



# On the Edge of Chaos: Space and Power in Maria Edgeworth's 'The Grateful Negro' (1804)

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## Abstract

'The Grateful Negro' (1804) is one of Maria Edgeworth's less well-known children's stories. Set on a Jamaican plantation, it concerns the differing attitudes of two white plantation owners, Mr Edwards and Mr Jefferies, towards enslaved people and a rebellion provoked by Mr Jefferies's cruelty, later averted by Mr Edwards's apparent kindness. The tensions among the characters are made legible through spatiality. We identify the origins of the text in Edgeworth's involvement in debates about the transatlantic slave trade and, particularly, her visit to a slave ship while living in Bristol. However, her story shows ambivalence and avoids condemnation, something that may contribute to scholars' lack of interest in the tale.

Drawing on discussions of power and space in children's literature, this essay examines the ways that space encodes, reflects, and problematizes power in 'The Grateful Negro'. We consider the text in its political and historical context and draw on Bradford's work on liminality in postcolonial theory, and Stephens and McCallum's theory of borders as liminal spaces between meanings to frame our comparison of Ireland and Jamaica in the 1790s, and especially the Edwards and Edgeworth plantations that stood on the threshold between order and rebellion. We argue that while the Jefferies's house initially appears as a clear site of power and the slave cabins a clear site of powerlessness within the text, this binary is complicated by the presence of the forest—a locus for magic, rebellion, and alternative might—and by the spectre of Britain, the centre of colonial, imperial, and administrative authority that haunts the narrative. Edgeworth puts these spaces in uncomfortable proximity, creating a textual landscape that teeters on the edge of chaos.

## Keywords

Maria Edgeworth, Space, Power, Liminality, Colonialism, Slavery

In October 1792, a 24-year-old white woman boarded a slave ship in Bristol. She was there for a tour. That year, debates about the British slave trade took on a new intensity and urgency when, on 2 April, William Wilberforce accused John Kimber, a captain of a Bristol-based slave ship, of murdering a fifteen-year-old African girl on the deck of his ship (Rogers, 2020, p. 25). Now, at the Bristol docks, the pivot-point for the triangu-

lar trade in slaves, sugar, and cotton, Maria Edgeworth peered inside 'the dreadfully small hold in which the poor slaves are stowed together, so that they cannot stir (Edgeworth, 1792).' For Edgeworth, a privileged woman from an Anglo-Irish family, the visit to the slave ship, the chance to see firsthand the cramped conditions and the awful space below-decks where slaves were quartered, made visible and tangible the brutal-

ity of slavery in a way that abstract discussion did not. By visiting the slave ship and entering a space that would have been beyond the reach of most people of her gender and class, Edgeworth gave herself new understanding and insight into the British slave trade.

Edgeworth had been engrossed in debates about the transatlantic slave trade for some time before she boarded that ship. In the 1790s, Edgeworth and her family lived near Bristol twice and she witnessed the busy slave port in action. The Edgeworths also cultivated friendships with abolitionists including Thomas Day, who published an abolitionist poem with John Bicknell titled 'The Dying Negro' in 1773, and Erasmus Darwin, who thought they ought to put the slave muzzles that were manufactured in Birmingham on display in the House of Commons, to show their barbarity (Barrett, 1992, p. 3). Another family friend, Anna Barbauld, wrote her 'Epistle to William Wilberforce' in 1791, criticising the fact that Britain 'knows and she persists—Still Afric bleeds,/unchecked, the human traffic still proceeds (Barbauld, 1791, p. 6).<sup>7</sup> Edgeworth's stepmother, Frances, recounted in 1799 that when the Barbaulds visited, they were 'so eager against the slave trade that when (they) drank tea with us, he always brought East India sugar, that he might not share our wickedness in eating that made by the negro slave (Hare, 1894, p. 26).<sup>8</sup> Edgeworth's preoccupation with the slavery question is evident in her texts for children. In 'The Good Aunt' (1801), young Charles Howard is cared for by his aunt, who sold her estate in the West Indies because 'she did not particularly wish to be the proprietor of slaves (Edgeworth, *Moral Tales*, 1802, p. 14).<sup>9</sup> Edgeworth's play 'The Two Guardians' (1817) is set in the West Indies and features a slave named Quaco, named after a leader of the Maroon War in Jamaica 1725–1740. But it is 'The Grateful Negro' (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, 1804) that best provides a place and a setting where complex ideas of slavery and power can be considered by young readers.

