

**Ideal Gender Roles and Individual Self-Expression in the Novels *Pride and Prejudice*
and *Sense and Sensibility***
By Sarah Melz

"I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder at your knowing any."

*"Are you so severe upon your own sex, as to doubt the possibility of all this?"
"I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united."*

-Elizabeth and Darcy in Pride and Prejudice, Volume I, Chapter VIII

Preface

In the final volume of the novel *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood, having reflected on her excess of sensibility, tells her sister Elinor her new resolution: "From you, from my home, I shall never again have the smallest incitement to move; and if I do mix in other society, it will be only to show that my spirit is humbled, my heart amended, and that I can practise the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness and forbearance" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 245-246). Marianne has renounced her selfish ways and will now fit more easily into what society at that time expected of a woman, who must often perform "the lesser duties of life," which did not require much feeling in the performance of them. However, what Marianne has failed to learn from her more sensible sister is that one can maintain the standards of propriety yet not give up the ability to feel strong emotion.

The wide range of scholarship centered on Jane Austen is full of contention. Some put forth that she was ahead of her time in regards to feminist ideology. Others say she did not go far enough, at least in comparison to what other women were doing at the time. I would argue, however, that Austen's views on women involve a balance between what was expected of them from society and their individual desires. As evidence, I will point to the pairs of sisters in her novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*,

who must also navigate society to find the right compromise between meeting society's expectations and yet asserting their own minds, with the former work stressing a balance of observing some rules of the class system and recognizing their limitations on the individual, and the latter proving one can have both sense and sensibility.

To illustrate Austen's belief in such a balance, my first chapter examines the images that the women of her time were expected to aspire to. These images circulated in the form of conduct literature, which usually outlined what a woman should do to first catch the attention of a suitor, and then to make sure it is a good match. Other instructors emphasized how a woman could live in a virtuous, Christian way, which conveniently would also lead to an advantageous marriage. I argue that Austen was aware of what society expected, yet in her fiction she points out the faults to be found in codes of conduct such as these. For example, she includes in her fiction the issue of a woman finding love and marriage, yet at the same time characters who turn this into their sole focus are presented as ridiculous. Going along with this, Austen's heroines in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* each find happiness in a good match, yet they are not always the type of ladies that conduct literature promoted at the time. Minor characters are often used to depict the ironies of a society that idealizes certain things even as these individuals do not care about these ideals. In these ways, Austen takes society's expectations and shows how the reality cannot live up to such images. With this assertion, I will bring in scholarship from those who view Austen as a conservative writer and those who see her work as much more feminist to stress how the way to understand these two novels is to see them as falling somewhere in between the two extremes.

In my second chapter, my focus is on the novel *Sense and Sensibility* and how

Elinor and Marianne present two models of how a woman could navigate the strictures of society while also attempting to balance those expectations with a sense of individuality.

Marianne is an example of a woman who allows too much feeling to control her behavior, a way of life that can lead to social disapprobation. It is true that Marianne at first seems to be the character who is striving for independence by voicing her opinions and emotions. However, I put forward that Austen intends to show with this younger sister that completely disregarding proper social conduct does not lead to happiness.

Elinor is really the character who deserves admiration and empathy. She behaves as she is expected to and shows little outward feeling, but inwardly she understands her emotions and dwells on them. I argue that this sense of inhibition is due to her sister's overly dramatic behavior and its negative consequences. Austen seems to be putting Elinor forward as the sister whom other women should attempt to emulate. She appears on the surface to be the type of woman authors of conduct literature would have praised, yet her inner thoughts reveal that she is not blindly following social standards but using them to discover who she is as an individual.

My third chapter centers on *Pride and Prejudice*, in which another pair of sisters, Elizabeth and Jane, emphasizes that while society does have its shortcomings, some of those rules need to be respected in order to live comfortably. Jane is quite close to being the ideal woman as outlined in the conduct literature of the time. She is beautiful, quiet, acts properly in public, and has a strong sense of Christian virtue, which makes her exceptionally kind and understanding. However, Austen seems to be once again pointing out a problem in the way society treats women. On the one hand, a woman who follows the guidelines of proper female behavior, as Jane does, is told she will be rewarded with a

good match. On the other, Jane is not allowed to achieve this goal since her family is of a lower class and *they* do not act with proper decorum. An individual's merit means nothing next to connections. As it turns out, Jane is not the perfect woman, and neither is her sister, Elizabeth. In fact, Austen ever acknowledges that there is such a person.

Whereas in *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor already knows how to balance social decorum and independent thought, Elizabeth must learn her lesson as the story progresses. She acts with propriety, yet she is not afraid to ridicule those around her who follow social tradition blindly or those who disregard the rules themselves but point out the faults in others. Elizabeth flouts convention, though not as much as Marianne, but she still must learn that just because society has its flaws does not mean that its modes of decorum can be thrown away, especially when one is in a strained financial situation.

