

THE SEMIOLOGICAL MODEL IN THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE: DISCUSSING THE TITLE OF AUSTEN'S *MANSFIELD PARK*

Leona Toker

Professor, Department of English, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

One of the pitfalls of current undergraduate literary study is instant ideologization of the texts—that is, the tendency to deal not with what the text is like but with the way it can function as grist to one's ideological mill: readers then either find their ready-made views confirmed by the text or cast it in the role of an ideological adversary. Though such approaches do not preclude the chance of saying something true about the text, they run enhanced risks of effacing each text's individuality. The best way to pre-empt such uses of the text is to start first-year studies of literature with close readings of literary works. Yet even such "intrinsic study" of texts in an academic framework requires the teacher's conscious choice between systems of concepts such as linguistics, prosody, stylistics and the fine art of tropes, and—especially in the case of prose narrative—descriptive poetics and reader-response criticism.

Whatever specific school or theory stands behind it, close text analysis trains students to concentrate on and enjoy the details of the texts. It points to the sources of the aesthetic experience that the texts may provide, helps

out with analytic questions that can stimulate insight and discussion, and, ideally, leads not to solutions of mysteries but to complicating the way in which one thinks about works of art. However, at a certain point of a student's progress, total concentration on the text, and total exclusion of historical, cultural, and ideological contexts, become unsatisfactory. Contexts, indeed, begin to intrude as soon as one is faced with lexical change—as soon as the teacher has to explain that in an 18th-century text "nice" is likely to mean "subtly discriminating" rather than "pleasant," that in a 17th-century poem "to die" is likely to mean "to consummate a sexual relationship," or that when Wordsworth says that "A poet could not but be gay / In such a jocund company," he is not referring to homosexuality. Once the text is opened up to changes in the language, it also calls for attention to the multiplicity of its links to the culture within which it was produced and which it may have helped to perpetuate or change. The study of a national literature then links up with the study of the corresponding civilization.

The challenge that a literature teacher faces at this point is to avoid using the text as merely a “document” of that civilization, an instrument for its study. Many college literature teachers reject this challenge—witness the world-wide popularity of courses like “Israeli Society as Seen through Modern Israeli Literature.” I do not wish to cavalierly denounce the methodology of such courses: they are deliberately *interdisciplinary* and can be based on methodologically valid procedures. My purpose here is to describe a useful model of an *intradisciplinary* study of literature that combines close analysis with the study of the contexts (both potentially endless—but our life is brief).

This model is built on the semiological triad of *Semantics* / *Syntactics* / *Pragmatics*¹. Here “semantics” stands for the relationship of the constituents of the text with referents, specific or generalized, outside the text—the dictionary meanings of words and expressions, the import of historical and geographical references, the link of textual details to External Fields of Reference (“EFR”). “Syntactics” (not to be confused with “syntax,” a grammatical term) is a matter of the interrelationship of textual details within the text itself, their interconnections in the “Internal Fields” of reference (“IFR”)². These interconnections often modify the meanings that words or narrative details trail in from the External Fields: if the knowledge of the EFR can enrich our understanding of IFR,

¹ For a discussions of these concepts see also Morris 1946, 217–220.

² The theory of External and Internal Fields of References was formalized in Hrushovsky 1984. The same distinction had been previously made by Northrop Frye, in terms of the “centrifugal” vs. “centripetal” movement of textual detail (1957, 73-75).

the latter can affect our ideas about the extra-textual reality in unexpected ways³. “Pragmatics” is a matter of the interface between the author and his/her target and hurdle audiences, as well as of the interface between the text itself and the different “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980) which it may eventually address, communities that may include new target audiences and unforeseen hurdle readership. Spanning all the three terms of this model is the intertextual dimension of a work—matter of semantics (by way of allusion), of syntactics (by way of subversion), or of pragmatics (by way of the author’s self-positioning in respect to a literary tradition).

I shall discuss the semiological triad, starting with its intertextual addendum, using the example of the title of Jane Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park* to show not only in what directions the classroom discussions can go but also how the model can help preserve these discussions from incoherence.

