

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS:  
ENGLISH SOCIETY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

## **A-The English Patriarchal Society**

Patriarchal describes a general structure in which men have power over women. Society is the entirety of relations of a community. A patriarchy from the ancient Greek *patriarches*, was a society where power was held by men and passed down through the elder males. When modern historians and sociologists describe a patriarchal society, they mean that men hold the position of power, the head of the family unit, leaders of social groups, boss in the workplace and head of government.

Feminist theorists have expanded the definition of patriarchal society to describe a systemic bias against women. As second wave feminists examined society during the 1960s, they did observe households headed by women and female leaders. However, the way society perceived women in power as an exception to a collectively held view of women's role in society was more significant rather than the underlying bias of a patriarchal society.

Beyond the individual's deeds to symbolize the past, personal relationship epitomizes history of people. As the literacy of British society was increased in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Victorian society was a patriarchal society where men were the only ones who were economically empowered whereas the women were forced to depend on men for financial stability. Furthermore, the Victorian society was particularly about class and inter-class marriages were not accepted in society.

In the same perspective, the patriarchal society of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain tried to limit women's reading by promoting the danger of reading some literary works that were not appropriate for women, making prohibition and creating a standard about what women were supposed to read. Gender mattered in the Victorian patriarchal society that believed women must be protected from reading particular texts.

According to Kate Flint in her book *The Woman Reader*, this society standard was based on paradoxical arguments: first, certain texts might corrupt women's innocent mind and therefore, by diminishing their value as women, they were strangely having too little resistance to emotionally provocative material.<sup>2</sup> These arguments had their foundations from three hundred years ago: Renaissance society believed that reading an inappropriate text might lead women to

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader* .Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. P.212

sexually and morally astray both in imagination and reality, and distract them from developing intellectually and spiritually.

Furthermore, the advocated reasons have led to understand the movement of women about reading which also came from 'the rise of the domestic woman' in the late eighteenth century. According to Jacqueline Pearson in her book *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation*, the domestic ideology shaped the feminine role fundamentally as literary consumption seemed 'inherently ambiguous': *Books made women communicate with the world outside despite the reality that they only stay at home.*<sup>3</sup> This condition threatened subversion from the concept of 'separate spheres.' Moreover, for some others, women reading were considered as dangerous because it could distract women from their domestic duties or transgress their limit of private sphere: good and ideal women must resist the pleasure of reading and take care of their husband and maintain the household.

At this point, a great number of books were prohibited by parents, husband, brother or governess of women or girls. Anxieties and the questions of morality were appeared if these books were seen to be read in public by women or girls. George Eliot's *Adam Bede* was one of the examples, besides, books by Ronsard, Guy de Maupassant, Defoe, Balzac, Stendhal, Byron and many of them. As written by Flint in her book *The Woman Reader* in 1890, Harriet Shaw Weaver's mother was shocked when she found out her adolescent daughter read *Adam Bede*<sup>4</sup>. *Adam Bede* itself in part tells a story about a girl who had given birth and disposed her illegitimate child which is written by unmarried woman living with a man. Weaver was sent to her room immediately and a local vicar was called to explain the books unsuitability.

In this respect, one may argue that a variety of anxieties appeared and there were not many books left for women or girls to be read in public. Critics always appear in almost every kind of text: science and the classic risked transgressive access to knowledge, botany meant sexuality, astronomy evasion of traditional femininity, classical literature usurpation of male prerogatives, poetry disruptive imagination, metaphysics revolution, the novel seduction and even the Bible troubled female delicacy. For the conservative thinker of Victorian society, the most respectable reading contains hidden dangers and to some extent this is borne out by the

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<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.86

<sup>4</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Boston New York, Atlanta, 1859, P.134

gleeful way in which women readers used legitimate text for their own purposes. Women and girls reading was very limited particularly to religious texts, sermons, history, travels, household conduct books, magazines and imaginative literature. Similarly, women's reading habit toward a certain text relied on circumstances, condition, position and also on family social and educational background.