Jane Austen is neither completely conservative in her fiction's themes, nor is she promoting a radical form of feminism. In her novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen is showing that the ideals society promotes are not always attainable, since no one can live up to society's expectations. Something must usually hold a woman back, whether it be economics, family background, or her own individuality. A compromise must be made between the individual and society. The pairs of sisters in these works discover that such a way of life can lead to happiness. So, Austen falls somewhere in the middle of the progressive spectrum, accepting that some of society's rules and expectations must be followed in order to avoid ruin, but also asserting that one can successfully move through society by adhering to tradition while at the same time fulfilling individual desires.

Chapter One: The Social Rules of Austen's Time and the People Who Abused Them

"Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she had fondly flattered herself with expecting...she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village." - Jane Austen on Marianne's fate in Sense and Sensibility, Volume III, Chapter XIV

Jane Austen's contemporaries defined a proper lady very singularly and clearly. Much was written in an attempt to guide young women in society's ways so they could ensure a good marriage, the best position a female could hope for at the time. In her novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen addresses some of these social ideals. At times she supports conventional values, such as living a virtuous life and women finding happiness in marriage. In other places she points out the faults of a society that encourages certain modes of behavior and thought while its members are either too eager in following them or flout them for selfish purposes. With her work acting as a sort of social commentary, Austen does not present herself as completely conservative in promoting the social traditions of her time, but neither is she calling for a feminist revolution on a grand scale. Rather, she is forcing people to look at their world in a more critical way, to follow social rules while recognizing that they are not always reasonable, especially in regards to the view of women. In this way, Austen's heroines achieve an independence that can operate within convention.

In Jane Austen's time, a special stress was put upon a woman to be a "proper lady." There were many authoritative texts, mostly written by men, that laid out what such a woman should be. Some of the most influential examples from this period were collected into an anthology entitled *The Young Lady's Pocket Library*. This collection contained parents' advice to their daughters on how to live correctly in society and also a

short compilation of fables thought to be a suitable form of entertainment for young ladies. The advice is mostly concerned with how a woman should behave, with the goal being to marry well. The fables were written for "...those whose only business is amusement" (*The Lady's Pocket Library* iii). This suggests that the only purpose these stories had was not to provide any great knowledge, but to teach moral lessons in a simple format. In fact, the title of the whole collection itself is revealing in that by using the word "library," it can be deduced that this book contained everything a woman could possibly need to read.

Surely Austen did not agree that women only needed conduct guidelines and basic animal tales to improve their minds. In fact, in *Pride and Prejudice* the theme of females reading is addressed. In one of the famous scenes at Netherfield, Elizabeth chooses to not play cards with the rest of the party, but instead sits and reads. She receives trouble for this choice, as Miss Bingley comments on her behavior with sarcasm: "Miss Eliza Bennet...despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 26). Miss Bingley seems to be calling Elizabeth's sense of femininity into question, but Darcy surprisingly shows an admiration for Elizabeth as he lists the qualities of an accomplished woman. Indeed, many of the attributes are ones that can be found in *The Young Lady's Pocket Library*, such as "...a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions..." (27). Yet Darcy adds something not usually encouraged in conduct literature: "...and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (27). Darcy is a rich, land-owning gentleman—quite a catch for a young woman looking for a husband. When Austen chooses to have him desire a well-

read woman (and surely *The Young Lady's Pocket Library* would not be regarded as “extensive” reading), she is showing some of her progressive ideas. That is, women must form an independent mind but to do so they must be well informed. If society were to change its modes of thinking and allow women a chance for education, then perhaps society would function the way it was meant to, with men and women respecting each other and living side by side.

A well-known advocate of this change to make society more favorable to women is Mary Wollstonecraft. In her famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she reasons that education is the key to ensuring happy relationships between men and women and making more productive citizens of society. In fact, she even states how forming the mind properly can lead to virtue:

Consequently, the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason (Wollstonecraft 37).

During the late eighteenth century, people were pressured to lead lives full of virtue and goodness. Some thought that too much knowledge would destroy this much sought for trait, but here Wollstonecraft is purporting that virtue cannot exist if one cannot deduce what it is and how one should behave to achieve it.

Now, Austen is often not considered to be comparable to more radical feminists such as Wollstonecraft. However there are modern critics who see her work as having very forward-thinking elements in regards to the interactions between men and women.

In fact, Vivien Jones, in her essay entitled “Feminisms,” puts forward that Austen not only included feminist elements to her work, but also postfeminist ideas. Jones writes that “feminist” literature is mostly considered to be radical and demanding equality, much as Wollstonecraft does in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Jones points out how Austen does do this at some points in her fiction, as in *Pride and Prejudice*:

“Economically, Elizabeth is far from independent. As the closest male relative, under the law of entail, it is Mr. Collins rather than herself or her sisters who is heir to her father’s estate. But Elizabeth asserts her moral and intellectual independence, at least, and reaches for Wollstonecraftian rhetoric in order to do so” (Jones 284). On the other hand, though, Jones goes on to state that one should pay more attention to the postfeminist elements of Austen’s work; that is, when she does not call for equality or a changing status for women, but rather how one can improve herself as a human being:

This does not, of course, mean that her novels are apolitical. Rather, they engage indirectly with the agenda of conservative reform through their focus on their heroines’ moral rather than formal education, on the ethics of domestic life, and on the right to romantic fulfillment. In doing so, they inevitably engage with contemporary gender politics, putting the language and ideas of Enlightenment feminism to post-[French] revolutionary effect by representing them in essentially nonthreatening ways (288).

