

# *Education and Social Class: A Study on Educational Methods in Mansfield Park and 19th Century British Society*

Huang Mingjuan

*School of English, Sichuan International Studies University, Tongjiaqiao Street, Shapingba District, Chongqing, China*

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**Abstract:** *Mansfield Park* is one of the greatest novels written by Jane Austen. This paper analyzes Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to explore two educational methods depicted in the novel - the authoritarian education of Sir Thomas and the permissive education of the Prices - and their relations to the social and economic strata of 19th century British society. By revealing how these educational modes reflect the social class differences, this paper aims to offer a critical view of the educational and social systems and provide an important perspective for understanding the structure and culture of British society in that era.

## 1. Introduction

Mansfield Park is an important novel written by English author Jane Austen, first published in 1814. The novel revolves around the life of the protagonist Fanny at Mansfield Park and her growth story. Although there have been many multi-faceted studies on this work, discussions on its educational themes are still rare. However, Mansfield Park contains profound implications on the theme of education.

Jane Austen, renowned for her novels often characterized by a light, satirical tone, was not just a creator of social "comedy of manners" but also a serious writer deeply concerned with social issues. In this novel, Jane Austen intricately depicted the relationship between the social class structure and educational concepts of her time. This paper explores in-depth two contrasting educational methods in the novel - the authoritarian education by Sir Thomas and the permissive education by the Prices - and their intricate relationship with social class and economy at that time. Sir Thomas's authoritarian education emphasizes the importance of etiquette, tradition, and social standing, which reflects the intense need of upper class to inherit and maintain their social status. Conversely, the permissive education of the Prices mirrors the educational attitude of lower class. The parents in the lower class tend to neglect education due to limited economic resources, thus leading to the laissez-faire attitude towards their children's education. These educational approaches not only affect the children's personality development and social status, but also mirror the economic and class structure of the time, where the upper class maintains and consolidates their social status through education, and the lower class, lacking resources, cannot provide quality educational opportunities to their children, thus unable to bridge the class divide through education. This reflects the economic inequalities of the

time and reveals the role of education in solidifying class distinctions.

Through her depiction of educational theme in *Mansfield Park*, Austen reveals the class structure and economic inequalities of 19th century British society, offering a critique of the educational system and social values of that era. This study not only deepens the understanding of the novel but also provides a significant perspective for understanding the social and cultural context of that time.

## 2. Sir Thomas's Authoritarian Education

Bourdieu understands the impact of family background on children's education from the perspective of cultural capital, believing that compared to the lower classes, upper-class families possess higher cultural capital, enabling their children to acquire more cultural capital during the family socialization process. In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas's authoritarian approach to education epitomizes the upper-class educational ideology. His educational method reflects the 19th century British aristocracy's extreme emphasis on tradition, etiquette, and social status, which are elements of the familial cultural capital as identified by Bourdieu. A detailed analysis of Sir Thomas's educational methods reveals more clearly how the upper class uses education to maintain their social status and economic interests [1].

According to American psychologist Diana Baumrind's research, authoritarian parents are characterized by their strict control over their children's behavior and attitudes, attempting to align them with an absolute standard (260). For the upper or the aristocratic class represented by Sir Thomas, this "absolute standard" manifests as extensive knowledge, elegant etiquette, and good behavior. This educational method not only demonstrates Sir Thomas's strict control over his children but also reflects his intention to pass on the values and social status of the aristocracy to the next generation. Sir Thomas has always been the patriarch of the Bertram family, with absolute authority over everything, especially in the education of his children. In his view, the aristocracy should exhibit elegant behaviors, restrain themselves in any situation, and avoid showing their true emotions. He himself is the perfect embodiment of this educational standard. "A naturally stern demeanor" makes his children feel oppressed and "utterly inhibited". Moreover, as children of the aristocracy, Sir Thomas's offspring are required from a young age to learn etiquette, music, history, painting, and French. Handsome appearance, outstanding talent, and confident demeanor are the hallmarks of successful education and value system of the upper class. In this value system, moral conduct is secondary. In this novel, Sir Thomas's change in attitude towards Fanny upon his return from Antigua is not due to her good moral conduct but because "her equal improvement in health and beauty"[2]. And during the ball, Fanny's "general elegance of appearance and her being in good looks" meet the aristocratic educational standards, leading Sir Thomas to attribute her qualities to the education he provided. Therefore, he feels a sense of pride in his educational success.