Set on a Jamaican plantation, 'The Grateful Negro' concerns the differing attitudes of two white plantation owners, Mr Edwards and Mr Jefferies, towards enslaved people and a rebellion provoked by Jefferies's cruelty and averted by Edwards's apparent kindness. The narrative opens with Caesar, a slave on Jeffries's plantation, who is about to be sold and separated from his beloved Clara, so that Jeffries can pay off a debt. Edwards intervenes and buys both Caesar and Clara, in order to ensure that the couple can stay together. He allows them to set up home together on his plantation and, at one point, gives Caesar his own pocket-knife so that he can better manage the little garden beside their cottage. Caesar knows of an intended rebellion, instigated by Esther, an Obeah witch. Esther tries to persuade Caesar to join the rebellion, even threatening Clara's life in order to force his hand, but Caesar, keen to spare his new master, loyally warns Edwards of the plot, allowing Edwards and his men to surround the leaders. Edwards talks to the slaves, pardoning them, and so thwarts the rebellion. The overall catastrophe is averted, but not before the slaves on Jeffries's estate burn the plantation to the ground and revenge themselves on Durant, the overseer, inflicting the tortures used on slaves on the overseer himself. Jeffries is left destitute while Edwards's estate prospers. While the characters are one-dimensional—Durant is uncomplicatedly cruel, Edwards flatly kind, Esther a wicked witch cut straight from a fairy tale—their simplicity is thrown into relief by a complex and subtle spatial dynamic. Space encodes, reflects, and problematizes power in 'The Grateful Negro.' Focusing on the representation of domestic and wild spaces in the text, this paper examines the ways in which space supports and shapes narrative action, encodes active ideologies, and makes visible the apparently passive ideologies in Edgeworth's writing.

Children's literature studies places a high value on space and spatiality. Tony Watkins (2005, p. 67) suggests that landscape is the

‘most relevant’ topic for scholars of children’s literature and in the years following the so-called ‘spatial turn’ in the arts and humanities (Cosgrove, 1999, p. 7), there have been myriad publications that attest to the increased interest in space and place in children’s literature. Given that power is also a primary area of interest in children’s literature studies, studies that address the intersections of landscape and power are especially interesting. In *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children’s Literature* (2007) Clare Bradford highlights the ways that fictional spaces enable the production and reproduction of power. For Bradford, liminal spaces are especially interesting, noting that in postcolonial theory, ‘the term ‘liminality’ refers...to the concept of a domain ‘in-between’ cultures, languages, and subjectivities, where individual and group identities are formed (Bradford, 2007, p. 158).’ Bradford cautions that any careful reading of liminal spaces should be sensitive to ‘the historical and cultural contexts in which they are located (Bradford, p. 159).’ ‘The Grateful Negro’ insists on such a careful reading. It is a text that engages with multiple kinds of liminality. There are various liminal zones within the narrative and Edwards, a character who moves along and across cultural and spatial boundaries, can be characterized as a liminal figure. More importantly, as we discuss below, the text itself arises out of and deliberately recalls Edgeworth’s own liminal identity. Her lived experience as an Anglo-Irish woman dwelling in a precarious space in the Irish midlands and her preoccupation with contemporary debates about slavery affect the ways she writes about space and power. Edgeworth’s narrative is at once about Jamaica and about Ireland; it speaks to and of two distinct spaces and draws them close together, creating a textual space that combines elements of both places. This complex textual illusion, rather like the visual illusions discussed by E.H. Gombrich (2002, p. 4), allows the reader to see elements of both landscapes simultaneously.