I think this argument is an important one when considering Austen’s balance of social expectations with a development of individualism. Perhaps some see her as not being radical enough compared to radical feminists, but Austen instead calls not for a change in society but a change in how a person lives within that world, by understanding oneself.

Elizabeth reads not to demand equality with men or to catch a husband, but rather to improve her mind for its own sake. However, what I will discuss in later chapters is how Austen was not necessarily a postfeminist writer. She may have included some aspects of the Enlightenment in her work, but she did address gender problems more explicitly than Jones gives her credit for.

In fact, Austen's heroines are quite radical compared to the image Dr. Gregory puts forward in his "Father's Legacy to His Daughters," (1761) a selected feature in *The Lady's Pocket Library*. In it, Gregory asserts that a respectable woman is quiet, demure, and never reveals her learning, but he warns, "They [men] will assure you that a franker behavior would make you more amiable. But trust me, they are not sincere when they tell you so. I acknowledge, that on some occasions it may render you more agreeable as companions, but it would make you less amiable as women" (*The Young Lady's Pocket Library* 13). With this statement, Gregory seems to think that in being more open and revealing more of their own minds, young ladies would at first gain the attention of men in social situations, but this would later expose a girl to social censure, since to be inviting and interesting was not seen to be feminine behavior. It could also be argued that a gentleman may enjoy conversation with such a "frank" woman, but he would not marry someone who was not a proper woman. Austen appears to want to disprove this theory when she creates a man like Darcy who admires Elizabeth for her expressiveness and knowledge. However, real women were taught to think that if they behaved in ways that corresponded to Gregory's description, only then could they secure a happy marriage and be a credit to their sex.

Of course, to be a credit to the female population most often involved marrying

well. Girls were controlled by their parents and the social sanctions of those who either approved or disapproved of their behavior, and once they were married these young women now gained a new influence over their lives: a husband. Some scholars have put forth that, in reality, a woman's power rested in her ability to accept or deny a suitor and then after the wedding she was allowed, even expected, to take charge of the home. As Mary Poovey puts it in her book *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, upon marriage "...a woman acquired her greatest power: the power of influence" (Poovey 29). Poovey goes on to state, though, that this influence was only allowed towards her children: "It is as a mother, moralists agreed, that a woman exercises her highest capacity for 'power'" (29). Women could not easily call for public change, but in rearing their children they could have control over something. So, there were ways women could direct their lives: by being a moral authority of their households, in raising their children, and, sometimes, gently swaying their husband's opinions.

Once again, Austen has taken some of these ideas and put them into her work. In her novels, women who are already married seem to have the most control. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Fanny Dashwood is shown at the very beginning of the story to be manipulative over her husband. She has acquired most of the power in the relationship: "Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended to do for his sisters...She begged him to think again on the subject" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 9). Fanny succeeds in talking her husband out of giving his father's wife and daughters anything but the bare minimum. *Pride and Prejudice* too shows a woman attempting to achieve power over her husband, this time in the form of Mrs. Bennet. She does not always attain complete domination, but by constantly harassing Mr. Bennet she is

showing that she no longer cares about being quiet and demure around a man: “They attacked him in various ways; with barefaced questions, ingenious suppositions, and distant surmises” (*Pride and Prejudice* 7). With these characters Austen is agreeing with the belief at the time that women gained great influence after marriage. However, by portraying Fanny and Mrs. Bennet in such ridiculous ways, it could be surmised that she does not think marriage should be a power struggle. This can be detected in her treatment of her heroines’ marriages, since they do not settle with men only for economic reasons but also because of attraction and like-mindedness.

Even if Austen satirizes the fight for control in marriage, actual women still aspired to gain this limited privilege. In fact, it was not uncommon for older ladies to encourage the younger ones to settle. In “Advice of a Mother to her Daughter” (1728), another selection from *The Lady’s Pocket Library*, the Marchioness de Lambert is greatly concerned with how her daughter will marry. She cautions her to “...endeavor, in the most prudent and secret manner, to procure from your friends every necessary piece of information concerning him [the suitor],” and to especially pay attention to his family, whether it is “...distinguished for parts and worth, or for folly, knavery, and loathsome hereditary diseases” (*The Lady’s Pocket Library* 42-43). A husband and his family and wealth could either ensure a woman’s happiness or make her miserable both in the home and amongst the people of society. Once married, her new family would define a woman and any of their known attributes were also transferred to her. In a way, older women seemed to have encouraged younger girls to really understand what was at stake, rather than settle blindly. Austen also sees value in this, yet she stresses that a woman should try to also consider what she wants in a potential husband. In other words, young women

should keep in mind what her family thinks of a suitor, but also make sure that there is attraction to go along with the respectability.

