A Personality Analysis of *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price

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Abstract

This essay is a personality analysis of the character Fanny Price from Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park.* A brief summary of the plot is illustrated before the core analysis. The personality sketch of Fanny is viewed through McAdam's three-level model using the Big Five Traits of Openness to Experience, Consciousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. A personality application is then, which includes examples of how the character's personality affects her life. It also speculates on future predictions for the character based on her personality. Alongside this information about Fanny's personality, theoretical explanations are provided using Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Attachment Theory. The final analysis consists of strengths and limitations of the personality sketch, personality application, and theoretical explanations, and it provides additional information that would improve and expand on these ideas.

Keywords: *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, McAdam's three-level model, Big Five trait approach, attachment theory, Bandura's social learning theory

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Mansfield Park is a novel written by Jane Austen and published in 1814. The novel tells the story of a young girl named Fanny Price. Fanny is from Portsmouth, an impoverished town, and is sent to live with her aunt Lady Bertram and uncle Sir Thomas in Mansfield Park. She finds herself looked down on by all except her cousin Edmund. Aunt Norris, who looks after the Bertram estate, is particularly cruel to Fanny. When Sir Thomas leaves Mansfield for business, two visitors arrive at the estate, Mary and Henry Crawford. Henry flirts with both Fanny's cousins, making him highly disagreeable in Fanny's eyes. Mary finds herself attracted to Edmund, which strikes jealousy within Fanny. To extinguish the increasing boredom in the house, someone suggests putting on a play. This idea is well-received by all, except Edmund and Fanny. The group finds themselves needing more people for roles in the play and succeed to convince Edmund to join. Fanny is almost convinced to join as well when Sir Thomas suddenly returns home. Sir Thomas quickly ends the production.

As life returns to normal, the cousins move to London, and the Crawfords become more common at the estate. Edmund confides in Fanny about his feelings for Mary, which does nothing but secretly anger her, and Henry decides to try to woo Fanny into falling in love with him. Fanny strongly objects, but Henry is persistent. When Fanny's brother visits, they throw a ball in Fanny's honor. Fanny becomes more agreeable to all during this time. After William leaves, Henry manages to get William a promotion and uses that good news to try to sway Fanny into a proposal. When Fanny refuses, Sir Thomas is extremely disappointed she does not choose to marry someone of such high esteem. As a result, she is temporarily sent back to Portsmouth. Henry comes to visit Fanny there, but she sends him off. When Fanny returns to Mansfield, she

brings her sister Susan. After much unnecessary drama, Edmund comes to marry Fanny, and Susan takes Fanny's place at her aunt and uncle's home.

Personality Sketch

Fanny's character is shy, timid, and easily scared. These traits showcase her McAdams Level 1 traits – taken from McAdams' three-level model of personality – and highlight her Big Five traits, which are high in N, A, and C while being low in E and O. These traits result in Fanny having a very high drive to not let her family down or disappoint those who have taken her in, while also feeling very insecure about her own ability and others' opinions of her. This is made evident by her behavior upon moving to Mansfield Park:

> "The rooms were too large for her to move in with ease: whatever she touched she expected to injure, and she crept about in constant terror of something or other; often retreating towards her own chamber to cry; and the little girl who was spoken of in the drawing-room when she left it at night as seeming so desirably sensible of her peculiar good fortune, ended every day's sorrows by sobbing herself to sleep" (Austen, 1906, p. 13).

Due to these insecurities, she tends to hide her emotions from the new family while also doing her best to please them, highlighting her high A. She bends to their will and strives to make herself as agreeable as possible while feeling guilty about any negative emotion she feels towards her new status, as demonstrated by her reaction to Edmund's concerns: "'Fanny,' said Edmund, after looking at her attentively, 'I am sure you have the headache.' She could not deny it, but said it was not very bad" (Austen, 1906, p. 74). As demonstrated in this scene, Fanny's high N leads to her seeking validation from those around her, especially Edmund.

In terms of Level 2, Fanny has very strong family values and is also very respectful towards the different statuses in the family. While she does not have very high expectations when it comes to the treatment of herself or her own future, she does hold others to high standards when it comes to proper versus improper behavior. She holds very tightly to her values and beliefs, particularly when they concern Henry and her family. Her attachment to Edmund, however, leads to a personality shift throughout the book. She gains small amounts of confidence as time goes on and begins to value him and his opinions over all else, as seen in Chapter 34 when Edmund agrees with Fanny and she exclaims, "'Oh no! But I thought you blamed me. I thought you were against me. This is such a comfort!'" (Austen, 1906, pp. 359-360).

For a proper personality sketch, more information regarding Fanny's hopes, goals, and needs from a first-person perspective would be needed. There is not enough first-person textual evidence in order to get a complete level 2 reading of her.