## A Tale of Two Colonies

For Edgeworth, Jamaica was an imagined landscape. She never visited the Caribbean and had no first-hand knowledge of Jamaica. ‘The Grateful Negro,’ like the earlier story ‘The Little Merchants: A Tale’ (1800), is part of ‘a long literary tradition that allows authors to situate their stories in places they have never visited (Orestano, 2015, p. 57).’ Francesca Orestano describes the ‘manifold strategy’ Edgeworth used in ‘The Little Merchants’ to generate a convincing sense of place including quoting from guidebooks, pointing out local customs and embedding scientific facts within the narrative (Orestano, p. 63). Edgeworth uses similar strategies to create a sense of place in ‘The Grateful Negro.’ Having gathered information about the colony, including details about Obeah and the rebellion of 1760, from sources like Edward Long’s three-volume *History of Jamaica* (1744) and Bryan Edwards’s *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1792), Edgeworth quotes extensively from Edwards within her narrative. While Edwards’s work is the only source Edgeworth cites directly within her story, she also refers in a footnote to August von Kotzebue’s play ‘The Negro Slaves’ (1795). There are other intertexts present: the astute reader will note the scene where Edgeworth describes Mrs. Jeffries lounging on a sofa, fanned by four slaves, echoes Barbauld’s ‘Epistle to William Wilberforce’ where a pale beauty ‘diffus’d on sofas of voluptuous ease’ torments her slaves (Barbauld, 1791, pp. 9–10). However, Edgeworth also draws on other strategies to create a sense of place in this narrative. She supplements the information gleaned second-hand about Jamaica with ideas drawn from her lived experience in Ireland, another British colony rife with rebellion and unrest. By combining these two geographically disparate spaces, Edgeworth creates a unique and vibrant sense of narrative space.

As an Anglo-Irish writer, Edgeworth was sensitive to the social and political complexi-

ties of colonies and the complicated relationships between the native Irish and the Anglo-Irish settlers and draws on this first-hand knowledge of the connections between space and power in her representation of Jamaica. Like Ireland, Jamaica was a troublesome colony. Susan Greenfield (1997, p. 216) notes that 'both the plantocracy and the slave population in Jamaica were notoriously rebellious. The plantocrats supported the American Revolution, resented the British government's demand that they help fund their own defense, and declared the sovereign right to determine their laws...while the slaves instigated conspiracies, revolts, and near revolts at least ten times between 1776 and 1815.' Of these rebellions, Tacky's Revolt in 1760, which is explicitly mentioned in Edgeworth's text, is perhaps the most significant. An enslaved Coromantee warlord named Tackyi (anglicised as Tacky) led an uprising of hundreds of enslaved people drawn from Akan tribes (including Ashanti, Fanta, Nzema and Akye). The scale and violence of the revolt and the brutality with which it was put down by British forces reverberated throughout the empire. Writing in 1802, however, Edgeworth is not likely thinking just of Tacky's Revolt, but rather rebellion that was closer—both temporally and geographically—to home: the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, and specifically the Battle of Ballinamuck that took place on the Longford border, near to Edgeworth's family home. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace (1991, p. 143) remarks that during the 1798 Rebellion 'the fear of physical violence and destruction of property were well known to the family at Edgeworthstown.' The Edgeworths were forced to flee their estate for protection, narrowly escaping an ammunition cart explosion, and Richard Lovell Edgeworth was nearly lynched by an angry Protestant mob who thought he was associated with the United Irishmen. His estate, however, had been 'deliberately spared' by rioting Catholic rebels because he was a known sympathiser of Irish causes (Butler, 1972, p. 138).

