

# Mansfield park: movie characters analysis

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Jane Austen hasn't gotten the best reputation over the years. A lot of people, especially those who have never read her novels, think of her books as wordy, complicated, and boring. However, these people are just plain wrong. Austen's writing is full of social commentary, making fun of things that her contemporaries took for granted as just a part of life. She deals with her own life and that of her characters with a witty confidence that was unusual for her time.

Austen shares these qualities with the main character of the film based on her novel, *Mansfield Park*. This is a British-made historical fiction film, set in the English countryside around the late 17- to early 1800s. This film is about a young girl named Fanny, born to a poor family with rich relatives. Fanny is sent to live with these relatives, who don't always treat her very well. She has four cousins (two girls and two boys), and is watched over by her uncle Sir Thomas, his wife the Lady Bertram, and her Aunt Norris. Fanny deals with all of these people (unpleasant in different ways), and handles many trials with wit and dignity before finally ending up with her cousin Edmund, who she has loved with since she arrived there as a child.

Like all Austen stories, *Mansfield Park* contains many characters with complex relationships and isn't easily summarized. However, all of these characters are meant to show us something about human nature and ourselves. In this film, Fanny shows us that following your heart and doing the right thing will usually turn out well. Lady Bertram is the impersonation of sloth, and Mrs. Norris is the Martha of the story, harsh, worrisome, and overly frugal. Through each of these characters, we are shown something about ourselves, as well as something about society.

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One political aspect infused into this film is the issue of slavery. It is mentioned briefly in the book but is not emphasized. In the movie, however, it is more of a central plot line. This issue is portrayed as a prime point of disagreement between Sir Thomas and his eldest son, Tom. Sir Thomas has, we are led to believe, at least one plantation in Antigua that is run on slave labor. Tom, however, hates slavery. Toward the end of the movie, we see Fanny flip through a notebook of his full of sketches of the horrible treatment the slaves received at the hands of the white masters, including his own father. Austen wrote her novel as more of a humorous critique of (then) modern times, but the filmmakers chose to take this relatively small part of the book and expand upon it. The exact year the film takes place is not mentioned, but it was becoming more and more of an issue during that period. The Slave Trade Act was passed in 1807, only years before Mansfield Park was published. So I believe we can reasonably assume this upheaval would have definitely had an impact on families like the Bertrams. At the end of the film, it is revealed that Sir Thomas gave up his “ interests” in Antigua in favor of tobacco, so it stands to reason that Tom convinced his father to abandon the slave plantations they owned there.

One cinematic device used in this film at several key points is narration. It is usually employed to explain simply a sequence of events that is important to the plot, but not enough to warrant the time it would take to act it out for the audience. This adds to the film by reinforcing the point of view, keeping the film moving at a good pace, and focusing the audience’s attention on what the filmmakers want to emphasize.

Fanny provides these narratives, which are taken from her letters to her younger sister, Suzie. One unique aspect of these narratives is that Fanny looks into the camera while giving them. The sequences alternate between Fanny and the event she is describing, with her voice over it all. Breaking the imaginary window between the audience and the actors isn't used very frequently in film or plays, and is usually discouraged. The way this is used in the film, however, helps draw in the viewer. We feel a sort of comradery with Fanny, and it makes the story feel more real.

The first instance of Fanny's narration occurs near the beginning of the film. It starts as Fanny's first letter to Suzie, where she describes her new family and continues a story they shared. The scene then transitions to her as a young lady, reading some of her writings to her cousin Edmund. The narration help smooth the transition of the scene, as well as giving the best example of the use of narration to skip ahead in the story to a more important part. Seeing Fanny as she grew up isn't really necessary to the story, and obviously it isn't really possible to put her entire childhood in this film. In this sequence in particular, the narration adds to the continuity of the visual storyline.

The second and third narratives occur about 20 and 45 minutes into the film, respectively. Again, they provide a way to speed through some less important story points while still letting you know how Fanny feels about those events.

The second narration also gives a prime example of using these narrations to focus the viewer's attention on what the filmmakers want to emphasize.

During this narrative, Fanny kind of breezes over the death of Aunt Norris' husband. In the characters' lives, this probably would have caused a fairly major upheaval. However, in terms of the storyline, his death isn't as important as its effects on Fanny. As a result of her husband's death, Aunt Norris decides to move in permanently with the Bertrams. Aunt Norris is the least pleasant to Fanny, and frequently treats her as more of a servant than her own niece. So, even though the death of a family member is obviously significant, the filmmakers, through the use of the narration, downplay this event and instead emphasize its effects.

The fourth and final narration is at the very end of the film, and is used to sum up the conclusion of the film's events. Fanny gives a brief description of how each person fared. She herself ended up with Edmund, whom she had loved since she was a child. Her younger sister came to live with the Bertrams, and the less savory characters got what they had coming to them by way of inconvenient or unpleasant situations. Fanny's voiceover does a nice job of bringing to a close the various storylines. As Fanny concludes, " It all could have turned out differently, I suppose, but it didn't."

Through the use of narration in this film, the audience is given an insight into the life and thoughts of Fanny. We are shown what she (and the filmmakers) considers to be the important events while skipping over the less important parts. The unusual technique of Fanny looking into the camera and addressing the audience enhances this effect, and makes the viewer feel more like an observant friend than a moviergoer. Throughout the film, the

narrations draw us in and make us feel as though we are experiencing the film rather than only watching.