

# The Social Condition of the 19th Century British Society Depicted in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park Novel

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## Abstract

This study delves into the nuanced portrayal of 19th-century British society within Jane Austen's novel "Mansfield Park," employing Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism as a theoretical lens. Through a meticulous examination of themes such as marriage as a financial transaction, educational disparities, social stratification, and implicit references to the institution of slavery, the research sheds light on the intricate layers of societal divisions and cultural norms prevalent in the Regency era. By analyzing textual excerpts and applying critical scrutiny, this article investigates the multifaceted dynamics of social classes, educational gaps, and the subtle yet significant portrayals of economic entanglements with the slave trade. In utilizing Goldmann's theoretical framework, the study brings to the forefront the interplay between societal structures and cultural representations embedded within Austen's literary work.

Furthermore, this research seeks to unravel the complex web of interactions shaping the narrative, highlighting the interconnectedness of societal elements within "Mansfield Park." By elucidating the subtle nuances and underlying tensions in Austen's portrayal of British society, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural fabric of the time. The exploration of Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism as an analytical tool not only enriches the interpretation of Austen's novel but also underscores the relevance of literary theory in unraveling the intricate layers of meaning inherent in classic literary works.

**Keywords:** Social Condition, Genetic Structuralism, 19th-century British society

## Introduction

English literature has traversed diverse epochs from the Old English era to the postmodern epoch. One notable epoch within this spectrum is the Romantic period, situated in the 19th century (BGuanzon & Miranda, 2023). Spanning from 1785 to 1832, Romantic literature is distinguished by its intimate nature, extensive utilization of emotion, and fascination with supernatural beliefs (Rahman, 2018; Abbas et al., 2023; Jackson-Houlston, 2016).; Emmons, 2005). This period stands out for its innovation, championing the concept that literature should possess spontaneity, imagination, personal essence, and unrestricted expression. Among the luminaries of this era, Jane Austen stands prominently known for her portrayal of the romantic lives of the middle-class populace, offering a vivid depiction of the societal milieu and cultural ethos of her contemporary period.

Suaidi, Rusfandi, and Wilujeng posit that Jane Austen inhabited societal realms where English society exhibited discrimination based on gender, affluence, and aristocratic standing (Burgess, 2018). This societal landscape served as a catalyst for Austen, propelling her to craft literary works that critically scrutinized the prevalent societal norms. Notably, within her novel "Mansfield Park," Austen deftly illustrates the disparities among various social strata, elucidating the tensions and prejudices prevalent during her time.

In her depiction within "Mansfield Park," Austen elucidates the evolving enlightenment concerning social hierarchy in 19th-century England. She articulates that social class significantly impacts one's life, encompassing factors such as education, well-being, and life expectancy. Austen underscores that lower social standing correlates with diminished life prospects, where access to education becomes a privilege confined to higher social echelons. The novel delineates three primary social classes—upper, middle, and lower—with the protagonist, Fanny Price, occupying the lowest rung of societal hierarchy (Suaidi &

Rusfandi, 2016). Fanny's origins, with her mother's marriage to an unprivileged naval officer, contrasts sharply with her aunts' unions to a nobleman and a middle-class individual. Consequently, the novel delves into the interplay of social class dynamics and their ramifications during the 19th century.

Austen's "Mansfield Park," her third novel, debuted in 1814 under Thomas Egerton, comprising 48 chapters. The novel endeavors to illuminate the less explored facets of the author's psyche. Unlike her preceding works, where the central character mirrors a conventional heroine, "Mansfield Park" presents a resolute and self-reliant protagonist—a portrayal emblematic of Austen's envisioned archetype for the era.

The researcher aims to investigate the social condition depicted by Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park*, seeking to comprehend its implications on the protagonist's experiences and circumstances. This study endeavors to explore the impact of this social setting on the central character's life and development within the narrative.

## **Literature Review**

Understanding a 19th-century English novel necessitates a comprehensive grasp of the societal milieu prevalent during that period. This epoch was inaugurated amid England's profound involvement in the Industrial Revolution where England assumed a preeminent industrial role among European nations. The progressive advancements in wealth, politics, society, and economics wrought a transformation in the societal norms of the English populace (Suryanovika & Julhijah, 2018). These shifts and developments engendered considerable alterations across all strata of English society, presenting novel employment opportunities and fields previously inaccessible (Buzard, 2009; Rahman et al., 2019; Elton, 2012).

English society of this era was structured along hierarchical lines, demarcating three distinct social classes: the upper class, the middle class, and the working class. Disparities in wealth, education, labor, and living conditions delineated the distinctions within these social classes (Khan Academy. 2017). Consequently, one's social standing fundamentally determined their quality of life within English society. Notably, each social class inhabited segregated residential areas.

