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THE FEMINIST UNDERPINNINGS OF *MANSFIELD PARK*: FANNY PRICE AS AN INTERSECTIONAL HEROINE

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Abstract:

*This paper examines how Fanny Price, the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, reflects the principles of intersectional feminism as conceptualized in the 21st century. Though Austen's era predates contemporary feminist discourse, Fanny's nuanced character and experiences provide an unexpectedly rich ground for discussing issues such as class disparity, gendered expectations, and moral integrity. This analysis argues that Fanny's resilience, ethical steadfastness, and subversion of traditional power structures position her as an early advocate for intersectional values. Through her experiences, we see an alignment with modern feminist ideals, particularly those emphasizing the interplay of gender, class, and systemic marginalization.*

Keywords: *Feminism, Resistance, Male Gaze, Identity, Society, etc.*

Introduction:

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* has been subject to diverse interpretations, but few discussions have centered on its relevance to intersectional feminism. Fanny Price, often dismissed as timid or excessively pious, embodies qualities that resonate with modern feminist ideals. One of which being intersectional feminism, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, that critiques the reduction of women's struggles to a singular axis of oppression, emphasizing the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and other identities. Fanny, a poor and socially marginalized woman, navigates a world rife with systemic inequalities. Her quiet resistance and ethical consistency make her a figure worthy of re-examination through a feminist lens.

This paper seeks to explore how Fanny's experiences and actions align with intersectional feminism, illustrating how Austen's narrative prefigures modern concerns about the intersection of gender and class oppression.

The Framework of Intersectional Feminism:

Intersectionality recognizes that systems of oppression do not operate independently but are interconnected. For instance, a poor woman experiences gendered oppression differently from a wealthy woman, as her class status compounds her vulnerability. The same principle applies to other axes of identity, such as race, sexuality, and disability. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen delves deeply into the intersections of class and gender, portraying how Fanny's low social standing exacerbates the constraints imposed on her as a woman. By analyzing Fanny through this lens, we gain insight into how her experiences anticipate the struggles of modern feminists navigating intersecting oppressions.



Fanny Price as a Marginalized Figure:

Class Oppression and the Politics of Charity:

Fanny's journey begins with her removal from her impoverished family in Portsmouth to live with her wealthy relatives at Mansfield Park. While ostensibly an act of charity, this relocation underscores the power dynamics of class. Fanny's inferior position is emphasized from the outset: she is treated as a dependent and reminded of her lower status at every turn. Lady Bertram's disinterest in Fanny and Mrs. Norris's constant belittlement highlight the ways class prejudice manifests within interpersonal relationships. Fanny's lack of financial independence places her at the mercy of her relatives, a reality that mirrors the economic precarity faced by women in patriarchal societies both past and present. This class-based marginalization upholds the principles of intersectional feminism, which emphasizes the compounded effects of economic inequality on women's lives. Fanny's story serves as a reminder that feminist struggles must address issues of class disparity alongside gender inequality.

Gender Expectations and the Marriage Market:

Regency-era England was a society in which women's value was often measured by their ability to secure advantageous marriages. For Fanny, this expectation is particularly oppressive. Unlike her wealthy cousins Maria and Julia, Fanny lacks the dowry or social standing to attract a desirable suitor. Her dependence on her relatives leaves her vulnerable to their coercion, as exemplified in the pressure to accept Henry Crawford's proposal. Fanny's refusal to marry Henry is a radical act of defiance. Despite the advantages such a match would bring, she prioritizes her integrity and personal values over societal expectations. This resistance aligns with feminist ideals of autonomy and self-determination, highlighting the importance of moral agency in the face of systemic pressures.

Intersectional Challenges in Fanny's Relationships:

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is a nuanced exploration of societal expectations and personal morality, and much of this tension plays out through Fanny Price's relationships with her cousins Maria and Julia Bertram, as well as with Edmund Bertram. These relationships underscore the intersectional challenges faced by Fanny, as she navigates a complex interplay of class, gender, and power dynamics. While Maria and Julia represent privilege within the constraints of patriarchal systems, Edmund embodies both allyship and complicity in perpetuating those systems. This section explores how these interactions illuminate the nuances of privilege, morality, and feminist resistance in Austen's work.

Contrasts with Maria and Julia Bertram:

Maria and Julia Bertram are often seen as foils to Fanny Price, highlighting the differing ways women of varying social positions experience the constraints of their patriarchal society. Maria and Julia, as daughters of Sir Thomas Bertram, are born into wealth and privilege. They enjoy the advantages of refined education, social prominence, and access to prospective suitors who can secure their futures. In contrast, Fanny's lower-class origins render her perpetually marginalized within the Bertram household, relegated to the role of an outsider despite her familial ties. These contrasting positions illustrate how class and gender intersect to shape women's experiences.