Simultaneously, Sir Thomas emphasizes the importance of using education to maintain family honor and social status, reflecting his commitment to class boundaries and family glory. Sir Thomas uses education to consolidate class status, through which the next generation's careers and marriages can add more honor to the family's future. Watching Maria and Julia become talented and well-mannered under his educational standards, "he felt while they retained the name of Bertram, his daughters must be giving it new grace". After marriage, "he trusted they would extend respectable alliance". At the same time, his son Edmund would also likely achieve great things with his clear sense of right and wrong, finally "bringing bit for utility, honor and happiness to himself and all his connections". In the book *Victoria: A Life*, author A.N. Wilson points out that Victorian-era British society had strict social classes, with strict etiquette norms constraining interactions between different classes (23). For the upper class, everyday etiquette and demeanor are symbols of identity. Sir Thomas's educational philosophy further reflects his emphasis on identity and class status. When

adopting Fanny, he considers making her aware of her different status, and let her know that her identity, wealth, power, and future always differ from that of his daughters. When Sir Thomas left home to go overseas, Tom and Maria, among others, enthusiastically plan a play. At this time, Edmund, deeply influenced by Sir Thomas's educational views, opposes this play, believing that considering their family status, "acting would be imprudent, making it seem like we don't take father seriously". Faced with Sir Thomas's sudden return from Antigua, everyone shows panic and even fear, because they know that in Sir Thomas's education, daily behavior should match one's status. For him, acting is too ostentatious, not befitting the entertainment of the aristocracy. In daily interactions, Sir Thomas also shows a strong adherence to class boundaries. Sir Thomas generally does not like to interact with the outside world, except with the Rushworth family, who matches his family in wealth and class. Moreover, he is very keen on forming marital ties with them, as this is undoubtedly very beneficial for consolidating his family's class position.

However, authoritarian parents, as described by Baumrind, often do not allow their children much personal will, rarely engage in conversations with them, and tend to be emotionally distant (261). Sir Thomas's overemphasis on formality and external behavioral norms, while neglecting the moral cultivation and emotional needs of his children, is a clear drawback of authoritarian education. Although Sir Thomas provides his children with the best education of the upper class, his concern for them is limited to the intellectual level, lacking warmth in emotional terms. For his daughters, "He was no object of love to them; he had never seemed the friend of their pleasures"[3]. This educational approach, to a certain extent, also leads to character flaws in his three children-Tom, Maria, and Julia. Despite appearing well-mannered on the surface, they show significant deficiencies in emotional and moral development. The eldest son, Tom, is habitually extravagant. Even when Sir Thomas seriously admonishes him, he selfishly excuses himself, never considering other people's feelings. Living under Sir Thomas's strict control leads to the formation of rebellious traits in his personality. During the play, he completely disregards Sir Thomas's teachings, even agitating others to participate. When Sir Thomas left for Antigua, Maria and Julia are not sad but rather pleased, as "they were relieved by it from all restraints, and they felt they are at their disposal"[4]. The neglect of temperament and personality development results in Maria and Julia lacking proper moral concepts, contributing to their tragic fate. They not only lack closeness and empathy towards their cousin Fanny but also mock her ignorance to assert their superiority. In pursuit of Mr. Crawford, the sisters fail to recognize his insincerity and compete for his attention despite sisterly bonds. Even engaged to Mr. Rushworth, Maria continues to flirt with Mr. Crawford and eventually elopes with him even after marriage, leading to her being disowned by her family. These mistakes were caused by her lack of responsibility and morality. It was only after these tragedies that Sir Thomas realizes the flaws in his educational approach. He overly emphasizes the intellectual and etiquette training of his children, neglecting moral education and failing to truly cultivate their temperament. Eventually, he realizes that he "never properly taught them to govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty"[5]. The fault leads to a series of wrongful acts done by his daughters Maria, Julia, and his eldest son Tom.

Sir Thomas's educational method reflects his understanding of the relationship between education and social status. As the master of the estate, he is acutely aware of the importance of maintaining the family's wealth and status. In his view, education is not only about imparting knowledge and skills but also a symbol and safeguard of social status. By subjecting his children to strict education, Sir Thomas aims to ensure they could meet the demands of upper-class society, thereby maintaining the family's social position and economic interests. In 19th century British society, class differences and the maintenance of social order were emphasized, with education regarded as an important tool of social control. Sir Thomas's educational method, to an extent, shows the upper class's desire to maintain the status quo and their fear of the rise of the lower classes. However, this approach overemphasizes the superficial values of the aristocracy and neglects moral education and emotional

development. So it significantly impacts the formation of a well-rounded personality in children, thereby hindering their holistic growth. Children raised in such an environment are highly likely to lose judgment in life, make erroneous life choices, and consequently face tragic outcomes.

### 3. The Permissive Education of the Price Family

In *Mansfield Park*, the permissive education of Mr. and Mrs. Price sharply contrasts with Sir Thomas's authoritarian style. The educational approach of the Price family, though partly dictated by economic hardship and social status, also reflects the attitude towards education of the 19th century British lower class.

