

Jane Austen and Empire by Edward Said Key Points

In this chapter from *Culture and Imperialism*, Said explores a previously disregarded perspective on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, illuminating the relationships depicted between manor home and plantation, country and city (1118-20). In the process, he demonstrates that a colonial ideology which allowed humanistic British values to exist alongside a devaluation of colonized cultures is evident in and even central to pre-imperialist novels generally not considered to have overtly colonial themes (1113, 1115). He is careful also to note that in pointing out these understated themes, he does not mean to dismiss Austen's work as insensitive and concerned merely with the superficial activities of a privileged class; rather, he believes that the appreciation of Austen's portrayal of British life must be coupled with an awareness of its geographical positioning and the political implications of that positioning (1124-5).

Said begins his argument by quoting V.G. Kiernan's statement that "empires must have a mould of ideas or conditioned reflexes to flow into" (qtd. in 1112). While Said denies as too simplistic the idea that absolutely every aspect of European and American culture is therefore designed to support and justify colonialism, he also asserts that ignoring such tendencies where they are present—which is very commonly—would be highly inaccurate (1112). Even those liberals who we might expect generally to support freedom saw no contradiction in denying it to non-European cultures abroad. In support of this idea, Said quotes John Stuart Mill's assertion that "The sacred duties which civilized nations owe to the independence and nationality of each other, are not binding towards those to whom nationality and independence are certain evil, or at best questionable good" (qtd. in 1112). A belief in "native backwardness" therefore justified disregarding abroad rights and values that were cherished at home in Europe (1112). However, rather than suggesting that pre-imperial literature, because it contains these ideologies, has a purely causal relationship to later imperialism, Said argues that it is important to "discern instead a counterpoint between overt patterns in British writing about Britain and representations of the world beyond the British Isles" (1113). In other words, we must take into account the importance of geography and its political implications (1113, 22).

Using Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* as a springboard to discussing geographical considerations, Said continues by applying a geographically-informed reading to *Mansfield Park*. While Williams' book had discussed "the interplay between rural and urban places" from medieval to present day literature and had noted that the relationship between England and its colonies was important in literature "from at least the mid-nineteenth century," Said suggests that the importance of the colonies is reflected in British literature "with amazing insistence and frequency" far sooner than that (1113-

4). Intense Anglo-French competition in the colonies could be seen in frequent references to overseas land in literature throughout the eighteenth century and helped to form a sense of “Englishness” in opposition to French interests abroad (1114-5). Applied to *Mansfield Park*, this historical background creates a more complex reading than William’s suggestion that the novel is simply blind to class differences and that “[Austen] is concerned with the conduct of people who, in the complications of improvement, are repeatedly trying to make themselves into a class. But where only one class is seen, no classes are seen” (qtd. in 1115).

Complicating this picture, Said suggests that the first half of the novel “is concerned with a whole range of issues whose common denominator... is space” (1116). Most obviously, Mansfield Park is supported by income from Sir Thomas’ plantation in Antigua, where he is away attending to business, but even at home, much of the action concerns decisions made about “where [Fanny] is to live, read, and work,” and her cousins are largely occupied with improving their estates. Additionally, a conflict arises from the proposed performance of a *French* play, an activity that is put to a stop with the return of Sir Thomas, the household’s “Crusoe setting things in order.” A firm connection is therefore made between “domestic and international authority” (1116-7). Additionally, as seen later in the book, it is suggested that space is necessary for a free and accurate perspective when Fanny returns home and finds herself missing the size and sociability of Mansfield. If one does not have access to such a place by birth, one may—like Fanny— “earn the right to [it by] leav[ing] home as a kind of indentured servant or, to put the case in extreme terms, as a kind of transported commodity” (1118). According to Said, a parallel is drawn between Fanny’s advancement through “small-scale movement in space” and the “more open colonial movements of Sir Thomas, her mentor, the man whose estate she inherits,” with each being necessary to the other (1118-9).

Finally, Said turns to discussing the infrequency and lack of detail in Austen’s references to the Caribbean, concluding that it reflects the idea of “the avowedly complete subordination of the colony to the metropolis,” again quoting Mill to illustrate British attitudes to the colonies not as independent nations but as convenient farmland for British production of tropical crops (1120). In this way, Antigua is a bit like Fanny’s native Portsmouth in that it serves to provide manors like Mansfield with material goods (1120). These goods, along with Fanny’s service, are needed to maintain the lifestyle and values of the Bertrams at Mansfield Park (1121). In this way, the novel illustrates the way in which British values could be disregarded abroad, since that disregard was necessary to the exploitation which made the flourishing of those values possible at home (1123-4)