Privilege and Conformity:



Maria and Julia's lives are heavily influenced by their father's wealth and social status. This privilege affords them material comfort and the opportunity to pursue advantageous marriages. However, it also imposes a rigid framework of expectations that confines them to performative roles dictated by their gender and class. Maria's marriage to the wealthy but insipid Mr. Rushworth is emblematic of this dynamic. Sir Thomas Bertram, eager to secure his daughter's future and consolidate the family's status, encourages the match despite Maria's evident lack of affection for her suitor. Maria complies, aware that her worth in society is tied to her ability to secure a prosperous marriage. While Maria's decision reflects her entrapment within societal norms, it also underscores her complicity in perpetuating these systems. Unlike Fanny, who resists such pressures, Maria internalizes the values of a patriarchal society that commodifies women. Her ultimate rebellion—engaging in an affair with Henry Crawford—can be seen as a misguided attempt to assert agency, but it results in her social downfall. Julia, though less prominent in the narrative, similarly struggles with societal constraints, as evidenced by her impulsive elopement with Mr. Yates. Both sisters' fates demonstrate that privilege does not shield women from the oppressive forces of patriarchy; rather, it often binds them more tightly to societal expectations.

Fanny's Marginalized Perspective:

Fanny Price, as a marginalized figure within the Bertram household, occupies a unique position that allows her to critique the societal norms Maria and Julia internalize. Unlike her wealthier cousins, Fanny lacks the financial security and social capital to make advantageous decisions within the narrow framework afforded to women of the time. Yet, this very marginalization grants her a clearer perspective on the moral failings of her privileged relatives. Fanny's rejection of Henry Crawford serves as a stark contrast to Maria's willingness to pursue an extramarital affair with him. While Maria is swayed by Henry's charm and sees him as an escape from her unhappy marriage, Fanny recognizes his moral shortcomings and refuses to compromise her principles. This decision is particularly significant given Fanny's lack of power; as a poor dependent, she faces immense pressure to accept Henry's proposal. Her refusal underscores her ethical integrity and moral agency, values that resonate with feminist ideals of self-determination.

Fanny's ability to uphold her principles in the face of societal and familial pressures highlights the importance of internal strength in resisting systemic oppression. Her marginalized position, while a source of vulnerability, also enables her to critique the superficiality and materialism that drive the decisions of her wealthier cousins. In this way, Fanny embodies a form of feminist resistance that challenges not only gender norms but also the class-based hierarchies that perpetuate inequality.

Edmund Bertram and the Male Gaze:

Edmund Bertram, Fanny's cousin and eventual love interest, occupies a complex role in her life. On the one hand, he is one of the few members of the Bertram family who shows genuine kindness to Fanny, advocating for her education and wellbeing. On the other hand, Edmund's behavior often reflects the limitations of his position as a man within a patriarchal society, particularly in his initial infatuation with Mary Crawford. Through Edmund's relationship with Fanny, Austen critiques the male gaze and its tendency to prioritize superficial qualities over substance.

The Male Gaze and Mary Crawford:



Edmund's attraction to Mary Crawford exemplifies the male gaze in its prioritization of charm, beauty, and wit-qualities that Mary possesses in abundance. Despite her morally ambiguous behavior and manipulative tendencies, Mary captivates Edmund with her vivacity and sophistication. His infatuation blinds him to her deeper flaws, including her indifference to moral considerations and her willingness to justify Henry's pursuit of Maria. Edmund's initial preference for Mary over Fanny highlights the societal tendency to undervalue women like Fanny, whose virtues are quieter and less immediately apparent. Fanny's moral integrity, intellectual depth, and capacity for empathy are overshadowed by Mary's superficial allure. This dynamic reflects a broader feminist critique of patriarchal systems that privilege external appearances and social charm over inner qualities.

Fanny's Quiet Resistance:

Fanny's response to Edmund's infatuation with Mary is characterized by quiet endurance rather than overt confrontation. While she disapproves of Mary's behavior and sees her as an unsuitable partner for Edmund, Fanny refrains from openly criticizing her rival. This restraint reflects Fanny's limited agency as a marginalized figure within the Bertram household. However, it also underscores her emotional strength and capacity for self-sacrifice. Rather than seeking to assert her own claims on Edmund, Fanny remains true to her principles, trusting that her virtues will eventually be recognized. Fanny's eventual romantic triumph—winning Edmund's love on her own terms—represents a subtle subversion of traditional power dynamics. Unlike Mary, who seeks to manipulate Edmund through charm and persuasion, Fanny relies on her authenticity and moral consistency. Her perseverance challenges the notion that women must conform to societal expectations or engage in manipulative tactics to achieve personal fulfillment. In this way, Fanny's story aligns with feminist ideals of integrity and self-respect.