I

In intertextual terms, the title of *Mansfield Park* positions the novel in a series of literary works with actual or fictional toponyms for titles—Andrew Marvell’s “Upon Appleton House,” Alexander Pope’s “Windsor Forest,” Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Eliza Parsons’s *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*, and Jane Austen’s own *Northanger Abbey*. Juxtaposition of *Mansfield Park* with the first two titles and the last one is an opening for sociological

³ Cf. Harrison (1991, 1-8) on literature granting us not just knowledge as amenity but also “dangerous knowledge.”

comment on the tags attached to British landholdings, each with its own history and social and economic significance—Hall, Castle, Palace, Park, House, Abbey, Mansion, Farm, Grange (and “Forest” not a synonym of “wood” but as a specific administrative unit). Such a semantic explanation risks taking us into a detour, too far into the External Field of Reference, but so long as we are conscious of the semiological model, we shall be reminded to lead the discussion back to syntactics, the Internal Field of Reference by asking what the estate tag “Park” suggests about Sir Thomas Bertram’s family. Nor is it illegitimate to ask a hypothetical question about what might have been suggested if Sir Thomas’s mansion were called, for instance, “Mansfield Abbey.”

In Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* General Tilney is in possession of the eponymous estate; and in her novel *Emma*, Mr. Knightley is the owner of Donwell Abbey, which suggests that his status as a landed gentleman is, like Tilney’s, traceable not as far as the battle of Hastings but (merely?) to the dissolution of monasteries in the 16th century, during the Reformation. Sir Thomas’s landowning family may be of an older standing, and the tag Park connotes not only pastoral calm but also hunting rights. The tag “Abbey,” moreover, would have been inappropriate for this novel because it would have conflicted with the evangelical leanings of Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price: an author’s choice of a narrative detail may, indeed, be a matter of precluding as well as of creating certain effects⁴. The issue

⁴ By attributing a consciousness intention to an “author” here one does not necessarily mean what may have passed in the mind of the historical writer; one may actually be referring to the artistic “know-how” (see Herman 2008) in the selection of material.

of evangelicalism pertains to the External Field of Reference, the rise of evangelical movements within the Church of England in addition to nonconformist evangelicalism. Jane Austen’s resistance to Evangelicalism is documented, as well as her passing interest in that movement at precisely the time when she was writing *Mansfield Park*⁵. In fact, engagement with evangelical preferences (for household prayer, for the minister’s residency in his parish, and for his active involvement in the lives of the parishioners) was part of the “cultural code” (Barthes, 1974, 20) that Jane Austen shared with her target audience and which is not available to a reader of another time and place without the help of external sources. Information about the cultural code (a narrower concept than External Field of Reference) may significantly add to our understanding of the ideological commitments that impinge on the conduct of the novel’s main characters.

Another way in which the toponym in the title inscribes this novel into a literary strand is through its gesture towards Gothic narratives (*The Castle of Otranto*, *The Castle of Wolfenbach*), a genre which Austen has mocked in her *Northanger Abbey* yet whose selected features (a large house, a helpless virtuous heroine, a tyrannical father, evil intruders, seductions and transgressions), are still recognizable in the placidly pastoral *Mansfield Park*. Of particular interest here is the thoroughly domesticated shape of these features—even in comparison with the laundry list that the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* takes for a mysterious message. The

⁵ See her letter to her niece, November 18, 1814. For details see Butler 1975: 162–63. Conflicting views on Austen’s attitude to Evangelicalism are presented in Monaghan 1978 and Waldron 1999.

intertextual links of Austen's title can thus provide an opening for comments not only on social issues (the social standing of the novel's characters as reflected in their type of land-holding) but also on the issues of literary genre, viz., the relationship of the novel of manners with its Gothic precursors. Within the sociological triad the former discussion pertains to semantics and the latter to syntactics; the latter blends with the pragmatics of Austen's positioning her novel in opposition to the genre which she both parodied and complemented in her earlier work.

II

Another semantic aspect of the novel's title is its (possibly intentional) reference to the so-called "Mansfield judgment" of 1772: a slave becomes a free man when he sets his foot on the English soil (see Kirkham 1983, 116-19). When this reference to Judge Mansfield's representation of England as a free country is thrown into the witch's broth of the novel, we can see it as forging a syntactic link with a core element of the plot: a significant proportion of the Mansfield family's income comes from their estate in Antigua, doubtless an enterprise based on slave labor, and this is what causes Sir Thomas's absence from home at the crucial moment of his daughters' lives. Against the background of wartime taxation (EFR) and the expensive ways of the Bertram children (IFR), Sir Thomas has to travel all the way to Antigua to mend his affairs there. On his return Fanny asks him about the slave trade, but her question is met with "dead silence" around the dinner table (Austen, 1998, 136), reminiscent of the episode in *Northanger Abbey* where the character's conversation on the landscape leads to the loaded issue of the