The working class constituted the lowest echelon within the societal hierarchy. Residing predominantly in squalid slums, this class comprised individuals who migrated from rural farming villages or urban areas to undertake industrial labor (Van Aswegen, 2020; Bahçe & Köse, 2017); Rahman, 2019. Engaged in both skilled and unskilled roles within the industrial sector, they grappled with precarious living conditions, striving to subsist amidst poverty and rampant illnesses. Children were often deprived of formal education, and female workers endured particularly adverse circumstances (Jumiati et al., 2021; Junaid et al., 2023; Andini, 2017).

This segment of society primarily comprised unskilled laborers subjected to harsh and unsanitary work environments (social hierarchy in Victorian England). Deprived of access to clean water, adequate nutrition, educational opportunities for their offspring, and proper attire, they frequently resorted to residing on the streets due to limited employment prospects, necessitating extensive travel on foot. Tragically, many individuals within this cohort turned to substances like opium and alcohol as coping mechanisms for their adversities (Edwards, 1965).

Furthermore, as posited by Landow in Syawal, the lower echelons encompassed individuals reliant on external aid and support. Impoverished and orphaned youths relied on charitable contributions for survival (Social Hierarchy of Victorian England). Some women, lacking marketable skills and unable to secure employment, turned to prostitution as a means of livelihood (Syawal, 2020).

In summary, 19th-century England had clear divisions between rich and poor, with the Industrial Revolution changing life dramatically, especially for the working class. They faced tough conditions, lacked basic needs, and struggled to survive. Laws like the Contagious Diseases Act showed how society treated vulnerable groups unfairly. Novels from this time help us see the hardships people faced due to these social divides and how they coped with tough times. Understanding these historical differences helps us see how society's structures impact people's lives.

## **Methods**

This research seeks to delve into the societal landscape portrayed in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, employing a qualitative research approach. Hence, this inquiry utilizes qualitative methodologies to delve deeper into comprehending the social milieu depicted within the novel. Specifically, this study employs textual analysis as its primary method. Consequently, the data garnered from this investigation serves as the foundation for elucidating the previously presented concepts and theories.

Data extraction was conducted from Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to substantiate this study's findings. Prior to data collection, the researcher thoroughly read the novel twice, procuring textual information as the primary data source. Furthermore, the data was sieved through a lens that emphasized events and narratives that held potential as manifestations of anti-racism within the novel.

This research confines its scope to the examination and interpretation of how the societal fabric of 19th-century British society is mirrored in the novel. Employing Goldmann's genetic structuralism approach, the researcher employed a systematic process to analyze the societal reflections encapsulated within the novel. This entailed a structured sequence of steps in the application of genetic structuralism theory. Initially, an exhaustive scrutiny of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* was conducted. Subsequently, the application of genetic structuralism was deployed to analyze the novel in alignment with the study's objectives. Following this, meticulous note-taking ensued, focusing on themes encapsulating the social conditions depicted in the narrative. Ultimately, the synthesis of findings encompassed a comprehensive amalgamation of the review, selection, description, and categorization of elements within the novel.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Jane Austen's literary masterpiece, "*Mansfield Park*," serves as a microcosm reflecting the societal intricacies and cultural nuances prevalent in 19th-century British society. This article employs Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism as a theoretical framework to dissect the multifaceted layers of social stratification, educational divides, marriage as a financial transaction, and indirect allusions to the societal underpinnings related to slavery within the novel. Through an in-depth analysis of textual excerpts and critical evaluation, this study endeavors to illuminate the social and cultural fabric of the Regency era as depicted in Austen's narrative.

A prevalent theme in "*Mansfield Park*" is the portrayal of marriage as a financial transaction, where social status, wealth, and property serve as pivotal determinants in forging matrimonial alliances. Exemplified through textual excerpts, the narrative reflects societal norms where marriage is perceived as a means to secure financial stability, social standing, or advancement.

In this novel, Austen carefully explores the societal order intertwined with economic and social status and its relationship with marriage. The narrative revolves around characters like Miss Ward and Mr. Norris, who grapple with the realities of life and marriage amidst limited personal wealth and societal pressures. The selection of life partners and financial struggles becomes a thematic focus in the characters' lives, reflecting the societal views of that time regarding marriage as a form of financial and social security.

