



The Differences in Treatment Received by the Upper and Lower Classes of the 19th Century British Society Shown in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park

Inka Khairunnisa¹, Fathu Rahman², M. Amir P³

^{1,2,3}English Department Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: This study employs Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism approach to dissect the treatment disparities experienced by the upper and lower echelons of society within Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park." Utilizing textual analysis, the research scrutinizes instances delineating differential treatment, including condescension and exclusion, towards characters belonging to distinct social strata. The findings delineate the prevalent class-based prejudices, revealing the societal dichotomy ingrained within the novel's narrative. In examining the treatment disparities within Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park" through Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism approach, this study delves into the intricacies of societal divisions and class-based prejudices. Goldmann's method allows for a nuanced exploration of the upper and lower echelons of society as depicted in the novel, revealing subtle nuances of condescension and exclusion. Through meticulous textual analysis, the research identifies instances that illuminate the societal dichotomy present in the narrative. By applying this theoretical framework, the study not only brings to light the inherent class biases but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between social structures and individual experiences within the world Austen crafted in "Mansfield Park."

KEY WORDS: Genetic Structuralism, Social Class Disparity, Upper and Lower Classes, 19th Century British Society.

1. INTRODUCTION

English literature has navigated through diverse epochs, ranging from the ancient Old English period to the more contemporary postmodern era. One particularly notable era within this vast spectrum remains the Romantic period, spanning from 1785 to 1832 (Burgess, 2018). Romantic literature, distinctive for its emphasis on intimacy, emotional depth, and fascination with the supernatural, was marked by a fervent pursuit of spontaneity, imagination, personal expression, and unrestricted creativity (Lovecraft, 2013; McClelland, 2012; Crawford, 2014). Among the luminaries of this period, Jane Austen stands out for her portrayal of the romantic lives of the middle class, providing a vivid depiction of societal norms and cultural values of her time. According to Suaidi, Rusfandi, and Wilujeng, Austen inhabited a society marked by gender discrimination, wealth disparities, and aristocratic privilege. This societal backdrop prompted Austen to create literary works that critically examined prevailing norms (Suaidi & Rusfandi, 2016). Particularly, in her novel "Mansfield Park," Austen skillfully illustrates the disparities among social classes, shedding light on the tensions and biases prevalent during her era.

Austen's depiction in "Mansfield Park" unveils the changing perceptions regarding social hierarchy in 18th-century England. She underscores the significant impact of social class on one's life, encompassing aspects like education, well-being, and life prospects. Austen highlights that lower social standing often correlates with limited opportunities, where access to education becomes a privilege confined to the upper classes. The novel portrays three primary social classes—upper, middle, and lower—with the protagonist, Fanny Price, situated at the bottom of the societal ladder (Suryanovika & Julhijah, 2018). Fanny's background, originating from her mother's marriage to an underprivileged naval officer, starkly contrasts with her aunts' unions to a nobleman and a middle-class individual. Consequently, the novel delves into the intricate dynamics of social class and their repercussions during the 18th century.

Austen's "Mansfield Park," released in 1814 under Thomas Egerton, comprises 48 chapters. The novel aims to shed light on previously unexplored facets of the author's mindset. Diverging from her earlier works where the central character mirrored a typical heroine, "Mansfield Park" introduces a steadfast and self-reliant protagonist—a portrayal emblematic of Austen's envisioned archetype for that era.



In addition, the researcher seeks to delve into the contrasting treatment between the upper and lower classes in 19th-century British society, as portrayed in Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park." The study aims to comprehend the implications of these differences on the protagonist's experiences and circumstances. Specifically, the research endeavors to explore how the societal setting influences the central character's life and development within the narrative.

2. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding a 19th-century British novel demands a deep comprehension of the societal landscape prevalent during that era. This period commenced amidst England's pivotal engagement in the Industrial Revolution, where England emerged as a leading industrial force among European nations (Koistinen, 2016; Syawal et al., 2022; Ramadhan et al., 2022). The forward strides in wealth, politics, society, and economics triggered a significant shift in the societal norms of the English populace (Khan Academy 2017). These changes brought about substantial transformations across all layers of English society, unveiling new prospects for employment and fields previously inaccessible.