As women reading books was also taken into concern whereas silent reading establishes more secret and private intercourse with the written word. Silent reading was deemed dangerous. Moreover, Pearson also mentions in her book that this activity of solitary reading was also considered as potentially rebellious and self indulgent; meanwhile reading aloud formed the bond and expression of social ties and was especially appropriate for women within domestic ideology. Instead of reading alone she should read to friends or husband, or listen to her husband, father, brother or mother reading. Girls and women were often educated to read aloud because it was important for them to be able to read aloud. Moreover, concerning the place of reading and the source of the book, the visitors of libraries in 19<sup>th</sup> century were also often categorized by gender. Private libraries carried the image of masculine space, male power and rationality.

In such a context, one may argue that the concept of 'separate spheres' itself was strongly associated with 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society and has had a strong influence toward the way society viewed gender ever since. "Separate spheres" was a society standard of organization into a private, domestic, female world and an active, public, male world. Mary Shanley, a professor of Political Science and author of *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England*, points out that husband and wife occupied 'separate spheres'<sup>5</sup> and each had distinct complementary functions to perform. Middle class and working class women were directed to bear children and maintain the household, cook, sew, clean up, and take care of the husband and children, meanwhile men were ought to earn money for buying things needed by their household and represent the family in the society.

In addition, women as readers created social anxieties for the patriarchal society of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. This reaction was based on how society saw women as they created and determined to be: delicate, innocent and weak. This society paradigm gave birth to a social

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Farrel, Separate Sphere: Victorian Constructions of Gender in Great Expectations. The Victorian web, 1996

construction of the 'domestic woman' and the concept of 'separate sphere.' Men and women had different places, activities and duties to fulfil. In this respect, reading was not a preferable activity for women since it distracted them from fulfilling their domestic duties. Victorian society also believed in the danger of reading for women. Thus, discourses appeared and society created a standard about what and how women were supposed to read.

On the same wavelength, the concept of Patriarchy also seems to imply the institution of male rule and privilege; and it is dependent on female subordination. Yet, all of this social structure was under the blanket of the British Empire. Given that, patriarchy involves the process of forms of feminism that characterize patriarchy as an unjust social system which is oppressive of women. Historically, it has manifested in the social, legal, political and economic organization of a range of different cultures. In feminist theory, the concept of patriarchy often includes all the social mechanisms that produce and exert male dominance over women. Feminist theory typically characterizes patriarchy as a social construction that can be overcome by revealing and analyzing its manifestations. During the reign of Queen Victoria, there were certain social expectations that the separate genders were expected to adhere to. For the males, this included a vast amount of pride in their work, protectiveness over their wives if they were married. Victorian Britain was a society of extremes, of great wealth and absolute poverty. However, this patriarchal society has an influence on social order.

## **B. Social Order**

Until the late nineteenth century, social order in Britain was based on a stratified class division which most people regarded as inevitable and indeed as divinely ordained. The country was dominated by noble landowners who administered the local justice and monopolized the agricultural sector. At the same time, marriage was commonly regarded as an economic arrangement uniting families and estates because people had different conventions of marriage.

The convention of marriage was not a union based on love between two people. Rather, it proceeded from the approval by parents of the would-be couple. If members of the families disagreed on principles, there was no way for the couple to be married. The fact that people respected the middle social value, meaning the couple belonged to the same class and behaved according to a strict Victorian social code (1832-1901), there were many happy marriages as

well as unwelcome ones. It is in this respect that, Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* writes: “*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of wife.*”<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1845, the Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, saw that England was being divided into “two nations”, one rich and the other poor. The middle class Victorians believed in hard work, moral seriousness and social respectability whereas the Evangelicals believed in a strictly puritanical code of morality. Members of the wealthy middle class came from Evangelical and Nonconformist background. In *Mansfield Park*, the fact that Fanny came from a poor family and was raised in a wealthy family is very meaningful. For a woman to succeed in life, in the writer’s view, she needed to live in a good condition and rely on herself in order to be free.