enclosures; from enclosures it moves to politics, and from politics it is "an easy step to silence" (Austen, 1994, 100). Indeed, Sir Thomas's financial troubles may be directly related to the British ban on slave trade, a bill passed in the Parliament in 1808 and then reinforced in 1811 (see Armstrong 1988, 43-44). Sir Thomas and other British landowners could no longer purchase new slaves for their properties in Antigua, whether sugar mills or sugar-cane plantations. Therefore their overseers often attempted to squeeze out as much work as possible from the remaining slaves, which led to an outbreak of slave rebellions. This is likely to be the kind of trouble that Sir Thomas travels to Antigua to take care of – either by suppressing the rebellion with violence or by winning over the slaves by improving their condition (see also Hammond, 1993, 77). Have we stayed too far into the External Field of Reference again? Or can we assume that slavery and the prohibition of slave trade were topical issues at the time of the novel's composition, and hence another part of the cultural code that the author shared with her immediate audience? However that may be, the issue links up with the Internal Frame of Reference when we find Sir Thomas improving Fanny's living conditions upon his return from Antigua by ordering that a fire should be kept in the East Room where she spends her cherished hours of privacy⁶ left over from her attendance on Lady Bertram—we might, perhaps, be allowed to extrapolate from this agenda of expense-

⁶ Jane Austen herself well knew cold weather as an enemy to privacy: she would have to try to do her writing not in her unheated room but in the family sitting room downstairs. When the writing was interrupted by visitors, the sheets of paper would sometimes go into hiding under the table-cloth.

incurring kindness... One may further note that the conversation in which Fanny asks the question about the slave trade is not presented directly: the episode is mentioned retrospectively, in Fanny's reply to her cousin Edmund who reproaches her for being too quiet in company. In other words, Austen formats the motif of slavery not as concern in its own right but merely as an example of Fanny's effort to outgrow her self-effacement and to be not only seen but also heard. It is a half-hearted effort in so far as the evangelical education, to which she seems to be all too susceptible, would demand of a young lady to refrain from speaking unless spoken to while also somehow preserving unshakable moral fibre, not entirely compatible with strictures against speaking in company. Thus the ostensible function of the reference to slave trade is character portrayal. If one argues that this function is a cover under which a political issue is smuggled into the text, one thereby initiates a pragmatic interpretation of the episode in terms of the complexities of Jane Austen's self-positioning in her address of her contemporary reader, her deliberate—and not entirely truthful—disavowal of interest in politics or in any matters beyond a gentlewoman's domestic sphere⁷.

III

The reading of the title of *Mansfield Park* in the framework of syntactics must take into account the novel's setting its Internal Field of Reference in the world of provincial gentry constructed as *a man's world*, one which

⁷ On Austen's predicament as a woman writer and on the function of her plots as possible "cover stories" for proto-feminist concerns see Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 146-83.

marginalizes the heroine before allowing her to turn into a guardian of its own best values. It is a man's *rural* world, Mansfield rather than Mansville: Sir Thomas no longer takes his womenfolk to London (Joyce's "Romeville") when he goes there to attend Parliament sessions. Fanny finds herself enslaved by the conventions of this patriarchal world⁸, conventions instilled, ironically, by women such as her aunt Mrs. Norris. Her resistance to this enslavement takes the shape not of a critique of her social enclave but, on the contrary, of its idealization. Fanny's quiet assertion of her right of refusal when she is pressurized to marry the man whom she dislikes is presented as a rebellion not against the *order* of her social environment but against its *disorder*: the rural gentry is implicitly criticized when it seems to be giving up its ideal of companionate marriage for the sake of socio-economic alliances or marriages of convenience. Indeed, Fanny's firmness in this respect (partly subverted at one point by her beginning to relent towards the prospect of the advantageous match) almost succeeds in creating the impression that the companionate marriage has been a value cherished by the rural gentry from times immemorial. Ironically, this impression is not quite accurate: the ideal of the companionate marriage, no matter how sweetly sought in fiction, was, arguably, of a rather recent and predominantly middle-class origin (see Waldron, 1999, 116). Here again, the syntactics of the novel's motifs, in

⁸ It is noteworthy that though Fanny is usually believed to be critical of slavery and slave-trade, Claudia Johnson notes that she is herself "a perfectly colonized subject," that she is "one of Sir Thomas's slaves, every bit as bound to and constituted by the system that oppresses her as the hero of Edgeworth's appalling story *The Grateful Negro*" (1993, 114).

particular the motifs clustering around gender relationships, slides into the realm of pragmatics. The latter overlaps with the politics of a “connected critic’s” (Walzer, 1978, 38-40ff) address of the audience on whom this critic’s wellbeing depends yet whose values she has the power, albeit a severely limited one, not only to reflect and perpetuate but also, possibly, to amend.