These events speak to the Edgeworths' spatial and cultural liminality; they were both colonised and colonisers, both persecuted and revered for their championing of Irish causes, and their estate was both a refuge and a place of danger, a place within Ireland but belonging to England. Edgeworth's attitude to Ireland—and her sensitivity to the ways that power may be inscribed in space—is ambiguous, puzzling, and complex. When Edgeworth decides to write a story about a rebellion in Jamaica, she does so with first-hand knowledge of rebellions in Ireland and with a sound awareness of the social, cultural, and political factors that bred unease in Jamaica. These factors enable her to generate a vivid setting for her story that draws two colonised spaces close together.

### **Domestic and Wild Spaces in the Text**

When Edgeworth wrote to Sophy Ruxton about her tour of the slave ship at Bristol, she did not write about how the experience made her feel, nor comment on the conversations she and her brother must have had on the way to the docks or on their way home. The focus of her letter is on space, on 'the dreadfully small hold in which the poor slaves are stowed together (Edgeworth, 1792).' This same concern with space and power is obvious in 'The Grateful Negro.' Space is a vital concern to the narrator of the text and the worst injustices of slavery are described in spatial terms:

It too often happens, that, when a good negro has successfully improved his little spot of ground, when he has built himself a house, and begins to enjoy the fruits of his industry, his acquired property is seized upon by the sheriff's officer for the payment of his master's debts; he is forcibly separated from his wife and children, dragged to public auction, purchased by a stranger, and perhaps sent to terminate his miserable existence in the mines of Mexico;

excluded for ever from the light of heaven.  
(Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 196–7)

Here, the loss of the ‘little spot of ground’ is given priority over the human relationships that are ruptured by the slave trade. The sale of the enslaved person is first and foremost characterised as an eviction. Only then does the narrator reckon with the human bodies. Their experiences are also figured in spatial terms as they are ‘separated from,’ ‘dragged to,’ ‘sent to’ various places. For Edwards, that Caesar might have to leave the land he has tended is more of a tragedy than having to separate from his lover: “Poor fellow!” said Mr. Edwards; ‘and must he leave this cottage which he has built, and these bananas which he has planted?’ (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 200).<sup>7</sup> Here, the reader is encouraged to see space and one’s relationship with a landscape as taking precedence over human relationships within the text. Indeed, the relationships among the characters are primarily presented in spatial terms and the tensions simmering below the surface of the text are made intelligible through spatiality. The island setting serves to focus the narrative action within a tight geographical space and accentuate the power struggles among the characters. Within this space, the action is further focused on the two contiguous plantations. While there is an apparently wide ideological gulf between Jeffries and Edwards, that their estates share a border suggests that their views will be forced into juxtaposition over the course of the narrative. These plantations sit in uncomfortable proximity to the wild forest space, creating a textual landscape that is on the edge of chaos.

On both plantations there are two kinds of houses which Edgeworth uses as outward and visible signs of the status of the occupants. As Susan Meyer (1996, p. 7) suggests, the domestic space ‘may not be separate from the concerns of imperialism’ and the houses within Edgeworth’s narrative must be read in terms of colonial power. The plantation houses occupied by the white

characters are large and luxurious. The cottages occupied by the Black characters are small and meagre. The proximity of these dwellings would ordinarily suggest a kind of closeness, of intimacy and sympathy among the occupants but the nearness of two such distinct dwellings heightens the tensions in the text by bringing the free and enslaved characters into uncomfortable juxtaposition. While Edgeworth does not describe the houses in detail, we are afforded glimpses into these spaces which, despite their brevity, effectively convey the power dynamics of the narrative. Just as Edgeworth’s act of peering into ‘the dreadfully small hold’ (Edgeworth, 1792) on the slave ship allowed her new insights into the British slave trade, these glances inside the fictional houses grant her readers insight into the lives of her characters. Edgeworth provides almost no details about the appearance of the plantation houses, beyond mentioning that in order to wake his master, Caesar must ‘scal[e] the wall of his bedchamber, get in at the window’ which suggests that the building is at least two stories high and that Edwards sleeps in an upper chamber, with the window left open (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 236). Edgeworth gives a little more detail about the Jeffries’s house and its furnishings. Both Mr and Mrs Jeffries are reclining on sofas when they first appear in the narrative: Jeffries is ‘stretched on a sofa, drinking coffee’ and Mrs Jeffries ‘who spent all that part of the day which was not devoted to the pleasures of the table, or to reclining on a couch, in dress (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, pp. 200, 228).’ That the Jeffries’s couch and the table are the only items of furniture mentioned in the narrative gives these items unusual importance and allows Edgeworth to efficiently convey the Jeffries’s sloth and greed. Apart from the Jeffries’s house, the only other interior scenes are set in slave cabins. By referring to these spaces always as ‘cottages,’ Edgeworth conjures for her European readers an image of the Irish labourer’s cottage, the Bothán Scóir, typically a single-storey, one-roomed

