlight how Austen juxtaposes the two divergent worlds and modes of life together only to expose their apparent discrepancies.

KEYWORDS: City vs Country, Jane Austen, London, Morality, Rural and Urban spaces.

One of the noteworthy tropes of a tale is its setting, often defining or shaping the characters occupying the literary space. For Jane Austen, writing during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the world of rural England and landed aristocracy has primarily served as the background for her stories. Mostly belonging to the social order of the gentry like Austen herself, her characters embody the day-to-day lives of the English Georgian society. Austen's novel, especially *Mansfield Park*, is written against the backdrop of industrial revolution and the rapidly disappearing agrarian society. Raymond Williams, in his work *The Country and the City* (1973) notes that "the Industrial Revolution not only transformed both city and country; it was based on a highly developed agrarian capitalism, with a very early disappearance of the traditional peasantry" [2]. This, to some extent, worried Austen as this urbanization increased the influence of the 'city' on the 'country'. The setting of *Mansfield Park*, for instance, is interspersed among Mansfield, Portsmouth, and London as the characters travel through these locales throughout the novel. In this paper I intend to analyse the conflict between the urban and rural England, the influence of the city on the country, and the impact of the new industrial world on the rural order.

Jane Austen wrote *Mansfield Park* (1814) when she was in her late 30s. Though it apparently lacks the glitz and glamour of her most celebrated work *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), it is often hailed as one of the most complex and realistic of Austen's novels. The characters are varied, the locales are divergent, and the attitudes of people hailing from these places are markedly different. The complexity is also largely due to the varied perceptions of readers towards the main characters, especially the protagonist Fanny Price. Initially timid and self-conscious, ten years old Fanny is sent from the bustling, noisy Portsmouth to live with her affluent uncle and aunt Sir Thomas and Mrs. Bertram, to the quiet, rural setting of Mansfield. The daughter of a drunken sailor and a woman who married beneath her station, Fanny is intimidated by her confident and sophisticated relatives. Fanny's introduction to the Bertrams lead her to think of them as "a remarkably fine family". She notes with awe that "the sons very well-looking, the daughters decidedly handsome, and all of them well-grown and forward of their age...(Austen, 11). Fanny's initiation into the Bertram family is the first instance of the merging of the two worlds of Portsmouth and Mansfield—the living conditions the people and overall, the worlds so markedly different that not only "no one would have supposed the girls so nearly of an age as they really were" (11) but the "grandeur of the house astonished...The rooms were too large for her to move in with ease; whatever she touched she expected to injure, and she crept about in constant terror of something or other" (13).

The second infraction between urban and rural spaces occurs with the appearance of the Crawfords. The simple quiet lives of the residents are disrupted by the arrival of the Crawford siblings—Henry and Mary—who are thought of as 'lively and pleasant' (31) by Mrs. Grant as they are first introduced in the text. Needless to say, the innocence and the beauty of Mansfield Park are shattered by the arrival of the materialistic and immoral Crawfords who inevitably become the representatives of an urbanized England. London becomes synonymous with superficiality and shallowness. The city dwellers, as represented by Henry and Mary Crawford, are shown to care only about their own desires in direct contrast to the traditional rural values and ethics. They hide their moral decay behind their apparent charm and allure. Their moral degradation is further revealed by the theatrical episode in which they not only decide to enact Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* (1798), a play about pre-marital relations and illegitimate birth, but throughout its enactment Henry ostensibly flirts with the Maria Bertram, an engaged woman. The reference to *Lover's Vows* is brought upon by another outsider, a John Yates, a friend of Tom Bertram who "had not much to recommend him beyond habits of fashion and expense, and being the younger son of a lord with a tolerable independence" (86). It is also noted that Sir Thomas Bertram, a man of tradition and manners, "would

probably have thought his introduction at Mansfield by no means desirable" (86). The idea of enacting *Lover's Vows* at Mansfield Park is then taken upon by Tom Bertram, a frequent visitor to London, prone to gambling, and the overall irresponsible eldest son of Sir Thomas. In fact, Mary's initial inclination to marry Tom, apart from being the eldest son of a family of 'some consequence' (31), was Tom's regular visits to London. She observes, "Mr. Bertrams were very fine young men, that two such young men were not often seen together even in London, and that their manners, particularly those of the eldest, were very good. He had been much in London, and had more liveliness and gallantry than Edmund, and must, therefore, be preferred (35)".