Level 3 is touched on the least throughout this book. The book does not provide us with many instances of Fanny reflecting on her life story or who she is. Although the narrator does touch on these themes, we have no way of knowing exactly what Fanny's own thoughts and wonderings are.

"Let no one presume to give the feelings of a young woman on receiving the assurance of that affection of which she has scarcely allowed herself to entertain a hope" (Austen, 1906, p. 491).

In order to make a complete sketch of Fanny's personality, one would need many more first-person accounts that illustrate her inner thoughts and feelings.

Personality Applications

When Fanny is brought into the Bertram household, she is timid and easily embarrassed by her ignorance, seeing as she has no previous teaching. As a result of her lack of education and timid personality, the relationships that become rooted in her life begin to form both negatively and positively. Most of the household views her as foolish and lacking common sense. They do not understand her strong sense of empathy and instead pluck at her self-esteem, making her doubt her decisions. As mentioned in the second chapter, "Fanny could read, work, and write, but she had been taught nothing more; and her cousins found her ignorant of many things with which they had been long familiar, they thought her prodigiously stupid…" (Austen, 1906, p. 17). Her self-consciousness only grows, and she finds her opinions tolerated by few, wanted by even fewer. Because she is quiet and well-tempered, she becomes useful to the women at the Park by running errands and staying out of their way. By being made to feel useful, she becomes content in her role on the property and tries to excel at her education as best she can.

Fanny relies heavily on her relationship with her cousin Edmund, who is gentle towards her, easing her anxiety about making choices and often speaking on her behalf. She sees him as her protector, and as she becomes deeply dependent on this relationship, it blossoms into a crush. When Edmund begins to seek other intimacies, her excessive neurotic behavior – paired with jealousy – escalates to pacing, emotionally removing her from situations, and experiencing profuse amounts of guilt. She is angry, but she feels her anger may be unfounded or could disappoint those she cares for.

The introduction of another family on Mansfield Park also alters Fanny's connections with the Bertrams. Faced with the difficulty of having to rearrange the routine of daily life, she

initially finds them “very plain” (Austen, 1906, p. 49). However, few know of this opinion, as she is more comfortable not drawing attention to herself. Though this is a benefit to the degree that Fanny is seen as polite and cordial, her determination to avoid attention results in her lacking the ability to initiate interactions with people, including Edmund. Fanny becomes easily overwhelmed or embarrassed, and she often runs away to solve her problems. This is accompanied by the physical reaction of crying, becoming sick or fatigued, or becoming speechless. Because of this, she often fails during interactions to get her point across or stand her ground, as seen in Chapter 34, when she struggles to express her feelings properly: “Fanny could with difficulty give the smile that was here asked for. Her feelings were all in revolt” (Austen, 1906, p. 368). This coping mechanism only causes her more heartache and rarely works to solve her problems.

When Fanny ultimately achieves her hopes of marrying Edmund, her future is set up with many possibilities. She would be content as a wife and possible mother, for that is all she originally wished. As for her career, nothing much would be expected of her outside of the Park besides being a generous hostess – a task she could easily achieve due to her people-pleasing demeanor. She may be asked to continue running errands for Lady Bertram, or at least to visit, and Fanny would still feel obliged. Others would see her as successful, as she would herself, because she has married above her class and raised her status. In doing so, Fanny has made everyone else proud of her and therefore feels pride in herself. There is also the chance that many of her neurotic behaviors would lessen – though not cease – because she would be under less stress, having accomplished her goals of love and acceptance.

Theoretical Explanation

There are a number of theories one can use to determine exactly how Fanny's particular personality developed, though some methods – such as genetic-based approaches – are limited due to the reader's relatively narrow perspective on Fanny's life. However, based on the available information, two approaches in particular appear to offer solid explanations.

The first of these theories is Bandura's social learning theory, which best explains the changes in Fanny's behavior after living with her aunt and uncle for some time. Bandura's theory focuses a great deal on how people learn behaviors from each other through various observational techniques – that is, people develop behaviors based on observational learning. (Funder, 2016, pp. 528-530) The theory also focuses on the concepts of self-efficacy and efficacy expectations, which involve beliefs about one's own capabilities and how those beliefs translate into behavior.

Both of these concepts appear relevant to Fanny due to the way she acclimates and adjusts to life with her extended family, as well as the influences her own self-image seems to have on what she accomplishes.