building constructed of stone or peat and thatched with straw, an incongruity that reveals Edgeworth's European-centred worldview and her limited knowledge of the Caribbean. The cottages on the plantations are sites of powerlessness within the narrative. These are not private homes, and the occupants can be evicted without forewarning. While the omniscient narrator only ever brings the reader into the public-facing reception rooms of the Jeffries's home, the narrator directs the readers' eye into 'the farther corner[s]' of the slaves' cottages (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 199).<sup>7</sup> The characters, too, move in and out of the cottages without any regard for who owns or controls the spaces. The apparently benign Edwards continually encroaches on the slaves' property. Shortly after Caesar takes possession of a cottage, Edwards 'sent his carpenter, while Caesar was absent, to fit up the inside of his cottage; and when Caesar returned from work, he found his master pruning the branches of a tamarind tree that over-hung the thatch (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 223).<sup>8</sup> Caesar's home is subject to the oversight of the narrator and his master who decorates the house and shapes the adjoining garden according to his own tastes. Since space and its possession are so vitally important in this narrative, Edwards's intrusion into Caesar's home makes it clear that Caesar is not the master of his own space. While Edwards's amendments to Caesar's cottage are presented as a sort of kindness, his actions underline Caesar's powerlessness and render this powerlessness visible to the reader.

While the textual landscape may seem simplistically divided into a binary scheme comprised of the two plantations and the empowered space of the big house and the disempowered spaces of the slave cottages, close reading reveals a subtler spatial dynamic that suggests that the relationships among the characters and their ideological positions are far more complex than they initially appear. Martin Warnke (1994, p. 10) observes that 'among the simplest political

features of any landscape are the boundaries that separate private, regional or national territories, ecclesiastical or secular domains, and spheres of influence.' This suggests that political and ideological differences should be made legible in landscape through clearly demarcated boundaries. However, in 'The Grateful Negro,' the estates belonging to Jeffries and Edwards are not as distinct as they seem. When Edwards is out:

walking in that part of his plantation which joined to Mr. Jefferies' estate, he thought he heard the voice of distress at some distance. The lamentations grew louder and louder as he approached a cottage, which stood upon the borders of Jefferies' plantation. (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 198)

Here, the spatiality of the scene is muddled. There is at once a sense of distance and of proximity, of a border that is nonetheless permeable, at least for a white man. The borders both separate and connect the adjacent spaces. Significantly, Edwards is the only character to freely move across this plantation boundary, suggesting he is able to navigate and overcome other barriers. This ability to cross boundaries marks him as a liminal figure and, as we discuss later, his ability to move easily between spaces is connected to his ability to negotiate between different groups of people and to take on various identities.