In the same vein as Cixous’ theory of feminism, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) introduced the philosophy of utilitarianism, which proposes to subject all human practices and institutions to the scrutiny of scientific reasoning to determine their fundamental usefulness. English philosopher John Stuart Mill argued in his essay *On Liberty* (1859) that in society’s pursuit of “the greatest number” the individual must be free not only from political and religious tyranny, but from the tyranny of the opinion of others. *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), Mill extends his ideal of individual freedom and self-reliance to include women who were both oppressed and falsely idealized under the middle Victorian moral values and respectability.

Austen’s novels are concerned with the land-owners in England whose social significance derived primarily from their inherited property, the history of their families, and their embodiment of idealized morals and manners. This social class which was lower in prestige than the nobility or aristocracy. Crucial for Austen personally as well as for her characters, was the fact that for both legal and customary reason, wealth was not shared evenly among all the members of bourgeois families. Thus, women were often obliged to seek financial security through prosperous marriages, even at the cost of their own happiness. And Jane Austen was especially interested in the behavior of those characters who, for reason of birth or chance, found themselves at the margins of the gentry, either clinging to former respectability or hoping to elevate themselves into this social class. Furthermore, social conventions governed every aspect

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Signet Classic, 1847. P. 1

of gentry life, from everyday courtesies to the professions considered suitable for men (only being a governess or teacher was considered marginally suitable for gentlewoman). Under such conditions, Jane Austen alternately defended and criticized the social customs of her time.

As social order occupies an important role in the *Mansfield Park* more in the English society of the nineteenth century, social order is at the centre of Austen's novel. She manages to draw a small world specially possessed by a yearning for money and high social standing. It motivated almost many of her characters' action. In this respect, in *Mansfield Park* the reader can perceive the daily occupation of many of its characters is how to manage to reach the superior class. This is to be seen within the context of traditional British class society, with the strict separation between lower, working population on the one hand and the affluent and therefore leisured upper class of the aristocracy on the other. The fact that they are interested in elevating their position is animated by the enjoyment of leisure and pleasure as well as prestige. Hence they are in need to move upwards in the society, especially in the class of the wealthy, who on account of their wealth are entitled and are able to lead a life of leisure and pleasure. The privilege and the happiness that someone can get in elevating his social position urge Mary to think that "*A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of*" (Austen: 226).

This shows that belonging to the upper class though still highly restrictive is no longer based extremely on birth or on being descend from the aristocratic family but can also be achieved by the acquisition of wealth and by the purchase of land as exemplified by the rise of successful entrepreneur and businessman since the beginning of the industrial revolution.

At this point, the social and historical context in which the desire for advancement and its critique are situated can be identified more clearly. This is a tension between on the one hand, the traditional structure of society in which rank and identity are determined by origin and family on the other, the possibility and indeed the necessity of mobility for the individual, as increasingly brought about by the process of modernisation, frequently motivated by the desire to improve one's personal situation and social status.

The yearning for social mobility explains the obsession of some of Austen's characters with money. This obsession with money allows Mary Crawford when answering to Edmund question "*you intend to be very rich*", her immediate response is "*to be sure. Do not you? Do not we all?*" (Austen: 226). These series of questions and answers highlight the fact that social rank

is as she calls it “*true London maxim*” (Austen: 90). Hence it is a matter with everybody’s in London to become a rich people in a context of industrial revolution. 10

Through this assertion of Mary, it is revealed that their thoughts are directed to the fact that it is not normal for a Londoner of the time when improvement is at the centre of every matter to remain to an economic level without doing some little progress. It is in this level that this assessment “*The most interesting in the world*”, *replied her brother-„how to make money-how to turn a good income into a better*” (Austen: 237) is interesting. Furthermore, through this statement Austen lays an emphasis on the fact that even the desires for the rich people are to improve themselves economically. However, the ways the social order is set have an impact on the gender issues.