The English society of this time was organized along hierarchical lines, distinctly marking three social classes: the upper, middle, and working classes. The differences in wealth, education, work, and living conditions delineated these social divisions (Savage et al., 2013; Anyon, 2017; Rahman & Weda, 2018). Consequently, one's societal position inherently shaped their livelihood within English society, with each class residing in segregated residential areas.

At the bottom rung of the societal ladder lay the working class, predominantly dwelling in dismal slums. Comprising individuals migrating from rural villages or urban centers to engage in industrial labor, they grappled with dire living conditions, combating poverty and widespread illnesses. Children were often deprived of formal education, while female workers endured particularly challenging circumstances.

This sector primarily constituted unskilled laborers subjected to harsh working environments. Lacking access to basic necessities like clean water, adequate nutrition, and educational opportunities for their children, they often resorted to street living due to limited job prospects, necessitating extensive travel on foot (Edwards, 1965).

Furthermore, according to Landow in Syawal, the lower echelons relied heavily on external assistance. Impoverished youths and women without viable skills turned to charitable aid for survival, with some women resorting to prostitution as a means of sustenance (Syawal 2020).

In essence, 19th-century England bore evident divisions between affluent and impoverished classes, with the Industrial Revolution dramatically reshaping lives, particularly for the working class. Enduring harsh conditions, lacking basic necessities, and struggling to survive, this class faced the brunt of societal disparities. Legislation like the Contagious Diseases Act underscored societal unfairness towards vulnerable groups. Literature from this era sheds light on the adversities faced due to these social divides, revealing how people navigated challenging circumstances. Understanding these historical discrepancies offers insight into the profound impact of societal structures on individual lives.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative approach was adopted, emphasizing textual analysis of passages delineating treatment disparities between social classes in "Mansfield Park." Raw data were extracted from the novel, focusing on instances illustrating differential treatment and class-based prejudices. Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism framework guided the systematic analysis and interpretation of these excerpts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The societal hierarchy depicted in Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park" encapsulates intricate nuances of class distinctions prevalent in 19th-century England. The upper echelons' attitudes and behaviors toward individuals from the lower strata underscore pervasive class-based prejudices. This research delves into elucidating the dichotomy in treatment through instances of condescension and exclusion, employing Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism as an analytical framework.

The novel portrays instances where the upper class exhibits condescending attitudes toward individuals from lower social strata. Characters, notably the Bertram family, manifest patronizing behavior towards Fanny Price, mocking her lack of education and knowledge. Such instances serve as poignant reflections of the prevailing societal norms, reinforcing the entrenched class distinctions.



Data 1

"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).

In the passage above, the Bertram sisters showcase how the upper class viewed Fanny Price, their cousin from a lower social standing. They mock Fanny's lack of knowledge about geography and art, expressing surprise and disdain at what they perceive as her ignorance. Their astonishment that she doesn't know about Europe's map or the difference between watercolors and crayons highlights their belief in their own superiority due to education and upbringing, reinforcing the idea that lower classes are inherently less knowledgeable.

Even when the aunt tries to soften the situation, she indirectly upholds the societal divide. She acknowledges Fanny's learning gaps but implies that not everyone can be as quick to learn, hinting that Fanny's lack of knowledge is an inherent trait. This conversation vividly portrays the condescension and dismissal faced by lower classes, showcasing how the upper class belittled and marginalized those from different social standings, perpetuating divides based on education and social status.

In another passage, Sir Thomas Bertram explicitly states that he does not want to discuss "guilt and misery" or topics he finds distasteful. He aims to quickly shift attention away from such unpleasant topics and return to a more comfortable state, asserting that everyone who is not entirely at fault can be restored to a tolerable level of comfort. This statement reflects a condescending attitude toward the issues and suffering that lower classes may experience, considering them as topics unworthy of discussion or further consideration.