In addition, Mary Crawford's declaration about her own brother that "He is the most horrible flirt that can be imagined. If your Miss Bertrams do not like to have their hearts broke, let them avoid Henry" (32), is perhaps Austen's hint to the reader about the real nature of Henry Crawford, one that he hides behind his pleasant mask. His perverseness and moral decay are further underscored as he confesses to his sister:

And how do you think I mean to amuse myself, Mary, on the days that I do not hunt? ... No, my plan is to make Fanny Price in love with me... But I cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart (157).

Mary's moral degradation is evident as she tries to conceal the extent of Henry's transgression with Maria Rushworth. She criticises Henry's folly of getting caught and not his amoral behaviour. Edmund's shocked reaction as he narrates to Fanny his conversation with Mary bears testimony to the vast difference between them: "Oh! Fanny, it was the detection, not the offence which she reprobated" (309). Mary drives the final nail on the coffin of her relationship with Edmund when she blames Fanny for Henry and Maria's elopement:

Why, would not she have him? It is all her fault. Simple girl! —I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and too busy to want any other object. He would have taken no pains to be on terms with Mrs. Rushworth again. It would have all ended in a regular standing flirtation, in yearly meetings at Sotherton and Everingham (309).

Edmund's shock after discovering this side of Mary is presented through his earnest declaration: "Her's are faults of principle, Fanny, of blunted delicacy and a corrupted,

vitiating mind" (310). Suffice it to say, Henry and Mary's carefree and frivolous natures prove to be a disruptive and malign influence on almost all the residents of Mansfield Park. The steadfast Edmund and Sir Thomas Bertram too get swept by the beguiling attitude of the Crawford siblings at one point.

The city of London embodies commercialism and materialism and the same is evident in the characters who frequent London. Mary's bafflement to understand why no farmer, even in the face of money, will lend either their cart or their horse during harvest season to fetch her harp from Northampton, is a case in point. Edmund explains to her that the "hire of a cart at any time, might not be so easy as you suppose; our farmers are not in the habit of letting them out; but in harvest, it must be quite out of their power to spare a horse" (43). Her shock at the discovery that money might not solve every problem in the country as it does in the city, is obvious as she exclaims "coming down with the true London maxim, that everything is to be got with money, I was a little embarrassed at first by the sturdy independence of your country customs" (43). Her materialism is further proven in her declaration that "A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of. It certainly may secure all the myrtle and turkey part of it" (146). Her inability to grasp Edmund's desire to become a clergyman further emphasizes her avarice: "Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines, distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing" (66). Edmund's reaction to this not only speaks of his selflessness but also brings home the theme of virtue versus vice in this novel:

Not, I should hope, of the proportion of virtue to vice throughout the kingdom. We do not look in great cities for our best morality. It is not there, that respectable people of any denomination can do most good; and it certainly is not there, that the influence of the clergy can be most felt. A fine preacher is followed and admired; but it is not in fine preaching only that a good clergyman will be useful in his parish and his neighbourhood, where the parish and neighbourhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct, which in London can rarely be the case. The clergy are lost there in the crowds of their parishioners (66).

The distinction between the city and the country and the ill effects of the former on the latter is further underscored through the character of Tom Bertram. Tom visits London frequently, he drinks, he gambles, and shirks all responsibility that is owed to him as the eldest son and the heir to a baronetcy. His lack of moral scruples is brought forth when he not only invites a friend of questionable character, Mr. Yates,

to his home occupied by his two young unmarried sisters and a young cousin but also allows for a licentious play to be enacted in his home in the absence of his father. It is at this point the contrast between the two Bertram brothers are becomes palpable as Edmund protests to this blatant disregard for basic propriety:

I think it would be very wrong. In a general light, private theatricals are open to some objections, but as we are circumstanced, I must think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious, to attempt anything of the kind. It would show great want of feeling on my father's account, absent as he is, and in some degree of constant danger; and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering everything, extremely delicate(89).

Though, Edmund manages to save Fanny from being bullied into acting in the play, he too ultimately falls prey to persuasion, much to Fanny's shock:

After all that she had heard him say, and seen him look, and known him to be feeling. Could it be possible? Edmund so inconsistent. Was he not deceiving himself? Was he not wrong? Alas! it was all Miss Crawford's doing. She had seen her influence in every speech, and was miserable (110).