The spatial dynamics of the text are further complicated by the forest, a locus for magic, rebellion, and alternative might in Edgeworth's narrative. Like many fictional spaces, the physical characteristics and symbolic functions of the forest space are intimately connected. The forest is 'chaotic' (Maitland, 2012, p. 17): its abundant growth stands in direct opposition to the neatly ordered plantations and in this wild space, rebellion grows unchecked. Corinne Saunders (1993, p. 201) notes that in European literature, the forest is traditionally a space of 'uncertainty, danger, and wilderness' that

‘stands in opposition to civilisation.’ Sara Maitland (p. 13) goes further, arguing that forests are full of peril and secrets. In folktales and literary texts alike, the secrecy and confusion of the space lends itself to stories about secret identities and characters who hide from authority. We see these narrative patterns played out across European literature, from Daphne seeking refuge from Zeus’s rapacious urges to Snow White hiding from the jealous Queen to Robin Hood evading the Sheriff of Nottingham. For Edgeworth, an author rooted in the almost forestless stretches of Co. Longford, these narrative patterns hold firm and in ‘The Grateful Negro’ she uses the forest as the space in which the slaves secretly meet to plot rebellion and where the witch Esther practices her magic. Esther is inextricably connected to the forest space: she lives in ‘the recess of a thick wood’ and has ‘obtained by her skill in poisonous herbs, and her knowledge of venomous reptiles’ through close association with the plants and animals of the forest (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 217). All characters, free and enslaved, move into and out of the forest space with ease and so the forest further disrupts the boundaries of the plantations. It is appropriate, then, that the forest becomes the space where Esther and the slaves who are enthralled by her power plot to destroy the plantations and overthrow the white masters. Even within this wild space where established social orders are threatened, the narrative still clings to some elements of the spatial power dynamic established earlier. For example, when Caesar visits Esther’s cottage he finds ‘the door fastened; and he was obliged to wait some time before it was opened by Esther;’ yet when Edwards visits the same spot, he is able to ‘loo[k] through a hole in the wall and, by the blue flame of a cauldron, over which the sorceress was stretching her shrivelled hands, he saw Hector and five stout negroes standing, intent upon her incantations (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 232, 237).’ The white character retains his omniscience even

beyond the borders of the space he controls directly and can see further—and more acutely—than the Black characters. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that this space is controlled by Esther. As a woman, and moreover a Black woman, Esther should be doubly disempowered: that she not only gains power but asserts power over men within the forest suggests that this space lies beyond the reach of the plantocratic society.

### Colonial Spaces

The spaces of this narrative must also be considered in terms of two very distant spaces: Britain and Ireland. While Britain is only mentioned briefly at the end—as the place the near-destitute Jeffries and his wife escape to after the rebellion—the spectre and sceptre of Britain hovers over this text. As the centre of colonial, imperial, and administrative authority, Britain, even without being mentioned, is a centrifuge around which the characters orient themselves. The enslaved Africans have, undoubtedly, passed through British ports, on British ships, and Jeffries and Edwards are themselves transplants from Britain. Ireland, by contrast, is not a centre of colonial power but, like Jamaica, a colony under British control. In many ways, Edgeworth is not writing about Jamaica at all, but using an imagined version of Jamaica as a textual space in which she can present ideas about how colonies can be managed. Edgeworth’s writing is grounded in the landscape of her home estate in Co Longford in Ireland, a place on ‘the frontier of Anglo-Ireland (Connolly, 2020),’ at the very margins of British colonial control, constantly threatened with violent uprising, teetering on the edge of chaos. Yet Edgeworthstown was also a bastion of civilisation: a cultural oasis with distinguished literary and scientific visitors, where Richard Lovell Edgeworth executed civil engineering projects like the portable telegraph, road improvements and bog drainage. A last civilised outpost, the Edgeworth estate stood on the

threshold between civility and chaos much like Edwards's enlightened estate bordered both the forest and Jeffries's barbaric plantation in 'The Grateful Negro.' The triangulation of these three spaces—Jamaica, Ireland, and Britain—lends ambiguity to the spaces of the narrative. As Orestano (2015) notes in her discussion of 'The Little Merchants:'

By frequently summoning her young readers' attention to the unfamiliar setting, and by inviting them to read inserts and passages from other authors, Edgeworth in fact creates an interstitial space, set between her customary English reading public and the distant, indeed exotic, places described. (p. 70)