Data 2

"Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest. My Fanny, indeed, at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of everything. She must have been a happy creature in spite of all that she felt, or thought she felt, for the distress of those around her. She had sources of delight that must force their way. She was returned to Mansfield Park, she was useful, she was beloved; she was safe from Mr. Crawford; and when Sir Thomas came back she had every proof that could be given in his then melancholy state of spirits, of his perfect approbation and increased regard; and happy as all this must make her, she would still have been happy without any of it, for Edmund was no longer the dupe of Miss Crawford" (Austen, 1814).

In the passage above, there is an element of condescension towards lower-class concerns. Sir Thomas Bertram dismisses the topics of "guilt and misery" as odious and expresses impatience to move away from such unpleasant subjects. His focus is on restoring everyone, whom he considers "not greatly in fault themselves," to tolerable comfort. This implies a judgmental attitude, suggesting that the issues causing guilt and misery are not significant or deserving of extended consideration.

Moreover, Sir Thomas's assertion that his niece, Fanny, "must have been happy in spite of everything," despite the distress around her, reflects a certain condescension. The implication is that Fanny's happiness is due to factors that Sir Thomas deems appropriate or significant, such as her return to Mansfield Park, her usefulness, and being safe from Mr. Crawford. The passage suggests a hierarchy of concerns, where the distress of those around Fanny is downplayed, and her sources of delight are prioritized based on Sir Thomas's judgment. Overall, the passage illustrates a dismissive attitude towards the struggles and concerns of the lower classes, with a focus on maintaining a sense of comfort and happiness within the upper-class context.

Fanny Price, the protagonist from a lower social standing, experiences exclusion from significant social events, exemplified by her omission from theatrical preparations. Her emotional turmoil, stemming from observing the evolving relationships between upper-class characters, illustrates the constraints faced by individuals from lower strata in asserting themselves within social constructs.



On the other occasion, Mrs. Norris attempts to compliment Fanny Price's attire by stating that a woman can never be too fine when dressed in all white. However, in trying to give this compliment, Mrs. Norris indirectly implies that Fanny Price's clothing resembles something suitable for someone from a lower social class. The emphasis on "perfectly proper" and the comparison to Fanny Price, who comes from a less financially affluent background, reflects the subtle yet significant class distinctions prevalent in the society depicted in the novel. This portrayal highlights condescending attitudes and the tendency to underestimate or belittle those from lower social classes that often characterize the relationships between characters in Jane Austen's works.

Data 3

"The new dress that my uncle was so good as to give me on my cousin's marriage. I hope it is not too fine; but I thought I ought to wear it as soon as I could, and that I might not have such another opportunity all the winter. I hope you do not think me too fine."

"A woman can never be too fine while she is all in white. No, I see no finery about you; nothing but what is perfectly proper. Your gown seems very pretty. I like these glossy spots. Has not Miss Crawford a gown something the same?" (Austen, 1814).

In this passage from "Mansfield Park," Fanny Price, a character from a lower social class, is expressing gratitude for a new dress given to her by her uncle on the occasion of her cousin's marriage. Fanny acknowledges the perceived opulence of the dress and expresses a concern about being perceived as too fine. Mrs. Norris, the responder, exemplifies condescension towards Fanny and lower social classes. Mrs. Norris's response is dismissive of Fanny's genuine concern. She assures Fanny that a woman can never be too fine while dressed in all white, attempting to downplay any notion of extravagance. Mrs. Norris's comments, such as "I see no finery about you; nothing but what is perfectly proper," convey a condescending attitude by suggesting that Fanny's worries about being too fine are unfounded. The implication that Fanny's dress is merely "perfectly proper" may be interpreted as subtly patronizing, reinforcing the social hierarchy. Furthermore, Mrs. Norris extends her condescension by comparing Fanny's dress to Miss Crawford's, a character of higher social standing. By asking if Miss Crawford has a gown something the same, Mrs. Norris not only trivializes Fanny's concerns but also emphasizes the distinction between Fanny's lower status and Miss Crawford's higher status, using clothing as a marker of social class. This passage reflects the prevalent condescension and class consciousness present in the society depicted in "Mansfield Park."

