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Summary:

The most important decisions young people make include choosing a state in life, establishing a healthy outlook on career and finances, and forming good friendships. At a crossroads in life, these are crucial reflections deserving serious thought.

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“[Mansfield Park] is not so much about a young girl’s search for love as it is a careful study of how not to lose oneself while trying to ‘make it’ in the world.”

Freedom in Fiction: *Mansfield Park*

By Kathryn Hickok

“Wretchedly did [Sir Thomas] feel, that with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters, without...his being acquainted with their character and temper.”

Graduation season begins this weekend. With young Oregonians taking their next steps in life, why not [revisit a classic story](#) about young people setting out into the world of new jobs, independent incomes, first homes, debt, leisure, and love?

Of all Jane Austen’s novels, *Mansfield Park* is probably the most misunderstood and underrated. Unlike Austen’s more popular tales of upper-class English gentry, *Mansfield* does not star a confident young woman from a prominent family. Instead, Fanny Price is a shy teenager, dependent on wealthy relatives, who says little in public and hates attention. *Mansfield* is the only Austen novel in which the full force of a cynical world comes crashing down on an inexperienced teenage girl who seems least equipped to fight it.

The most contemplative of Austen’s works, *Mansfield* is not so much about a young girl’s search for love as it is a careful study of how not to lose oneself while trying to “make it” in the world. Because Fanny is a quiet person, she observes her peers while they hash out among themselves what is important to their lives and how they judge what they encounter. They debate—often acrimoniously—what their career choices should be, how much money they stand to make, what prestige they can earn in the eyes of others, and what are the criteria by which they should evaluate these decisions.

As their friendships unfold, the young adults of *Mansfield Park* don’t appear much different from today’s college students. In the brief window of time in which they settle their ideals, professions, friends, and spouses, they show each other their true colors. They discover they have irreconcilable worldviews. They decide what they can and can’t live with. Their romantic and financial decisions bear fruit.

Henry Crawford and his sister Mary, friends of Fanny’s relatives, excuse their personal shortcomings by their upbringing. Raised without the example of stable, responsible adults, they don’t have the confidence (or the will) to operate from a higher set of principles than convenience, social convention, and popular opinions. They admit they don’t have the capacity to trust others or to be reliable in their relationships. Mary is socially adept and attractive, but her cynical biases against concepts and values beyond her personal experiences are crippling. Her intellectual and romantic clashes with Fanny’s favorite cousin reveal the depth of their different approaches to discerning one’s path in life.



The Crawfords had lacked guidance, but Fanny’s cousins have the opposite problem: Sir Thomas confuses his children’s abiding by conventional rules of behavior with authentic character development. Sir Thomas “had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them.”

When three of his four children become involved in public scandals, Sir Thomas’s pain as a parent comes mostly from the realization that he does not truly know who they are. He knows them from the outside—how they tried to do what he expected of them while in his presence—without being acquainted with their minds, hearts, values, and aspirations. Their choices surprise him.

On the other hand, Fanny, despite her social and financial dependence and shy temperament, knows herself. Lacking self-deception or illusions about what will make her happiest in life, she is truly independent on a personal level. When morally unreliable (but financially eligible) Henry suggests that by becoming involved with him, Fanny could bring out the best in him, she delivers her most famous line: “*We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.*” By calling him to take responsibility for his own conscience, and refusing to make him a romantic “project,” Fanny shows she understands equal relationships. Her refusal to compromise her self-knowledge by being mismatched frees her to seek a healthy relationship. She and the man she really loves are the only young couple in the novel who do not subscribe to, or settle for, a transactional view of friendship.

Mansfield Park and Fanny Price have drawn acerbic criticism from writers who cannot “like” her and wish the novel “came down” on the side of the sparkling, *au courant* Mary rather than the quiet, conservative Fanny. That the characters make modern readers uncomfortable says more about what we value, and what we think about how to treat other people, than perhaps we want to admit. The contrast between Mary and Fanny is exactly what we are meant to see: No matter how clever she is, Mary is tragic because she will not give up her self-centeredness; Fanny is heroic because she won’t be browbeaten into going along with the crowd.

Personal authenticity requires the ability to say no, to find happiness in simple things, to value one’s primary relationships, to resist the urge to hide from oneself in a blur of activities and friendships that mask a restless spirit, and to make choices that resonate with one’s true self. At a crossroads in life—like high school or college graduation, or any new beginning—these are crucial reflections deserving deep thought. The most important decisions a person will ever make involve choosing a state in life, establishing a healthy outlook on one’s career and finances, and loving a good person. Each involves surrounding ourselves with a set of people and activities that either will enable or inhibit us from being who we ought to be. By remaining steadfast under tremendous pressure, Fanny Price proves not to be Austen’s weakest heroine, but her strongest.

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