In reflecting the ways society functions, the emphasis on marriage within Austen's novels usually does come from an older, maternal figure in the work. Austen uses these characters as an opportunity to show that putting too much importance on social demands, in this case the demand being marriage, can be overdone and result in social ridicule. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Jennings is often teasing the Dashwood girls about their romantic interests, the explanation being that "She had only two daughters, both of whom she had lived to see respectably married, and now she had nothing to do but marry all the rest of the world" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 29). Mrs. Jennings wants to know about the girls' beaux so she can be sure they are doing well for themselves. Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is also obsessed with the idea of an advantageous marriage for each of her five daughters. This is best exemplified at the ball at Netherfield as she boasts of Jane's supposedly impending union with Mr. Bingley: "...Mrs. Bennet seemed incapable of fatigue while enumerating the advantages of the match. His being such a charming young man, and so rich, and living but three miles from them, were the first points of self-gratulation" (*Pride and Prejudice* 68). Characters like Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Bennet are often treated with sarcasm and embarrassment, yet they have the same concerns that the Marchioness De Lambert has for her daughter; that is, to marry well so a girl can be taken care of and perhaps find some autonomy in running her own household. Finding a husband was the best way of ensuring a settled life at the time, but Austen seems to be questioning whether this stress on a proper marriage can end up leading one to social ostracism. In the Bennets' case, Mrs. Bennet is doing

everything she can to ensure Jane and Bingley's union, which she ought to be doing, according to society. Problems arise though when this emphasis on achieving status in marriage leads to violations in decorum, as Mrs. Bennet does when she brags about how her other daughters will be in the path of other rich men (68). It is ironic in that society wants its expectations to be met, but those who give it too much importance are led to being viewed as uncouth. Even society rejects an imbalance of social decorum and individual discretion.

To be sure, a woman was expected to act a certain way to lead her to an advantageous marriage, yet codes of conduct were also promoted by emphasizing how those behaviors are closely related to Christian moral standards. Richard Allestree, a writer on morality, wrote a book entitled *The Lady's Calling* (1787), in which he intends to instruct women on how to live virtuous, Christian lives. He emphasizes that women must have a proper sense of piety, a quality that he sets out "...to adapt it to my female readers, observe the propriety of it to women, not only as it is their greatest ornament and advantage, but especially as they have somewhat more of [a] pre-disposition towards it in their native temper" (Allestree 95-96). Interestingly, authors of conduct literature thought women needed to constantly be reminded of the importance of morality, yet did so by suggesting that women were naturally wholesome and so it was only right to act in such ways. Poovey sees this emphasis as being a means to control a woman's sexuality. As stated before, a woman only had her reputation to recommend her and any hint of immorality would destroy her future as a wife and housekeeper: "A woman is not to betray knowledge of sexuality (or even, in compromising circumstances, the absence of knowledge) because knowledge denotes experience and hence potential, if not actual,

corruption” (Poovey 26). Again there is a sort of irony in the weight given to women needing moral guidance. They are seen as innocent beings needing protection, yet at the same time there is a fear that women are drawn to impurity.

Interestingly, many clergymen make their way into Austen’s novels and she seems to use these characters to point out the faults of a society that constantly encourages virtuous behavior, yet most fail to achieve it. Sometimes it is even the clergyman himself who is living hypocritically, like Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, who is more concerned with status and pleasing his “esteemed patroness,” the formidable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, than setting a good Christian example. Mr. Collins is often bossed around by the old woman, a fact which makes him out to be a bumbling fool of a character. He seems to promote his religious authority at inappropriate times, such as when he uses the Netherfield ball to get closer to Elizabeth: “...she was surprised to find that he entertained no scruple on that head, and was very far from dreading a rebuke either from the Archbishop, or Lady Catherine de Bourgh, by venturing to dance” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 60). He is not ashamed to talk his way out of morality if it suits him. Mr. Collins also uses his position to interfere for Lady Catherine. He tells her the Bennets’ private business, such as when Lydia has eloped: “They [Lady Catherine and her daughter] agree with me in apprehending that this false step in one daughter, will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others, for who, as Lady Catherine herself condescendingly says, will connect themselves with such a family” (193). In this novel, the clergy seem to be the puppets of those who maintain their living.

Sense and Sensibility, on the other hand, offers a more forgiving view of a vicar. Edward is one of the novel’s romantic heroes and aspires to take orders. Austen reveals a

double standard of society when Edward's family believes such an occupation to be beneath him, yet at the time there is such weight given to Christian morality, which needs clergymen to guide the masses. Austen seems to make it a virtue of Edward that he does not listen to his mother and sister's ambitions for him: "But Edward had no turn for great men or barouches. All his wishes centered in domestic comfort and the quiet of private life" (*Sense and Sensibility* 14). His character can be compared to his sister Mrs. Fanny Dashwood's, who has big plans for him yet is selfish herself in helping to take away some of the heroines' inheritance.

In commenting on the issue of morality in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mary Poovey puts forward that

...nearly everything in the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* undermines the complacent assumption that they [Christian principles] are principles generally held or practically effective. Almost every action in the novel suggests that, more often than not, individual will triumphs over principle and individual desire proves more compelling than moral law. Even the narrator, the apparent voice of these absolute values, reveals that moral principles are qualified in practice (Poovey 184).