The nature of interpersonal relationships, as those between husband and wife, uncle and niece, friends and family, is another arena that mark the gulf between the city and the country. Fanny's respectful relationship with Sir Thomas at Mansfield is decidedly different from Mary's subtle scorn for her uncle, the Admiral in the city. Tom is inundated with false friends who lead him to gambling, alcoholism, and almost near death in London. Edmund's commentary on the Frasers, when he went to London to meet Mary, sums up the depravity of the relationship between husband and wife in the city:

She [Mary] was in high spirits, and surrounded by those who were giving all the support of their own bad sense to her too lively mind. I do not like Mrs. Fraser. She is a cold-hearted, vain woman, who has married entirely from convenience, and though evidently unhappy in her marriage, places her disappointment, not to faults of judgement or temper, or disproportion of age, but to her being after all, less affluent than many of her acquaintance, especially than her sister, Lady Stornaway and is the determined supporter of everything

mercenary and ambitious, provided it be only mercenary and ambitious enough (286-287).

A distinct feature evident in the city dwellers, one that at once sets them apart from their country peers, is their detachment from nature. If rural England is marked by beautiful landscapes, sprawling country homes, and a life of quiet and peace, London, in direct contrast, is burdened with constant noise, vehicles, and pollution. The alienation between man and nature is further underscored in *Mansfield Park* when the Bertrams and Crawfords travel to Sotherton to see Mr. Rushworth's estate. Right from the carriage ride, to the perusal of the estate, and their journey back, it is clear to the readers that the party has almost no desire to enjoy the natural beauty of the countryside. In fact, the very reason for their trip to Sotherton is for the Crawfords to offer their so-called expertise in home improvement—a modern way to replace the nature beauty of the country home with artificial accoutrements. It is mostly through the Crawfords that Austen presents the hollow, superficial nature of London society throughout the novel and Fanny becomes her champion for the preservation of the natural country. In fact, Fanny "was disposed to think the influence of London very much at war with all respectable attachments. She saw the proof of it in Miss Crawford, as well as in her cousins" (293-94). In other words, the Crawfords' arrival at Mansfield is, in fact, representative of the infiltration of the spurious city principles in the tranquil country, and the invasion of young minds, especially that of Tom, Maria, and Julia Bertram, with unbridled urban desires.

Fanny Price is the one character who remains steadfast and resilient to urban influence throughout the novel. The boisterous family of Mrs. Price from Portsmouth, the affluent and boastful Bertrams from Mansfield Park, and the immoral and self-centered Crawfords from London are brought together by Fanny's quiet, observant eye. She oftentimes distances herself to observe the characters from these divergent places, as they move around her, as if she is an audience to a play. In fact, it is her quiet judgement of others that has sometimes earned her the criticism of being morally uptight. However, as the novel progresses, and she finds herself distanced from her only ally Edmund, Fanny demonstrates courage and integrity in staying true to her own moral compass rather than blindly following the path chosen by her cousins. In fact, her warning to Maria as she tries to bypass a locked gate at Sotherton with Mr. Crawford sounds almost prophetic and symbolic:

"You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram," she cried, "you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes—you will tear your gown—you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go" (71).

The 'locked gate' might as well stand for societal prohibitions that Maria, influenced by Henry, carelessly flouts when she later elopes with him, thereby thoroughly ruining her reputation, her marriage, and her family's good name. Henry, on the other hand, loses his chance of being happy with Fanny as he falls prey to his own superficiality and vanity:

Henry Crawford, ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long...Curiosity and vanity were both engaged, and the temptation of immediate pleasure was too strong for a mind unused to make any sacrifice to right (317).

Fanny's resistance to external influence, her steadfast refusal to act in *Lovers Vows*, and her rejection of Henry's proposal, allow her to uphold the ideals, morals, and ethics of *Mansfield Park*. Even when Sir Thomas Bertram is swayed by Henry's apparent charms, Fanny stands resolute. Her ability to find goodness in Henry later in the novel is also a testament of her own guilelessness. But, as Henry elopes with Mrs. Rushworth, she finds veracity in her initial judgement: "the sister's... cold-hearted ambition—and the brother's... thoughtless vanity" (296). As a result, the quiet, sensitive young girl from Portsmouth becomes an invaluable member of *Mansfield Park* becoming an emblem of all that is pure, good, and natural.

To conclude, the dichotomy between good and evil, authentic and artificial, virtue and vice, are all explored by Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park*. She vividly portrays how the urban spaces, with its moral degradation and unashamed materialism, invade the rural spaces only to overturn its quiet morality. The selfish urban city desires, symbolised by the Crawfords, strive to overtake the simple, rustic country pleasures. It is through Fanny that Austen tries to stave off the worse impacts of urbanization against the backdrop of Industrial Revolution. If the Mary and Henry represent the vice of the urban society, Fanny and Edmund celebrate the virtues of the countryside. In addition, Tom, Maria, and Julia represent the victims of extreme urbanisation and it is through them that Austen tries to highlight the ills of such. In the end, goodness and morality are rewarded while superficiality, vanity, and conceit are punished.

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