

## *Mansfield Park* Discussion Questions

### Fanny Price

1. Describe Fanny Price. What is your reaction to her? Is she a dreary, shy spoilsport or an admirable heroine? Is this dichotomy Austen's intention? Does she have a sense of humor, like Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse? Does she make mistakes or have delusions as some of Austen's other characters do? In what ways is she isolated?
2. What influence does Fanny's status or lack of status in the Bertram family have on her actions?
3. Does Fanny stay true to her moral convictions throughout the novel? Does she change and develop?
4. Austen writes of Fanny, "Edmund formed her mind." "Her own thoughts and reflections were habitually her best companions." What does this tell us about Fanny's environment? Do Fanny and Edmund complement one another?

### Other Characters

5. **Sir Thomas Bertram:** Describe Sir Thomas. Is he instrumental in the disastrous actions of his children? How? Is he just? A tyrant? Is his presence oppressive?
6. **The Crawfords:** How does Edward respond to Mary? Is she good for him? In what ways is she or is she not? Does Mary remind you of Elizabeth Bennet? How? Compare the family affection between the Crawfords and note how it is missing in the Bertram family. How do Henry and Mary feel about Fanny's virtues? How do they treat her compared to her cousins? What do you think Edmund sees in Mary Crawford? What does Mary see in him? Henry sees himself as a manipulator of others but master of his own emotions. What happens to change this? Why does Henry propose to Fanny?
7. **The Ward Sisters:** Describe the social positions of the three Ward sisters—Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris, and Mrs. Price. How did their marriage decisions affect their lives? How do the sisters treat each other? Does the status of each play a role in this?
8. **Mrs. Norris:** Why is she so disagreeable? How does she act when Sir Thomas is away? Name some of her misguided actions. Compare her to Lady Catherine and Mrs. Elton.
9. Who is the real hero of *Mansfield Park*? Some say it is William Price. Why? Do you agree? What does he represent? What is Edward lacking as a hero?

### Plot and Themes

10. Austen uses two events to further her plot—the play and the visit to Sotherton. What does acting in the play *Lovers' Vows* do to the participants? What makes Edward change his position about being in the play? Why does the play tempt everyone but Fanny? How does the play threaten Sir Thomas's home and authority? What does the play symbolize?

11. How does the visit to Sotherton further the plot and add to our knowledge of the characters? How does it show the conflict between traditional and modern values? What does all the talk of improvements reveal? (Materialism, lack of love, threat to tradition and established order) How does the visit foreshadow what will happen later?
12. Why does Sir Thomas send Fanny to Portsmouth? What does this visit teach her about where her true home is?
13. What does the novel say about marriage? Why did Sir Thomas marry Lady Bertram? Why does Maria tell her father she wants to marry Mr. Rushworth? Why did Fanny refuse Henry Crawford? What kind of a marriage will Fanny and Edward have?
14. Contrast the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* with this sentence from the opening paragraph of *Mansfield Park*: “But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them.”
15. What does this novel say about the aristocracy? Do they train their children to be responsible inheritors? What is the affect of money and materialism?
16. Does this novel have religious overtones? (Note religious language—suffering, redemption, sin, repentance, virtue, temptation, etc.) What are some of the Christian attitudes *Mansfield Park* examines? (Duties of clergy, benevolence, charity, importance of family, prayers, good deeds like adopting Fanny) Who is tempted and what do the temptations reveal about the characters of the people? Is Tom’s repentance and reformation at the end of the novel believable?
17. Lord Chief Justice Mansfield (1705-1793) played a key role in smoothly ending slavery in England, by his famous judgment in Somerset’s Case. Was Austen making a point by the title? Are there other slavery overtones?
18. *Mansfield Park* is considered a mature work. There is a variety of opinion about it. Some believe it is brilliant and bears repeated study. Others find it lacking. What do you think?
19. Lionel Trilling wrote, “Yet *Mansfield Park* is a great novel, its greatness being commensurate with it’s power to offend.” Do you agree? Disagree?