### **C. Gender Issues**

The issue of gender has penetrated the literary field in the nineteenth century. It is in this respect that Jane Austen focused on a small group of society namely the upper-middle class of rural England; the class to which she herself belonged. Throughout her novel, Austen portrays the disadvantaged position of woman, presenting the issues of gender stereotyping and marriage choice as the main problems they have to confront. “*Gender came to be seen as a construct of society, designed to facilitate the smooth-running of society to the advantage of men*”<sup>7</sup>, proving that men gained power throughout the socially constructed subordination of woman.

However, in this section, it is question of studying the gender issues. Taking a post-structuralism approach to *Mansfield Park*, we notice that there is a «*pretence that bourgeois culture is ‘natural’ to limit meaning in the interests of control, repression and privilege*”<sup>8</sup>. Austen’s writing embodies middle-class values and portrays an ideology that emphasizes patriarchal rule along with social and economic power with little reference to the hardships of the working class. This is therefore a form of oppressive ideology in which women are kept in their socially and sexually subordinate place. When Sir Thomas Bertram discovers that Fanny will reject Henry Crawford’s proposal. The cruelty of male power is enforcing the gender role. He does not understand her refusal of a secure marriage and attempts to change her answer by

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<sup>7</sup> Eagleton Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996, p.114

<sup>8</sup> Denis Walder, *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford University Press, 1990, p.306

redefining what she says. Because Sir Thomas is an authoritative male and represents the male dominated system that tries to take control of and organize a woman's life for her.

Although Fanny represents female resistance by opposing Sir Thomas's judgment, Austen conveys the over-powering pressure that she feels as she states: "*She could say no more; her breath was almost gone*"<sup>9</sup>. Fanny's weak position is shown through the punctuation and structure of her sentences as she often begins to protest, but breaks off at a dash. This contrast with the clarity of Sir Thomas's speech in which he conveys a tone of certainty and finality while speaking with ease. He is confident and sure of his thoughts. In fact, he tries to impose them on Fanny, and uses any kind of pressure or cruelty to force her to comply with his decision that she should marry.

Sir Thomas is trying to persuade Fanny to marry and emphasizes on the fact that Austen's novels operate around the framework of love, marriage and money. Many of the characters believe that there is no future development open to women of their class but marriage and the upbringing of children, making Fanny seems extremely unusual when she turns down Henry's offer. This relates to the Marxist view that "*dominant visible forms taken by modes of physical and social reproduction through history have been family and kinship structures*"<sup>10</sup>, which utilizes the gender positions of male power and female subservience. Austen uses words such as "career" to remind us that marriage was a woman's livelihood, her "career" in the sense that it was her life's work, and that she would grab any marriage that had good financial prospects.

Similarly, in the society and culture that Austen depicts, the male is regarded as the norm, as the central position in which the female is defined. This reflects structuralist theory that society and thinking are constructed on models of binary pairs such as the pairing of man and woman. However, this pairing allows the man to take precedence over the woman who is seen as inferior to his superiority. Women are defined by men, as in *Mansfield Park* when there is pressure on Fanny to meet Sir Thomas's expectations of what a woman is:

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*. Penguin, 1994. P. 260

<sup>10</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*: Oxford University Press, 1976, p.79

*“Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her; she is the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – She is the Other”<sup>11</sup>.*

Therefore, Fanny’s personal identity is misrepresented by men making her a female victim of male power and gender stereotypes and depriving her of the right to her own feelings. However, these gender differences which lead the forms of inequality, oppression and exploitation between the sexes are constructed by society. Austen presents them as normal. In the middle-class society, she depicts femininity and masculinity that have been associated with various images and qualities as they are in society. The men are powerful, solid and authoritative, while the women are vying for their attention and information. That is why Sir Thomas feels that he can tell Fanny that it is the duty of a woman to accept a good offer of marriage when she refuses Henry Crawford.

A major concept of post-structuralism theory is deconstruction which stems from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s argument is that texts are really about what they appear not to be and he looks closely for contradictions and weak points with different meanings from the original can be interpreted. When deconstructing Austen’s text, it becomes evident that what she does not write can be even more revealing than what she does.