Similarly, in 'The Grateful Negro,' Edgeworth crafts an interstitial space which occupies the margins between the real and the imagined, the familiar and the strange. Within the narrative, the most significant spaces may be considered liminal. The forest is liminal in the sense that it occupies the very margins of known territory, but we may also consider Edwards's estate in its entirety as a liminal site. Edwards's estate is not merely geographically liminal, but ideologically liminal too, reflected in his thoughts about slavery. Edwards paradoxically 'treated his slaves with all possible humanity and kindness' while perpetuating the system that kept people enslaved (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 195). John Stephens and Robyn McCallum propose borders as 'liminal spaces between meanings' not just spaces between places. They continue: 'borders are thus also a marker of hybrid or liminal subjectivities, such as those that would be experienced by persons who negotiate among multiple cultural, linguistic or racial systems throughout their lives (2011, p. 369).' Edwards exemplifies this in his ability to negotiate with both slave and slave owner, and the space he occupies is appropriately liminal.

Like the Edwards's estate, Edgeworth's own home in Longford was both geographically

and culturally liminal. Perhaps appropriately, the murky bogland of the Edgeworth estate represents muddied positions of power and place. Claire Connolly (2020) states Edgeworth writes from the boggy place; that like the political and social landscape from which she writes, her perspective is not always clearly presented or understood. This is perhaps why 'The Grateful Negro' appears to both condone and condemn slavery. In his reading of the story, George Boulukos (1999, p. 22) describes Edgeworth as a 'lukewarm, ameliorationist supporter of slavery.' Yet it should be noted that Edgeworth's views echo those of William Wilberforce who, like many British abolitionists, was more concerned with stopping the transatlantic trade in human flesh than with eliminating slavery altogether. Indeed, Wilberforce went so far as to suggest that 'the owners of West Indian estates [are] men of more than common kindness...utterly unacquainted with the true nature...of the system with which they have the misfortune to be connected (Taylor, 2020, p. 26)' thereby absolving them of any serious wrongdoing. Edwards, by challenging the common treatment of slaves while upholding the system that allows for slavery, embodies this ambivalence:

He wished there was no such thing as slavery in the world but he was convinced... that the sudden emancipation of the negroes would rather increase than diminish their miseries. (Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, p. 195)

Unlike Jeffries, whose estate is a landscape of cruel indifference, Edwards sees his role as planter and slave-owner as a moral and legal duty, much like the Edgeworths of Co. Longford who could see themselves as providing much-needed stewardship for the unruly and incompetent Irish. Thus, Edgeworth positions Edwards as a model of colonial stewardship. The liminality of his estate supports and enables his personal liminality. He is a figure who walks on the borders of estates,



moving easily between supposedly distinct zones within the plantation. His spatial liminality enables a kind of personal liminality too, allowing him to negotiate among different groups of people and speak easily and freely to all. Edwards is a man able to mediate between the empire and the colonized people, who extends understanding and sympathy to both and, in so doing, turns aside the threat of rebellion.

## Conclusion

Edgeworth's sense of place is complex, and this spatial complexity informs and enriches 'The Grateful Negro.' The textual landscape is one riven with contrasts—the managed plantations stand in contrast to the wilderness of the forest, the grand houses of the white characters in contrast to the cottages

of the enslaved Black characters, the well-managed estate in contrast to the poorly-managed one, the colony in contrast to the centre of empire. These spaces represent opposing ideological stances too. In the figure of Edwards, Edgeworth creates an idealised liminal character, one who moves readily between spaces and negotiates between rebels and their masters, between the colony and the empire. Edwards stands between the slaves and Jeffries—both spatially and ideologically mediating between these two extremes—allowing for passive acceptance and active condemnation to coexist. Through Edwards, Edgeworth presents a kind of middle ground, a complex position that is made clear to the reader only when we pay attention to the narrative's complex and subtle spatial dynamics.

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