The Interplay of Power and Vulnerability:

Fanny's relationships with Maria, Julia, and Edmund reveal the complex interplay of power and vulnerability within patriarchal systems. Maria and Julia, though privileged by wealth and status, are ultimately constrained by societal expectations that reduce women to commodities in the marriage market. Their attempts to assert agency—through Maria's affair and Julia's elopement—result in social ruin, highlighting the limitations of privilege within a patriarchal framework. Fanny, in contrast, demonstrates that true agency lies in the ability to resist societal pressures and uphold one's principles. Her marginalized position grants her a unique perspective that allows her to critique the superficial values of her wealthier cousins. Similarly, her relationship with Edmund challenges traditional notions of romantic fulfillment, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and moral alignment over superficial attraction.

Fanny's Moral Authority as Feminist Resistance:

Rejection of Materialism:

One of Fanny's most striking qualities is her rejection of materialism. In a society that values wealth and status above all, Fanny's refusal to marry Henry Crawford is a bold assertion of her principles. This decision, though met with disapproval from her relatives, reflects a deep commitment to personal integrity. From an intersectional perspective, Fanny's rejection of Henry can be seen as a critique of capitalist and patriarchal systems that commodify women. By prioritizing her values over material gain, Fanny embodies a feminist ethic that challenges societal norms.



Advocacy for Empathy and Care:

Fanny's relationship with her younger sister Susan highlights her capacity for empathy and care. By mentoring Susan and helping her navigate the oppressive environment of Portsmouth, Fanny demonstrates the transformative power of solidarity. This ethic of care aligns with feminist principles that emphasize community and collective upliftment. Fanny's actions illustrate how marginalized individuals can resist systemic oppression not only by advocating for themselves but also by empowering others. This commitment to empathy and care resonates with contemporary feminist movements that prioritize intersectional solidarity.

Broader Social Critiques in *Mansfield Park*:

Colonialism and Economic Inequality:

While *Mansfield Park* primarily focuses on class and gender, it also hints at the broader systemic inequalities underpinning Regency society. The Bertram family's wealth, derived from their Antigua estate, implicates them in the exploitative practices of colonialism. Fanny's moral superiority, contrasted with the Bertrams' complicity in these systems, invites readers to question the ethical foundations of wealth and privilege. Though Austen does not directly address issues of race or colonialism, an intersectional reading of the text must consider these dimensions. By critiquing the Bertrams' moral shortcomings, Austen indirectly highlights the interconnectedness of class, gender, and colonial exploitation.

Modern Relevance of Fanny Price's Story:

Fanny Price, the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, has often been viewed as an unassuming and passive character, particularly when compared to Austen's more dynamic heroines like Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse. However, when examined through the lens of modern feminist thought—particularly intersectional feminism—Fanny's quiet resilience and moral steadfastness take on a powerful contemporary relevance. Her journey offers profound lessons for today's feminist movement, especially in addressing the struggles of marginalized women navigating intersecting oppressions such as class, gender, and systemic inequality. Fanny Price exemplifies values that challenge societal expectations while emphasizing empathy, integrity, and community as transformative tools for achieving justice.

Resilience in the Face of Systemic Oppression:

Fanny's story resonates deeply with the experiences of women who face multiple layers of oppression in their daily lives. Her journey as a poor relation brought to live with her wealthy relatives at Mansfield Park places her in a precarious position. Although ostensibly "rescued" from poverty, Fanny is consistently reminded of her inferior status. From Mrs. Norris's overt cruelty to Lady Bertram's neglectful indifference, Fanny endures a lifetime of microaggressions and systemic dismissal. In contemporary terms, Fanny's position mirrors that of individuals who experience intersectional discrimination. For example, women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often find themselves excluded from spaces of privilege and power, facing both overt and subtle barriers to inclusion. Like Fanny, they may be tolerated in these spaces but are rarely celebrated or empowered. Fanny's ability to endure these challenges with grace and strength highlights the resilience required of marginalized individuals in navigating inequitable systems. Fanny's marginalization also emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing class disparities within feminist movements. In today's context, feminist discourse often risks being dominated by privileged voices that fail to adequately represent the concerns of working-class or



economically marginalized women. Fanny's story reminds us that a truly inclusive feminism must account for the ways in which class intersects with gender to shape women's experiences of oppression.

Quiet Resistance and the Subversion of Expectations:

One of the most striking aspects of Fanny's character is her method of resistance. Unlike more overtly assertive feminist heroines, Fanny's defiance is quiet and understated, yet profoundly impactful. Her refusal to marry Henry Crawford, despite immense pressure from her family, is a pivotal act of resistance that underscores her commitment to personal integrity. Fanny recognizes Henry's moral shortcomings and refuses to compromise her values for material gain or social approval, even at the cost of alienating her relatives.