There are no "moral absolutes," as Poovey calls them, because actions must be looked at in their context. An individual has reasons for why she is the way she is. Austen uses this idea to point out the faults of a society that does not allow leeway in its rules of decorum. This will be an important idea to consider when thinking about Austen's attempt to reconcile social expectations with an individual mind. From her differing depictions of religious characters in her work, it can be seen that Austen was aware of the prevalence

of a Christian attitude in society yet was not afraid to point out how people, even those who claim to be good and virtuous, do not adhere to such standards.

So, a woman was pressured at the time to be demure, to catch a respectable husband, and aspire to virtuous Christian morality. Though many women tried to live up to this picture of femininity, many others were calling for change in regards to the status of women and the corresponding code of conduct they were expected to live by. In her book, Poovey points out that many women recognized that such an image of a female was unattainable, mostly due to the fact that the view of women of the late eighteenth century was full of paradoxes. In addition to being inherently pure beings who at the same time needed guidance in moral instruction, another example of a paradox for females at this time is that women were living in an age that emphasized individualism, yet they were not expected to assert themselves as independent: “Women were also urged to think of themselves collectively—not as a political unit, or as beings possessed of individual talents, capacities, or rights, but simply in terms of the universals of what Richardson’s *Lovelace* called ‘the sex, the sex’” (27). Such was the world Austen was living in, with stresses on proper deportment, and yet a pull was felt to bring change. Yet, Jones points out that one could not bring up issues of equality during this time because it was not a behavior associated with “proper femininity.” Jones gives the example of the public opinion of Wollstonecraft and how her credibility was promptly destroyed:

In spite of the emphasis on responsible motherhood in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the overtly polemical title of Wollstonecraft’s text, with its claim to women’s rational equality with men, meant that she became a byword, within the conservative press at least, for an inappropriately politicized form of

femininity which “no decorum checks”: a reputation compounded when the details of her unconventional private life were revealed to the public by her husband William Godwin in his 1798 posthumous memoir (Jones 287).

This memoir would have come out when Austen was writing, and surely she would have been influenced by society’s reaction. Like Wollstonecraft, Austen had an “unconventional private life”: she never married, though she received offers. Perhaps this was another influence that led Austen to promote a balance between societal standards and a sense of individuality. One cannot call for change too radically otherwise she will be dismissed altogether.

To return to Austen’s work itself, many critics saw and continue to see her writing as being too conservative in addressing social change, especially in regards to the treatment and expectations of women. Some only view her as an author who captures the outmoded norms of her world. George Parsons Lathrop was one such writer who in the late nineteenth century responded to an editorial written by a Mrs. Amelia A. Barr in which that lady calls for a return to protecting young women’s sense of innocence and purity—traits much like those of Jane Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* or, at least on the surface, of Elinor in the work *Sense and Sensibility*. Lathrop responds that women are going to be coming into their own more and more, and that literature is beginning to reflect these changes in the forms of George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He continues that the style of those like Jane Austen is gone for good, suggesting that Austen wrote in accordance with Mrs. Barr’s preferences (Lathrop 616). In some ways, Austen is conservative, since she does incorporate elements that were popular in her time period into her characters. Most of her heroines are aware of propriety, but by allowing them to

develop their own identities, Austen finally departs from conservatism and heads toward feminism.

Nina Hazaar defends Austen's modern tendencies in her article entitled "The Imagination Goes Visiting," in which she states that "...Austen's interest in propriety does not preempt her interest in independent judgment...Propriety, after all, entails not only silence and reserve but also dialogue, as in the small talk Elinor is often forced to make in the interests of politeness" (Nazaar 148). One could argue that a good woman would not have too many independent thoughts, instead only listening to those with authority over her. However, in reality one can still act in accordance with society's rules yet establish a singular identity, as both Elizabeth and Elinor do. The former lady knows what is expected of her in a public setting, yet she understands herself enough to not enter into matrimony lightly. She refuses both Mr. Collins, who will one day inherit Longbourn, and Mr. Darcy, who receives ten thousand pounds a year. Either match would have meant comfort and position, yet Elizabeth knows she will not be happy in either situation, at least for the present. Elinor, on the other hand, only receives one proposal, yet she goes through the motions of acting properly in society while all the time feeling strongly and meticulously examining her reactions. Each character knows herself well enough to understand what will make her happy.

In Jane Austen's lifetime, there were many rules of decorum a woman had to follow to be considered a "proper lady." Within her fiction, Austen often depicts characters who encounter problems with society's standards and in doing so she comments upon those rules. Sometimes she satirizes the way propriety is treated, as when some high status characters abuse their positions to get away with breaking social norms.

At other times Austen advocates using these rules in moderation, which can be done only when an individual attempts to achieve personal desires while at the same time being aware that these rules need to be followed for practical reasons. Society did not seem to be changing in favor of women too quickly, and so Austen suggests a way a woman can be happy while navigating a world obsessed with propriety.