Fanny begins the novel – and her life with her aunt and uncle – as a very timid, emotionally-fragile young girl, and later begins acting far more calmer and well-tempered, though she still maintains much of her previous immaturity. She retains some of her initial anxieties and self-esteem issues, but she tends to bottle up these feelings and channel them into introspective thought rather than outward behaviors. One explanation for this shift is Fanny simply merely becoming more comfortable in her new environment, and while this is a perfectly

reasonable explanation, it does not provide much insight into her personality. Keeping Bandura's theory and ideas about observational learning in mind, it is possible that Fanny's behavior changes over time because she learns to act similarly to those around her. Rather than isolating herself and acting (at least outwardly) anxious, she adopts the more sophisticated behaviors that her extended family possesses. Additionally, Fanny becomes more outspoken and stubborn as the novel goes on – for example, she is incredibly forthright in her refusal to take part in the performance of *Lover's Vows* – which could very well be an imitation of her aunt and cousins' fiery, snobbish personalities.

Regarding Bandura's ideas about self-efficacy, Fanny seems to have a very set idea of what she is capable of. She is described early on as lacking self-esteem, and she often lets the other characters tell her what to do. It appears that Fanny does not have much confidence in her abilities (particularly her social abilities, given how shy and introverted she acts), and this lack of confidence results in her *actually* performing poorly and acting submissive in social situations. As mentioned previously, Fanny seems perfectly capable of standing up for herself, particularly when the stakes involved are avoiding another task she has no confidence in. She also clearly has many of the talents she believes she lacks: for example, Fanny seems to have a natural talent with memorizing lines, as is revealed by Maria. (Austen, 1906, p. 179) Despite all of this, Fanny continues to believe her skills are lacking, which then results in Fanny actually struggling to succeed.

The second theory – and perhaps the one that offers the best explanation – is attachment theory. According to this theory, human children have a desire for protection that results in

developing *attachments* to their caregivers – the primary caregiver being the child's mother. The child then develops expectations based on their interactions with their caregivers, which results in the primary element of attachment theory: the categorization of people into various attachment types. Mary Ainsworth established one of the more widely-used sets of these categories, which classifies children as *anxious-ambivalent*, *avoidant*, or *secure*. These types then affect the child's behavior and – in particular – their relationships and interactions with other people. These types also tend to follow the child into adulthood, further influencing the way they interact with other people, especially romantic partners.

To bring the focus back to the character at hand: Fanny Price has many traits that suggest an anxious-ambivalent attachment type. According to David Funder, the anxious-ambivalent type is often a result of an *inconsistent* or *chaotic* home environment, which results in the child "clinging" to their caregiver and becoming very upset when said caregiver is not nearby. (2016, p. 411) While Fanny's home-life may not quite warrant the term "chaotic," it is certainly inconsistent. Fanny is initially raised in an impoverished family, which suggests a great deal of uncertainty in her life. Fanny's mother then sends her away to live with her aunt and uncle at the age of ten, and although Lady Bertram and Fanny's mother may have similar parenting styles, Fanny's social withdrawal upon arriving at her aunt and uncle's home makes this seem unlikely. In fact, the other children Fanny comes to live with are borderline-abusive to her – something that Fanny likely did not experience at home. Under this assumption, Fanny experiences a very stark shift in how she is treated and given affection (or lack thereof) by her caregivers, making her home environment inconsistent by definition. She initially acts very unhappy and cries often, and she is described as "longing for the home she had left" (Austen, 1906, p. 11), all of which

suggest that she is experiencing the anxieties that an anxious-ambivalent child experiences when its caregiver is not nearby.

Further proof of her anxious-ambivalent behavior appears in Fanny's eventual romantic life. According to Funder, anxious-ambivalent adults tend to become obsessed with their romantic partners (or romantic interests, at the very least), and they become jealous very easily. Fanny does precisely this, as she seems to fixate on Edmund and her affections for him, and later becomes very jealous of Mary Crawford, whom Edmund spends a great deal of time with and often flirts with. One of the more obvious instances of Fanny's jealousy occurs when the family decides to put on a play in which Edmund and Mary play the two lovers. Before the rehearsal, it becomes clear that Fanny has read the scene in which the pair admits their love for each other many times with "many painful [and] wondering emotions" (Austen, 1906, p. 174). Later, when Mary and Edmund – each of their own accord – arrive to ask Fanny for help rehearsing, Fanny becomes very agitated, and clearly does not want to be a part of their admissions of love, regardless of whether they are fictional or not.

Other traits of anxious-ambivalent adults include having very low self-esteem, a trait that becomes evident as soon as Fanny's character is introduced in the second chapter. She is described as "ashamed of herself" (Austen, 1906, p. 11), "exceedingly timid and shy," and she noticeably "needed encouragement" from others. (Austen, 1906, p. 10)

Overall, attachment theory seems to offer the best explanation of Fanny's personality and how she interacts with others due to the fact that the root causes of her particular anxious-ambivalent attachment style are evident, and that attachment style directly corresponds to many of her adolescent-adult personality traits.