Although sexual desire is never explicitly mentioned, there is a sense that it is a constant underlying threat to the characters of *Mansfield Park*. It is seen as a powerful force which disrupts the social order and marriages that are treated as normal and moral. When a group of characters visit the house and grounds at Southernton, Fanny is left alone outside the iron gates of the entrance to the wilderness while the others enter. This sets in motion the possibility of sexual desire. Fanny resisting goes through the gate indicates sexual repression and lack of sexual power.

This contrasts to Maria crossing the boundary into the park which clearly conveys the idea of crossing a moral boundary. She deceives Mr Rushworth, the man she is to marry, and indulges in her infatuation with Henry Crawford. This creates a sense of betrayal and raises

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<sup>11</sup> Simone De Beauvoire, *Woman and the Other from Literature in the Modern World*, Walder, Dennis, Oxford University Press, 1990. P. 307

moral issues about her faithfulness to Mr Rushworth. It also shows a female exerting her sexual power which was not accepted at the time Austen when she writes, meaning that the characters could not be directly discussed. Therefore, sexual affairs are a taboo, unspoken in the text, and only alluded to at most. For example in *Mansfield Park*, characters are held together to the social and moral order and then as reinforce the sexual power of the male characters. In a sense, one of the main characters in *Mansfield Park* is immorality as opposed to morality. However, immoral themes remain unspoken and this determines the language Austen uses which can give sexual connotations.

The main character in *Mansfield Park* is the heroine Fanny Price. It is through her that many gender issues are conveyed and men are able to demonstrate their authoritative power. Although Fanny is in love with Edmund, he talks about female vanity and her appearance in a condescending manner. We can see his stereotyping of women as he embarrasses Fanny by teasingly complimenting her looks. He says that she is “worth looking at”<sup>12</sup>, giving the impression that she is the object of his sexual desire. Edmund also patronizes Fanny when he mentions her “beauty of mind”<sup>13</sup>, as the purpose of emphasizing her intelligence is to flatter Sir Thomas for information about his business abroad and the slave trade. Austen is therefore defining the roles of the two sexes in which men give information and advice to be received by women. This is typical of the patriarchal family where there is a social hierarchy and a belief in the gentleman as a leader promoting the figure of the father to an almost God-like status while women occupy a secondary position.

As for Sir Thomas Bertram he becomes a central character in *Mansfield Park* because his authority influences the actions and language of other characters. When the play is being organized, Maria and Mrs Grant talk about Sir Thomas and the role he plays in the Bertram family. And Mrs Grant thinks that Sir Thomas is a fitting head of the family and this shows that his influence defines the existence of the women under his patriarchal rule. For example Lady Bertram is not in Sir Thomas’s presence, she is called a ‘cypher’, but he is around her. Her existence seems to take on a more substantial meaning. This demonstrates the solid influence that Sir Thomas has over the lives of the women in the household. Moreover, we see his

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<sup>12</sup>Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, op. cit. p.165

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.,p.165

authoritative power over Fanny. Sir Thomas portrays a strong picture of authority and control by creating what should be a stable living environment for the women of the house.

In this respect, in *Mansfield Park* we notice that there are two opposed themes which are concerned with different approaches to life. Firstly, Austen stresses the importance of serious and conservative authority that highlights moral principles through the character of Sir Thomas Bertram. This parallels the tempting attraction of a livelier, self-indulgent life where behavior is less principled and selfish gratification. These two themes are most clearly portrayed when the amateur theatricals take place at *Mansfield Park*. In a discussion concerning Mr Rushworth, Mary states: “*I often think of Mr Rushworth’s property and independence, and wish them in other hands – but I never think of him*”<sup>14</sup>. She and Mrs Grant believe that a public role would suit Mr Rushworth showing the powerful influence that owning an estate.