This form of quiet resistance is particularly relevant in contemporary feminist movements, which often celebrate loud, visible activism. While public protests, outspoken advocacy, and viral social media campaigns are critical tools for effecting change, Fanny's story reminds us that activism can also take quieter, less confrontational forms. Resisting systemic pressures through personal choices, maintaining ethical consistency, and upholding one's principles are equally vital components of feminist resistance.

Fanny's approach challenges the notion that power must always be wielded loudly or visibly to be effective. In today's world, where women in marginalized positions may lack the platform or privilege to engage in visible activism, Fanny's story offers a model for how quiet perseverance and moral clarity can serve as forms of resistance. For instance, women working in low-wage or precarious jobs may resist exploitation not through public outcry but through daily acts of solidarity, persistence, and refusal to accept dehumanizing treatment. Fanny's story celebrates the courage required for such acts, affirming their importance in the broader feminist struggle.

Prioritizing Empathy and Community:

Fanny's character is marked by her deep sense of empathy and care for others, qualities that align with feminist values emphasizing solidarity and collective upliftment. Despite her own marginalization, Fanny consistently demonstrates concern for the wellbeing of those around her, particularly her younger sister, Susan. Fanny's mentorship of Susan—offering her support, guidance, and the opportunity to join her at Mansfield Park—highlights the transformative power of empathy in fostering resilience and breaking cycles of oppression.

In contemporary feminist discourse, the ethic of care exemplified by Fanny is increasingly recognized as a critical component of social justice work. Feminist scholars and activists have argued that movements for equity must prioritize not only individual empowerment but also the creation of supportive, inclusive communities. Fanny's actions underscore the importance of investing in others and building networks of care, particularly for those who, like Susan, face significant barriers to opportunity.

Fanny's emphasis on empathy and community also reflects the need for intersectional feminism to prioritize relationships over individualism. Modern capitalist societies often valorize self-reliance and competition, but Fanny's story reminds us that true empowerment comes from mutual support and collective growth. Her efforts to uplift Susan mirror the work of grassroots feminists who focus on community-building and solidarity as essential tools for dismantling systemic inequalities.



Ethical Consistency as a Feminist Value:

Fanny's unwavering commitment to her principles is one of her most defining characteristics, and it holds profound relevance for contemporary feminism. In a world where systemic pressures often encourage compromise or moral ambivalence, Fanny's ethical consistency serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of staying true to one's values. Her refusal to accept Henry Crawford's proposal, despite the social and financial advantages it offers, demonstrates her unwillingness to prioritize material gain over integrity.

This emphasis on ethical consistency aligns with feminist critiques of systems that commodify human relationships and prioritize profit over people. Fanny's rejection of Henry can be seen as a rejection of the patriarchal and capitalist values that underpin Regency society—a stance that resonates with modern feminist critiques of neoliberalism. By refusing to participate in a system that devalues women and prioritizes wealth above morality, Fanny challenges the structures of power that perpetuate inequality.

In today's feminist movements, the importance of ethical consistency is evident in efforts to hold individuals and institutions accountable for their actions. From demanding transparency in corporate practices to advocating for policies that prioritize equity over profit, feminists continue to emphasize the need for integrity in the fight for justice. Fanny's story serves as a reminder that maintaining one's principles, even in the face of immense pressure, is a vital component of this work.

A Model for Inclusive Feminism:

Perhaps most importantly, Fanny Price's story serves as a model for an inclusive and intersectional feminism that values resilience, empathy, and ethical clarity. Her journey highlights the need to center marginalized voices within feminist discourse, acknowledging the unique challenges faced by those who navigate intersecting oppressions. Fanny's ability to critique the superficial values of her wealthier cousins while remaining true to her principles illustrates the transformative power of intersectional analysis in understanding and addressing systemic inequality.

In a modern context, Fanny's story inspires feminists to envision a world that values integrity, community, and care over materialism and superficial success. Her resilience in the face of systemic oppression, her quiet but impactful resistance, and her commitment to uplifting others reflect the core principles of an inclusive feminist movement. By reexamining Fanny through this lens, readers are encouraged to think critically about their own roles in creating a more equitable and just society.

Conclusion

To conclude, though Jane Austen wrote *Mansfield Park* long before the advent of feminist theory, Fanny Price's story resonates deeply with the principles of intersectional feminism. Her navigation of class and gender oppression, coupled with her steadfast moral agency, positions her as a proto-feminist figure. Through Fanny, Austen critiques the systemic inequalities of her time, offering a narrative that continues to inspire and challenge modern readers. In Fanny Price, we find a heroine who defies societal expectations not through rebellion but through quiet resilience. Her story reminds us that feminism is not a monolith but a multifaceted movement that must address the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression. By reexamining Fanny through the lens



of intersectional feminism, we gain a deeper appreciation for her strength and the enduring relevance of Austen's work.

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