Analysis

When reviewing the possibilities and limitations of Fanny's personality sketch, the conclusions of such an analysis are only as strong as the sources used to garner information. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen provides the reader with a look into Fanny's traits, motivations, needs, behavioral tendencies, and interactions with others, allowing the reader to collect a multitude of views on Fanny and adding a completeness to the sketch that it would otherwise be lacking. However, the novel is not narrated by Fanny, but rather by a somewhat limited third party, and this lack of a first-person perspective is where limitations arise. Some of Fanny's emotions are revealed, while others are glossed over as the other characters' drama unfolds, making it difficult to collect information about the third McAdams level. The Big Five trait approach helps to categorize personality patterns with the goal of predicting behavior as well as future mental or physical complications, but these predictions are not a guarantee. Ideally, Fanny would be able to complete a personality test or be interviewed, but – with the information provided – the reader is left to assume that she is high in A, C, highest in N, and can ascertain little else.

Contrasting this idea, the person-situation debate sparked by Walter Mischel points out the weak relationship between trait measures and actual behavior. Low consistency of behaviors across various situations supports the situationist perspective, which may explain why Fanny begins to stand up for her beliefs by the end of the book, whereas she rarely did so before for fear of disappointing anyone. This shift in behavior becomes especially evident when she acts against Sir Thomas' wishes and denies Henry's advances, knowing full well the consequences.

One must also consider the longitudinal studies that posit the surging and waning of traits throughout maturation with a decrease in N, increases in A and C. This trait progression is not

present in Fanny, but she is also not described in late adulthood, so there is still the possibility for her traits to evolve.

Not only does the multitude of textual evidence describing Fanny's personality and actions make it easy to describe her behavior, but it also provides an understanding of how her actions affect her situation. Because the book spans through Fanny's adolescence, the reader sees how her character grows and can gauge how severely her personality and choices have contributed to each life outcome, all of which provide a great deal of background for the personality application. In order to form a more complete understanding of these applications, however, the novel would need to provide more instances of Fanny reflecting on her own choices. Although the narrator provides a very detailed external picture, the lack of a first-person perspective leads to a lack of awareness about how Fanny truly feels and whether or not she is cognizant of the changes she causes within herself and others.

As mentioned previously, Bandura's social learning theory has many strengths regarding the personality analysis of Fanny Price. The concept of self-efficacy accounts for social environment feedback, types of behavioral learning, personal levels of achievement, and emotional interactions with others. This type of information is covered most throughout the novel and can be identified as what often initiates Fanny's behavior and especially her repeated avoidance. A limitation of Bandura's theory is that it does not fully account for the subjective experience. Rather, it focuses on the triadic reciprocal interaction. There is an acknowledgment of the cognitive process, but not of the separate interpretation and individual perceptions.

Seeing as some key information about Fanny's personality and development is missing, additional research and assessment would undoubtedly provide a more thorough understanding of Fanny's personality as a whole.

Realistically, all forms of data would be helpful in understanding Fanny's personality and her impact on others more deeply. However, seeing as the story is told by a relatively limited third-person narrator, the novel provides a great deal of behavioral data, and any further personality assessments should focus on gathering self-reports and informants' reports. By interviewing Fanny, or perhaps conducting an inventory of her self-perceived traits such as the Paul Costa Jr. and Robert McCrae's NEO-PI-R, one can accurately categorize her personality traits and gain a great deal of insight into her thoughts, feelings, and self-image, all of which are strong indicators of personality. Additionally, because the novel already provides behavioral data – natural behavioral data, in fact – these self-reports would be relatively easy to verify. For example, if Fanny reported that she saw herself as a generous person, one could either verify that Fanny sees herself accurately by noting instances in which she has acted generously, or verify that Fanny has an obscured – even narcissistic – view of herself by noting that she never acts generously at all. Conducting an interview with Fanny herself would also serve to provide more information about her past. Because all of the events preceding Fanny's arrival at Mansfield Park are told in the form of brief exposition, the reader's knowledge of Fanny's behavior as an infant and her life with her immediate family is very scarce. By obtaining this information, one could delve deeper into the impact her upbringing and childhood had on her current personality.

Relatedly, interviews of informants such as Fanny's parents, siblings, extended family, and friends would provide an additional layer of valuable information that Fanny may not be

able – or want – to provide herself. Her extended family and friends – those she lives with and regularly interacts with at Mansfield Park – would provide a great deal of insight into how Fanny acts toward various people and in various situations, as well as how her behavior affects others' opinions of her. Similarly, interviews with her parents and siblings would be extremely beneficial in determining how Fanny acted as a baby and as a child, as well as exactly how her personality and behavior changed in response to her new home and environment.

Essentially, one would need to conduct extensive interviews of Fanny, her friends, and her family and have her complete a detailed trait inventory or similar personality test to develop an all-encompassing understanding of her personality and all of its complexities.

References

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