So, if we allude to a Marxist approach we can say that the way a Marxist perceives the world is the ‘natural’ division of society into unequal economic classes by the right to ownership of property, creating the financial power of one class over another. Mary goes on to ridicule the political system and does not understand why Mr Rushworth can be put in Parliament to “represent the county”. At this point in the novel, the Mansfield party lacks any sense of authority and this is related to Mary’s statement about the county lacking authority if the corrupt parliamentary system elects Mr Rushworth. In this regard, Austen is incorporating some aspects of the wider world into the novel through a trivial event. Mary’s character is also interesting in this scene as she shows that a man can have power despite his intelligence because he is just a man. Under such conditions, Mary achieves a sense of power for even recognizing this fact as many women would just accept the power men had.

However, when using Marxist theory it becomes clear that gender inequality is a result of a “*historically specific phenomena with historically specific roots located in the invisible levels of social reality*”<sup>15</sup> meaning that women could never achieve political power due to a social constructed history that saw the female as weak, and too full of emotional sensibility to conduct themselves in important situations such as Parliament. When thinking of this situation in relation to socialist feminism, we can argue that “*oppression is rooted in a capitalist system*”<sup>16</sup>, showing

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<sup>14</sup>Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, op. cit.p.134

<sup>15</sup>Terry , Eagleton, *A Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, Blackwell Publisher Ltd, 1996. P.57

<sup>16</sup>Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory* : Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986. P.100

that in Western society there is no liberation of women without over-throwing the capitalist system, and this is impossible because they are “*social subjects under bourgeois capitalism*”<sup>17</sup>. It has become evident that the relationship between individuals and society is a main concern of *Mansfield Park* as it is a ‘novel of manners’ which observes and reports on characters’ feelings, thoughts and decisions.

To some extent, Jane Austen focuses specifically on the upper-middle class, the landowners, or members of the minor aristocracy. Sir Thomas Bertram belongs to the baronet level and has economic power due to his large estates in both England and Antigua. So, Sir Thomas’s business in the West Indies allows Austen to mark a boundary to the wider world and issues that are associated with other countries such as the slave trade. Because the slave trade was a much-debated issue throughout Austen’s life as many people wanted it abolished, making it a political focal point. Slavery was therefore in the process of violent change and effecting the economic power of many middle class families who owned plantations abroad by reducing profit.

This means that the readers of Austen’s novel can see Sir Thomas as someone who is facing a financial crisis as well as recognizing the morality of slavery. For the Bertrams’ of *Mansfield Park*, the income from Antigua is important to them because and Sir Thomas has to economize after Tom spends money lavishly. It is also evident that women have no say or control over how money is spent while the Bertram sons can spend money with no say over what it is on. Men therefore, have power in terms of business and money while women are ignored with no say over how any of it is organized.

In conclusion, it can be said that the men in *Mansfield Park* have power in social, economic and political circles. However, the portrayal of male authority and power is ambiguous. For instance Sir Thomas has a strong influence on the other characters particularly the women and less than the men (as Tom spends all his money, something that a woman would never do) whereas Mr Rushworth is depicted as a fool in an artificial position of power. Austen has therefore shown that in English society, a man of power can give, can control the lives of the weaker characters. But it is also possible that a fool such as Mr Rushworth can represent the county in Parliament. Overall though, the qualities of sensible caution and materialism are

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Austen *Mansfield Park*, op.cit. p. 35

identified with masculinity and those of strong passion and emotional sensibility are characteristics of the females. Another important factor in *Mansfield Park* is the importance of omission and by deconstructing the text, words and actions take on more meaning than what they seem to imply. Austen has taken into consideration all aspects of middle-class society, but does not go into depth about other classes. She seems to stick to what she knows, as she was also brought up in a middle class society. The society that she depicts is presented as hierarchical and men occupy an important position in relation to women, as they can use their influence and power in a good or bad way. Austen takes the disadvantaged position of women and analyses sexual stereotypes and prejudices in great detail. Therefore male power and female helplessness are explored in her novels. However, the analysis is directed towards the treatment of gender issues.