Chapter Two: Elinor Dashwood, an Example of Controlling Feelings without Repressing Them

“...and sense will always have attractions for me.” –Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, Volume I, Chapter X

At one of the climaxes in the novel *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne, in an attempt to better understand her sister, finally finds out how unhappy Elinor has been. She declares, “What! while attending to me in all my misery, has this been on your heart? and I have reproached you for being happy!” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 185). With this statement, it is revealed that Marianne, with her excess of sensibility, has failed to see what her sister was truly feeling. She had been too caught up in her own feelings to look more deeply into Elinor’s life, but instead only reacted to what she saw on the surface. Elinor, in response, asserts, “But I did not love only him; and while the comfort of others was dear to me, I was glad to spare them from knowing how much I felt...I would not have you suffer on my account” (185). Elinor is depicted here as being more concerned with others, quite the opposite of her sister.

In many respects, Marianne is the more exciting of the two heroines in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. She is not afraid to defy social expectations, expressing her feelings openly and using her accomplishments for her own pleasure, rather than that of others. However, I would argue that Austen intends for Elinor to be the character that women should identify with. Marianne often uses her independent spirit in selfish and simple ways, while Elinor is more complex in that she commands her emotions in order to not diminish her worth in society’s eyes. She appears to be a proper lady on the exterior, yet inside she is feeling strongly and working towards an understanding of

herself. Elinor has found the proper compromise between sensibility and sense, something Austen promotes throughout the novel in her presentation of the two characters by closely examining only Elinor's deepest thoughts and juxtaposing her and Marianne in such a way as to emphasize one's virtue and the other's self-absorption.

Throughout my discussion, I will be playing the words "sense" and "sensibility" off each other, since I wish to argue that Elinor has balanced these two ideas in her character and her sister Marianne has not, for she favors sensibility. When I use the term "sensibility" in this chapter, I refer to the experience of overwhelming emotion and the desire to express it. By "sense," I mean thinking through a situation logically, especially in terms of social decorum. Much scholarship has been done on sensibility, and A *Dictionary of Sensibility* even provides a definition of sense:

...sense is a site of battle between the mind and the body. In both its mental and physical connotations, sense means perception: on the one hand, the consciousness and judgment provided by the mental faculties; on the other hand, the consciousness of external stimuli supplied by the corporeal senses-- sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch-- as well as the awareness of internal changes in the sensations of one's own body (Brady).

From this definition of sense, it can be seen that it does not have to exclude an awareness of one's feelings, or the "internal changes in sensations." A *Dictionary of Sensibility* is a compilation of words that are related to the surge of discussions that took place about sensibility in the eighteenth century. As I will point out later in my analysis of Willoughby, there was a change in the middle of the century in regards to the way men were expected to approach social matters. Before, men were thought to be independent if

they followed their feelings, expressing themselves and trying to relate to their fellow creatures on an emotional level. However, once the French Revolution took its toll on Britain and Europe, a new pressure was felt by males to be logical and separate feelings from politics (Johnson 6). Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her analysis of sensibility during this time period, “Oscillations of Sensibility,” discusses the different implications the idea of sensibility had on men and women. Men could still be reasonable in decision-making, while women had always been and were expected to continue to be at the mercy of emotion. As Spacks puts it, “The hero of sensibility allows himself to feel. His female counterpart can’t help herself” (Spacks 506). Austen defies this stereotype present in her culture by creating Elinor, a woman who knows when to feel by using her sense. However, Austen was not the first to point out the dangers of a woman who lived up to this traditional expectation of being a slave to feeling. Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* condemns women who do not use reason in favor of sensibility:

Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become prey to their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling...Ever restless and anxious, their over-exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome, to use a soft phrase, to others (Wollstonecraft 129).

I wish to argue in the following pages that Austen is in agreement with Wollstonecraft. Through her continual comparisons of Elinor and Marianne throughout the novel, Austen highlights the trouble that can occur when one allows herself to be “blown about” by emotion and does not think clearly. Not only does too much sensibility affect Marianne,

but it also causes her family pain by exposing them to social censure and feelings of sympathy for Marianne's tragedy. Austen does, however, depart from Wollstonecraft by not condoning an exclusion of sensibility entirely; rather, in Elinor's character Austen is arguing that women, and even men, can still allow themselves to feel without finding their "understandings neglected."

Within the first chapter of the novel, Austen clearly depicts each heroine by using a third person narrator. This narrative voice, however, favors only one of the Dashwood sisters, Elinor, in order to generate sympathy for this character. Marianne's private thoughts are often ignored. Readers must rely on the biased narrator to disclose elements about her personality. Marianne is described as "...sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent" (8). On the other hand, Elinor is introduced as having an "...excellent heart; her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong: but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught" (8). By using a narrative voice that is not directly involved in the action of the story, Austen seems to force readers to view the characters in the way she dictates. No allusions to traits or personality are given, so no other interpretation can be allowed in deciding who each sister is.

In addition to the directness of the narrator, Austen also makes use of the situation occurring at the beginning of the novel, which is the death of the father, to provide a guide in forming opinions of the sisters. This is important in that the Dashwood girls are on their own in a patriarchal society. True, they have a half-brother, but John is under the

control of his selfish wife and is not going to take care of his father's wife and daughters: "I believe you are right, my love; it will be better that there should be no annuity in the case; whatever I may give them occasionally will be of far greater assistance than a yearly allowance..." (11). So, it is up to the Dashwood women to take care of themselves.

