

Summaries of Jane Austen's six novels

3. *MANSFIELD PARK*

(Begun 1811; published 1814)

A shy young girl named Fanny Price comes to live with her rich uncle and aunt, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. Fanny's mother, unlike her sister Lady Bertram, married beneath her, sharing her life with a Marines lieutenant who drinks heavily. Fanny's other aunt, the manipulative Mrs. Norris, likes to think she manages matters at Mansfield Park, the Bertrams' estate, and performs this role both while based at the Parsonage, as the clergyman's wife, and subsequently as a widow, housed in the village by Sir Thomas. The Bertram daughters, Maria and Julia, are girls of no discernible quality. The elder son, Tom, seems self-indulgent but the younger son, Edmund, who is planning to be a clergyman, is a good-hearted youth. He alone takes the trouble to make Fanny feel welcome in her splendid new home.

Sir Thomas leaves Mansfield Park to inspect his properties abroad. Henry and Mary Crawford make their entrance into society while Sir Thomas is away. The brother and sister soon establish themselves within the Mansfield Park social circle. Henry is flirtatious with both the Bertram daughters while Mary focuses her attention on Tom before moving on to Edmund, although the younger brother's genuine vocation as a clergyman

does not appeal to her. Fanny watches the Crawfords' behaviour with pain, not quite aware of her own warm feelings for Edmund.

It is suggested that the group should dabble in amateur dramatics but Edmund and Fanny are horrified at the idea of acting in a play about romantic entanglements. After some time, Maria and Henry, Mary and a reluctant Edmund rehearse some scenes with one another, and Fanny is put under pressure to participate but Sir Thomas's sudden return curtails the whole production.

Since Henry Crawford has not declared his love, Maria is married to her somewhat dull fiancé, Rushworth, and leaves Mansfield Park for London. The Crawfords and the Bertrams continue their friendship and it seems likely that Edmund will propose to Mary, a possibility which upsets Fanny without her knowing why. In the meantime, Henry Crawford has, for his own amusement, switched his romantic focus from Maria to Fanny. After Fanny's brother visits Mansfield Park, Henry helps young William to gain a promotion in the Navy and then actually proposes to Fanny, presuming he will be in favour with her. Her uncle is angrily disappointed that Fanny refuses such a wealthy man, and she soon finds herself back staying with her parents in their overcrowded little house in Portsmouth.

Henry comes to see Fanny at her parents' house and tries to propose again; he appears to be genuinely in love with her now, but must take his leave. Fanny receives written encouragement from Mary about the wisdom of accepting her brother's proposal. Before long, however, life

back at Mansfield Park takes a sudden dramatic turn with a variety of unwelcome events. Tom Bertram has had a drunken fall and is very ill; the fickle Henry elopes with the married Maria, and her sister Julia elopes with Yates, Tom's friend. The Bertram family's great distress at all these events means that Fanny is recalled to Mansfield Park along with her younger sister Susan. She discovers that a sorrowful Edmund has finally come to realise that Mary is as unscrupulous as her brother. Maria and Henry eventually split, and the disgraced Maria and her aunt, Mrs. Norris, go off to live together abroad. After some time, Julia and Yates find their way back into favour with the family. Susan is pleased to be taken into service with the Bertrams and Edmund eventually marries his devoted Fanny, to the great happiness of both. Edmund later gains the opportunity to take over the parsonage at Mansfield, giving the happy couple a beloved home of their own.