In the classroom situation, the analysis of the directions in which the significance of the novel’s title may branch out should take place after the students’ have read the novel and can easily connect the issues raised by the title with the novel’s motifs, its vindication-pattern plot (Paris, 1997, 144), its character portrayal. Explanation of the social significance of the toponym such as *Mansfield Park* may be usefully offered at the beginning of the study

of the novel because it helps to define the novel’s social setting, but the bulk of the semiological analysis must be interwoven with the close reading of selected episodes and themes. Moreover, the semiological triad of semantics/syntactics/pragmatics is not a mandatory lesson in theory to be offered to the students. It is, rather, a method by which the teacher can helpfully organize her conceptualization of the proportions of external information and the intra-textual analysis when planning the never sufficient class time, as well as her conceptualization of the ways in which the attention to each of the constituents of the semiological triad may enrich our understanding of the other constituents and the enjoyment of the delicate beauty and the cultural depth of great literary works.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Armstrong, Isobel. 1988: *Jane Austen: Mansfield Park*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Critical Studies.

Austen, Jane, 1952: *Jane Austen’s Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*. Ed. R. W. Chapman, London: Oxford University Press.

Austen, Jane, 1994 [1818]: *Northanger Abbey*, Harmondsworth Penguin Popular Classics.

Austen, Jane, 1998 [1814]: *Mansfield Park*. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson, New York: Norton Critical Editions.

Barthes, Roland, 1974: *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang.

Butler, Marilyn, 1987: *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon.

Fish, Stanley, 1980: *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Frye, Northrop, 1957: *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, 1979: *The Madwoman in the Attick: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hammond, Brean S, 1993: “The Political Unconscious in *Mansfield Park*.” In Nigel Wood, ed., *Mansfield Park*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 56-90.

Harrison, Bernard, 1991: *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Irony*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Herman, David, 2008. “Narrative Theory and the Intentional Stance.” *Partial Answers* 6/2, 233—260.

Hrushovski, Benjamin, 1984: “Fictionality and Fields of Reference: Remarks on the Theoretical Framework.” *Poetics Today* 5, 227-51.

Johnson, Claudia, 1993: “Gender, Theory and Jane Austen Culture.” In Nigel Wood, ed. *Mansfield Park*, Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 91-120.

Kirkham, Margaret, 1983: *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction*. Brighton: Harvester.

Monaghan, David, 1978: "Mansfield Park and Evangelicalism: A Reassessment." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33: 215-30.

Morris, Charles, 1946: *Signs, Language, and Behavior*, New York: Prentice-Hall.

Paris, Bernard J., 1997: *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature*, New York: New York University Press.

Waldron, Mary, 1999: *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walzer, Michael, 1987: *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

SEMIOLOGINIO MODELIO TAIKYMAS LITERATŪROS DĖSTYMIUI:

J. AUSTEN ROMANO PAVADINIMAS *MANSFIELD PARK*

Leona Toker

Santrauka

Straipsniu iliustruojama, kaip semiologinį modelį galima būtų pritaikyti dėstant literatūrą universitete. Trys semiologinio modelio aspektai: semantika, sintaktika ir pragmatika – padeda suderinti detalią teksto analizę ir jo meninių, istorinių ir sociologinių kontekstų apibrėžimą. Straipsnyje apžvelgiamos kryptys, kuriomis galima plėtoti diskusiją apie Jane Aus-

ten romano *Mansfield Park* pavadinimą. Jos remiasi intertekstine toponimo reikšme, sociologine ir istorine abiejų pavadinimo dalių reikšme (semantika), vidiniais ryšiais tarp romano temų, jų plėtotės būdų ir romano pavadinimo motyvų (sintaktika) bei motyvų išdėstymo būdų priklausomybe nuo autorės pozicijos jos adresatų atžvilgiu (pragmatika).

Gauta 2008-10-30

Priimta 2008-11-26

Author's address:

Department of English

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel

Tel.: +972 2 5883581, Fax: +972 2 5881245

E-mail: toker@mscc.huji.ac.il