Fanny Price, the protagonist from a lower social standing, experiences exclusion from significant social events, exemplified by her omission from theatrical preparations. Her emotional turmoil, stemming from observing the evolving relationships between upper-class characters, illustrates the constraints faced by individuals from lower strata in asserting themselves within social constructs.

Furthermore, Austen also delves into the internal conflict of the character, grappling with a sudden revelation that seems to challenge the consistency and integrity of another, specifically, Edmund. The passage unfolds with a sense of disbelief and consternation as the protagonist reflects on Edmund's unexpected decision to engage in a particular activity despite his prior objections, which were both just and public. The narrator delves into the character's contemplation, exploring the emotional turmoil spurred by doubts and the unsettling realization that Miss Crawford, another character, may have played a pivotal role in influencing Edmund's actions. As the character grapples with these revelations, a sense of melancholy and inner turmoil pervades, emphasizing the intricate interplay of emotions and moral dilemmas central to the unfolding narrative.

Data 4

"To be acting! After all his objections—objections so just and so public! 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. The doubts and alarms as to her own conduct, which had previously distressed her, and which had all slept while she listened to him, were become of little consequence now" (Austen, 1814).



In Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park," a character, Fanny Price, feels deeply upset when she notices Edmund Bertram, from the upper class, joining a social activity he had previously opposed. This inconsistency in Edmund's behavior, especially as he participates alongside a socially esteemed woman, Miss Crawford, deeply troubles Fanny. She feels betrayed and puzzled by this stark difference in treatment based on social standing.

The passage highlights how individuals from higher social classes often had more leeway in deviating from societal norms, while those from lower classes faced stricter expectations. Fanny's distress over the contrast in Edmund's actions vividly portrays the unequal treatment and societal constraints individuals from different social strata experienced in 19th-century British society. In addition, the narration below illustrates how society at that time looked down upon the lower social class and expected them to improve themselves through education or good fortune. While not directly addressing the exclusion from social activities, it reflects a superior attitude that can limit the involvement of the lower class in social life.

Data 5

“In this world the penalty is less equal than could be wished; but without presuming to look forward to a juster appointment hereafter, we may fairly consider a man of sense, like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret: vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness, in having so requited hospitality, so injured family peace, so forfeited his best, most estimable, and endeared acquaintance, and so lost the woman whom he had rationally as well as passionately loved” (Austen, 1814).

As we can see above, the narrator reflects on the consequences that characters like Henry Crawford, a man of sense and social standing, may face in their lives. The focus is not explicitly on lower-class exclusion, but there is an implicit acknowledgment of the societal expectations and consequences for those who deviate from social norms. The passage suggests that individuals, even those with a degree of sense and intelligence like Henry Crawford, may incur a heavy personal cost for their actions.

In the context of lower-class exclusion from social activities, this passage indirectly points to the idea that societal expectations and norms are rigid, and deviations from them can lead to personal suffering. While it does not directly discuss the lower class, the social structure and expectations described in the novel would likely extend to those of lower social standing. The emphasis on self-reproach, regret, and wretchedness suggests a societal framework that enforces conformity, possibly leading to the exclusion or marginalization of individuals who don't adhere to established norms, including those from the lower social class.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of treatment disparities between social classes within "Mansfield Park" illuminates the societal dichotomy prevalent in 19th-century England. The novel serves as a testament to the enduring impact of class-based prejudices and their intricate manifestations in interpersonal interactions, contributing to a deeper understanding of societal constructs and their ramifications. Furthermore, the exploration of treatment disparities within "Mansfield Park" not only sheds light on the societal dichotomy in 19th-century England but also underscores the timeless relevance of these themes. Jane Austen's astute portrayal of class-based prejudices serves as a mirror reflecting the enduring complexities of social structures and their implications on individual lives. By delving into the intricacies of interpersonal interactions, the novel invites readers to critically examine the subtle yet powerful ways in which class distinctions permeate various aspects of society. The analysis, therefore, not only enhances our comprehension of the historical context within which Austen wrote but also prompts a broader reflection on the contemporary echoes of class-based biases, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of societal constructs and their lasting ramifications.

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