Even though their situation is dire, it is only Elinor who thinks of the future. Marianne is much too concerned with her grief to think about what will happen to their family now, and Mrs. Dashwood is no better: "Elinor saw, with concern, the excess of her sister's sensibility; but by Mrs. Dashwood it was valued and cherished. They encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again" (8). With the phrasing of this description, it can be surmised that the emotion that "was voluntarily renewed" could be a defense mechanism on the part of the mother and Marianne to not think about anything else, such as the practical logistics of where they are to reside. True, it is Mrs. Dashwood who accepts the cottage in Devonshire, but it is not because she sees the good economics of it. Rather, she no longer acknowledges that there is to be any benefit in staying at Norland if Fanny discourages a match between Elinor and Fanny's brother. The move is an emotional impulse as opposed to a well-thought-out decision. Elinor, on the other hand, approves of Barton cottage for more sensible reasons: "The house...was on so simple a scale, and the rent so uncommonly moderate, as to leave her no right of objection on either point" (20). Elinor's thoughts on the matter are given right after an explanation of her mother's fury at Fanny, which serves to show her in a more practical light and gain reader's approval.

It is interesting how different Mrs. Dashwood is than other maternal voices of the time. In “A Mother’s Advice to Her Daughter,” the Marchioness de Lambert discourages a girl who is all sentiment and no substance. This selection’s appearance in *The Young Lady’s Pocket Library* suggests that those who staunchly supported the rules of decorum believed this was sound advice. The Marchioness goes on to blame governesses, who “...flatter their [the girls’] self-love; they give them up to effeminacy, to the world, and to false opinions; they give them no lectures of virtue and fortitude” (*The Young Lady’s Pocket Library* 121). Mrs. Dashwood is not the kind of mother the Marchioness would have approved of, for she forgets her duties to guide her daughters successfully through society and instead encourages them to only think of their own desires.

Although their mother does not strictly direct them to be the proper ladies of society, Marianne and Elinor each can be considered “accomplished” in their own ways, though they cannot be deemed perfect examples of femininity for their time. Marianne’s most obvious accomplishment is her music. When she first plays at Barton Park, “...everybody prepared to be charmed” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 28). Society expected a lady to be able to play well on an instrument, and for their part the audience must be “prepared” to acknowledge the young lady’s accomplishment and adherence to social decorum. Yet, Marianne does not play only to impress others and catch a husband; she is emotionally engaged with the music.

In fact, Marianne holds in contempt anyone who does not share her love, as is evidenced by her approval of Colonel Brandon’s response to her playing: “He paid her the only compliment of attention; and she felt a respect for him on the occasion which the others had reasonably forfeited by their shameless want of taste” (28). The word

“reasonably” suggests that Marianne views the other members of the party as not truly understanding music, but only giving praise because society expects them to do so. However, her response to Brandon’s individuality is slanted in a negative way as she supposes that “...it amounted not to that ecstatic delight which alone could sympathize with her own...and she was reasonable enough to allow that a man of five-and-thirty might well have outlived all acuteness of feeling and every exquisite power of enjoyment” (28). Marianne does not want to admit that Brandon has merit as someone she could be attracted to. Austen may have written Brandon’s response to the music differently than the other characters in order to show a flaw in Marianne’s sensibility. She claims to think independently from society’s opinion of her, yet she does care what people think of her performance. Brandon’s response is quiet but more sincere than the loud congratulations from those who did not really listen, but only followed a predetermined social script.

In fact, music is often addressed as an accomplishment for young ladies in Austen’s work. Gillen D’Arcy Wood, in his essay “Austen’s Accomplishments: Music and the Modern Heroine,” argues that Austen maintained an ambivalent attitude towards music in her fiction, even though music was important not only in Austen’s own life but also for many young ladies of that time period. Instead, “...both Austen’s fiction and the avant-garde orchestral music of early nineteenth-century London can be described as romantic reactions against virtuosity and its mechanized culture. Austen’s work thus offers a far more complex representation of feminine pianistic ‘accomplishment’ than might appear on first reading” (Wood 366). This is a valid point and lends itself to a close analysis of *Sense and Sensibility* in that Austen portrays Marianne’s playing as something

more than an acceptable hobby. She studies music for her own enjoyment, a very humanistic idea at a time when learning an instrument was part of a girl's "proper" education. Wood suggests that Austen's portrayal of music in her novels reveals the author's stance in the debate over education for women, in that it should be more comprehensive (368). This is another illuminating idea, since it places Austen among the ranks of those such as Mary Wollstonecraft who also wanted a more well-rounded education for women.