### **Data 1**

“But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them. Miss Ward, at the end of half a dozen years, found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune, and Miss Frances fared yet worse. Miss Ward's match, indeed, when it came to the point, was not contemptible: Sir Thomas being happily able to give his friend an income in the living of Mansfield; and Mr. and Mrs. Norris began their career of conjugal felicity with very little less than a thousand a year.” (Austen, 1814)

The passage specifically focuses on Miss Ward, who, after six years, finds herself compelled to be attached to the Reverend Mr. Norris. Mr. Norris is a friend of her brother-in-law and has little private fortune. Miss Frances, another character mentioned, fares even worse in terms of her marital prospects. However, when Miss Ward's match is finalized, it turns out to be respectable. Sir Thomas, a character in the novel, is able to provide Mr. Norris with a comfortable income by appointing him to a position in the living of Mansfield. As a result, Mr. and Mrs. Norris begin their married life with an income of almost a thousand pounds per year. This passage highlights the social and economic considerations that often played a significant role in the matchmaking and marriage decisions of the characters in Jane Austen's novels. It reflects the importance of financial stability and social standing in the societal norms of that time.

In addition, the novel illustrates the initial impressions and societal expectations concerning beauty, charm, and social interactions within the upper-class society of the Regency era. This portrayal underscores the pragmatic approach to marriage where financial considerations assume paramount importance.

### **Data 2**

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Another crucial theme explored in "Mansfield Park" is the conspicuous educational disparity between the lower-middle class, represented by Fanny Price, and the affluent upper class embodied by the Bertram family. Austen vividly contrasts Fanny's lack of formal education and cultural refinement with the privileged access to intellectual pursuits and refinement enjoyed by the Bertram siblings, particularly Edmund.

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### **Data 3**

"Dear mama, only think, my cousin cannot put the map of Europe together—or my cousin cannot tell the principal rivers in Russia—or, she never heard of Asia Minor—or she does not know the difference between water-colours and crayons!—How strange!—Did you ever hear anything so stupid?"

"My dear," their considerate aunt would reply, "it is very bad, but you must not expect everybody to be as forward and quick at learning as yourself." (Austen, 1814)

The novel emphasizes the societal limitations placed upon individuals from lower social strata, underscoring the disparities in educational opportunities and their implications on societal expectations and biases prevalent in the Regency era.

In addition, the novel explains that Miss Frances married, as the common saying goes, to go against her family's wishes. However, by choosing a marine lieutenant with no education, fortune, or social connections, she did so wholeheartedly. Her choice of marriage is considered highly unfavorable, as selecting a marine lieutenant without educational, financial, or social standing is seen as a difficult or inappropriate choice.

### **Data 4**

"But Miss Frances married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a lieutenant of marines, without education, fortune, or connexions, did it very thoroughly. She could hardly have made a more untoward choice" (Austen, 1814).

The passage describes the marriage of Miss Frances, suggesting that she married, as the common saying goes, to intentionally go against or displease her family. The choice she made in a husband is then detailed — she married a lieutenant of marines who lacks education, fortune, or social connections. The phrase "did it very thoroughly" implies that she went to great lengths to defy her family's wishes. The statement concludes by expressing the opinion that she could hardly have made a more unfavorable or untoward choice in her selection of a husband. This passage highlights the societal expectations and the tension between individual desires and family expectations, particularly in the context of marriage and social status. Furthermore, Austen's "Mansfield Park" subtly explores social stratification concept, evident through the disparity in attire and manners between Fanny and her cousins, Maria and Julia Bertram.

### Data 5

“They were a remarkably fine family, the sons very well-looking, the daughters decidedly handsome, and all of them well-grown and forward of their age, which produced as striking a difference between the cousins in person, as education had given to their address; and no one would have supposed the girls so nearly of an age as they really were” (Austen, 1814).

The narrative portrays the stark differences in physical appearance and education, reflecting the socio-economic divisions inherent in the society depicted within the novel. The delineation of social hierarchy through appearances underscores the societal expectations and class distinctions prevalent in the Regency era.

In addition, "Mansfield Park" does not explicitly discuss slavery, Austen indirectly alludes to the economic ties between England and its colonies through the Bertram family's wealth derived from Antiguan plantations.

### Data 6

“The Honourable John Yates, this new friend, had not much to recommend him beyond habits of fashion and expense, and being the younger son of a lord with a tolerable independence; and Sir Thomas would probably have thought his introduction at Mansfield by no means desirable.” (Austen, 1814)

The narrative subtly hints at the societal implications and economic contexts of the slave trade, illuminating the complex interplay between the English upper class and the exploitation of enslaved individuals. Fanny Price's social position within the Bertram family symbolizes the marginalized, echoing the injustices and social disparities of the time, including those related to slavery.

### Conclusions

Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park," examined through the lens of Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism, offers a profound portrayal of the socio-cultural landscape prevalent in 19th-century British society. The thematic explorations of marriage, education, social stratification, and indirect references to slavery underscore the nuanced societal divisions, cultural norms, and economic entanglements of the Regency era. By employing Goldmann's theoretical framework, this study sheds light on the intricate tapestry of societal structures and cultural representations embedded within Austen's literary canvas.

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