According to Baumrind's research, permissive parents hardly establish a proper set of behavioral standards and moral norms for their children and rarely engage in emotional communication, lacking sensible and positive interaction with their children. These parents often neglect their nurturing role due to being preoccupied with life's trivialities, lacking the time and energy to care for and instruct their children. On her return to Portsmouth, Fanny observes stark differences from Mansfield Park, "In her uncle's house there would have been a consideration of times and seasons, a regulation of subject, a propriety, but Portsmouth had none"[6]. Here, rules are absent, children are noisy and unruly. The prices are indifferent and even indulge their children's behaviors. On the one hand, Fanny's father pays little attention to the upbringing of children and hardly communicates with them, preoccupied daily "only with newspapers and the naval register". He is fond of drinking and shouting, showing a lack of exemplary consciousness and responsibility in educating his children. On the other hand, Fanny's mother, with a lax character, "neither taught nor restrained her children", overly indulges the favored children and neglects the others. With Mr. Price's absence in family life, Mrs. Price spends all her time managing servants and trivial household affairs, leaving no time to learn how to guide her children properly. As a result, Fanny's siblings lack basic manners, and there's an absence of courtesy and respect among them.

Due to poverty and a lack of educational resources, the Price couple fail to provide their children with systematic and standardized family education. Pierre Bourdieu, in *Forms of Capital*, discusses the impact of cultural and economic capital on individual development [7]. Cultural and economic capital refer to the knowledge and economic resources an individual acquires through family or education (48). Lacking these capitals, the Price couple couldn't transmit knowledge or provide educational investment for their children. Mr. Price, as a lower-class individual "without education, fortune, and connections", and his wife, being poorly educated herself, do not understand what family education is or how to fulfill their parental duties, thus lacking cultural capital for their children's development; their home is cramped, almost devoid of decoration, without books for the children to read, and only with a diet limited to pudding and mashed potatoes. All of these indicate that their economic condition barely meets subsistence levels. Therefore, they don't have economic capital for educating their numerous children. In contrast, Fanny has received basic education at Mansfield Park, which means that she possesses some cultural capital. Meanwhile, she uses the ten pounds given by Sir Thomas to rent books for the household, which means that she possesses some economic capital. So she can provide effective guidance in the family education to her sister Susan. In this scenario, Fanny, with her cultural and economic capital, became the good educator in her family [8].

Moreover, the educational approach of the Price family also reflects the lower class's different understanding of education. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction suggests that the education system not only transmits knowledge but also produces the culture and values of specific social classes (80). The educational method of the lower-class English, as represented by the Prices, reflects their cultural values and beliefs. For them, education is not a symbol of social status but rather a natural part of a child's growth. This kind of view grants more freedom but potentially leaves

children unprepared for social challenges. The Prices' permissive and indulgent behavior towards their children indicates their lack of awareness of the importance of education. For them, as long as the children grow up with basic needs met, their parental duties are fulfilled. They consider education and emotional communication as naturally developing aspects of a child's growth, which is unrelated to their parental efforts. Susan, the Price's third daughter, although intelligent and capable of discerning right from wrong, often "acts inappropriately" due to a lack of proper guidance and discipline from her parents, lacking the skills to face social challenges. Without proper guidance and correction, her future development will likely encounter many obstacles.

The educational approach of the Price family highlights the socio-economic inequalities in 19th century British society. Due to financial difficulties, the poor are unable to provide high-quality education for their children, significantly limiting their future social mobility. Therefore, these children are likely to remain in the lower socio-economic strata, unable to access better employment opportunities. This situation demonstrates how economic inequality directly leads to societal neglect and injustice towards the lower classes. In other words, in 19th century British society, economic disparities resulted in unequal distribution of educational resources. The younger generation of the lower class struggles to receive a wholesome education from their parents which includes the development of proper moral values and etiquette. This inequality not only restricts social mobility but also exacerbates the division between classes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Sir Thomas's authoritarian education and the permissive education of the Price family reveal the inequality and rigidity in the social structure. On the one hand, Sir Thomas provides his children with quality educational resources due to his financial capability. In his authoritarian education, he emphasizes tradition, etiquette, and adherence to social norms, hoping to consolidate the values and status of the aristocracy with a uniform educational standard. However, this method overly focuses on external behavior, neglecting moral and emotional education, thus exposing the flaws of aristocratic education. On the other hand, the children of the Price family, due to their family's economic hardship, lose the opportunity for better education, further limiting their chances of escaping poverty and low social status. In the permissive education of the Prices, due to class limitations, the couple lacks the cultural and economic capital for education and does not have enough time or the right methods to guide their children, leading to a laissez-faire attitude towards their development. This results in the children's inability to form correct values and face social challenges. Ultimately, class solidification is formed under this situation.

The comparison of these two educational methods reveals that education in that era is seen as a reflection of class and economic status: the upper class consolidates their social and economic advantages by providing authoritarian and high-quality education, while the lower class, constrained by economic factors, cannot provide the same educational opportunities for their children. This educational disparity not only deepens the social divide but also exacerbates the social issues present in British society at the time.

In summary, the role of education in 19th century British society is not just as a medium for imparting knowledge but also as a maintainer and shaper of economic and class structures. The educational theme in *Mansfield Park* provides an important window into understanding the social structure and culture of the period. Jane Austen, by depicting these two starkly different educational methods, not only showcases the class and economic realities of 19th century British society but also critiques its unequal social structure, hinting at the necessity for educational reform.

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