



Mansfield Park (with Original Illustrations by C.E. Brock)

Jane Austen

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Mansfield Park, although certainly regarded as a part of the canon of English literature, is often considered to be the weakest, least dazzling of Austen's novels. Without the witty sparkle of *Pride and Prejudice* or the gothic indulgence of *Northanger Abbey*, it has struggled at times to match the popularity of her other titles. But oh, what a treat those who pass over *Mansfield Park* are missing. Certainly, it is the most disturbing and perhaps the least superficially pleasing of Austen's output but it has rewards aplenty for the careful reader.

Mansfield Park, home of the affluent Bertram family, takes in a young poor relation with the overt intention of giving her the advantages of a good education and good connections while preserving her sense of gratitude and subservience. Fanny, the haplessly lucky chosen beneficiary of such benevolence is uprooted from friends, home, family and all that is familiar to take up residence in the grand house with her grand relations. Austen sets Fanny up as the heroine, designed to evoke the sympathy of the reader: this is a challenge for a modern audience, many of whom will find her weak and too self-deprecating to be genuinely engaging. And similarly, the sins and deficiencies in disposition and feeling with which Austen gifts brother and sister, Mary and Henry Crawford, may seem not so damning today as Austen intended. This however, does little to detract from the overall value of the novel itself. The relationship between the Bertram family and its colonial role (their wealth derives from sugar plantations in Antigua) is only hinted at overtly, but beautifully explored through the metaphorical position of *Mansfield* as the centre of all that is English. Similarly, contemporary values regarding manners, position, influence and identity are gently rolled out for the reader through the evolving relationship between the Bertrams and their acquaintances and within the family itself. And yet, with all this meat beneath the surface, there is still a gentle and touching domestic love story, which evolves over the course of the novel as the more passionate, less fatalistic engagements and attachments of side characters wax and wane.

Mansfield Park is a masterpiece of English manners, of Englishness and of empire.

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