For her part, Elinor also can be considered to be somewhat of an accomplished woman in that she draws. She does not throw herself wholeheartedly into her art with the same passion as Marianne, yet this can be viewed as a virtue. In London, at her first meeting with Mrs. Ferrars, some screens Elinor painted are passed around the group. John Dashwood asserts, "... she is in general reckoned to draw extremely well" (166). However, like Jane Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, being an accomplished woman is not enough if the girl's family is not highly connected. This is exemplified in *Sense and Sensibility* when "Mrs. Ferrars, not aware of their being Elinor's work, particularly requested to look at them" (166). However, Fanny "considerately" informs her who the artist is and Mrs. Ferrars calls them "'very pretty'—and without regarding them at all, returned them to her daughter" (167). Whereas Marianne was praised for her music even if no one really evaluated her playing, Mrs. Ferrars cuts Elinor by not even pretending to follow social rules and accept a lady's accomplishments. With this, Austen reveals an irony of a social world that promotes the assurance that a lady can move up in status with accomplishments, yet in reality one only does so if she has a good family. Austen also makes Elinor the more sympathetic of the two sisters when she allows Elinor to handle

social embarrassment with such aplomb. When Marianne lashes out at the impoliteness of Fanny and her mother, “Elinor was much more hurt by Marianne’s warmth, than she had been by what produced it” (167). Elinor’s social grace in accepting insults with no outward expression of resentment places her in a higher social standing than Marianne’s outburst, which is done with little regard to propriety and will only bring more disdain from Mrs. Ferrars.

Perhaps contrary to first appearances, Elinor is not the image of the ideal woman of this time. Whereas Austen censures Marianne’s faults, Elinor is used to show how the idea of a perfect woman is not attainable, since life does not always allow for the rules of conduct to be followed rigidly. Instead, Austen uses Elinor’s lack of ideal femininity to offer a way a woman can respect some aspects of propriety but use her individual sense to navigate the situation she is given. A woman was not supposed to worry about economics or to take care of her family without male help or guidance at this time. Unfortunately, the lot Elinor has received does not allow her to wait for a man to take care of her and her mother and sisters. It is she who must move past her grief and plan for the well-being of her family. Elinor understands economics better than her mother, who “...could hear of no situation that at once answered her notions of comfort and ease, and suited the prudence of her eldest daughter, whose steadier judgment rejected several houses as too large for their income, which her mother would have approved” (13). Elinor cannot but appear in an admirable light, since she is saving the family from stretching too far financially. Marianne does not appear in such scenes at all, suggesting that the future does not enter her mind.

When considering the amount of propriety each heroine of the novel maintains, it

is also important to look closely at the men the girls deem (or in some cases, do not deem) romantic interests. I begin with Willoughby, since he is so similar to Marianne in his selfishness and disregard for social convention. To set the stage for Austen's rejection of people like Marianne and Willoughby, I turn to Claudia L. Johnson's book, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s*. In her introduction, Johnson discusses the changing treatment of sentimentality at the end of the eighteenth century. Before, "men of feeling," as they were called, were revered, since they "...were decidedly conservative types, country gentlemen who resisted needed change, who had an aversion to newfangled social ideas, and who exemplified the gallant ways of Old England" (Johnson 8). Sentimental men believed in chivalry and deference to a lady, and were often able to continue this line of thinking since they were usually the highest members of society. However, some, like Mary Wollstonecraft, ridiculed this image of men, since it "reduces men themselves to the status of women, women to the status of children" (8). A call for change was felt as men were pressured to be less influenced by emotions and instead to be more rational. Most critics did not mention women and their need for change, assuming their image and status would remain the same. This is a fact that Wollstonecraft took issue with and began to require that men and women be partners in marriage and that each view the other as an equal in reason and thought.

As one returns to Austen's fiction, some elements of the call for more rationality at the time can be noted in her treatment of potential heroes. Sensibility is only acceptable if it is properly balanced out by sense. Willoughby considers himself a "man of feeling," as he talks of poetry with Marianne in a spirited manner. Austen does not let readers regard Willoughby through Marianne's point of view, which no doubt would have been

full of admiration and approval. Instead, readers can form an opinion of Willoughby through Elinor's thoughts: "Elinor saw nothing to censure in him but a propensity...of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or circumstances...and in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety, he displayed a want of caution which Elinor could not approve, in spite of all he and Marianne could say in its support" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 38). Austen reflects her time in rejecting too much feeling in men, but takes it further by also suggesting that too much sensibility in women is not a good thing either, as she shows when she makes Marianne and Willoughby so alike in their selfishness, which they excuse with passion.

Though Marianne no doubt thinks of herself as a unique individual in the expression of her feelings, Austen reveals within the text that Marianne is not independent. Her excessive feeling, something she cultivates in her own behavior and demands in that of others, is actually the thing that holds her back from true independence. Her relationship with Willoughby exemplifies this. Marianne has often boasted of the poetry she reads, which could have influenced her attachment to her rescuer, as opposed to her finding, without any outside opinion or help, her soul mate. Willoughby is simply a living man that can have a literary hero's traits placed upon him: "His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favorite story" (33). She uses her imagination to make Willoughby into what she wants him to be, rather than seeing what is actually there: "Her imagination was busy, her reflections were pleasant, and the pain of a sprained ankle was disregarded" (34). Marianne has not formed an independent mind, an attribute which, it can be argued, Austen wants women to develop. Marianne's head is influenced too much by what she

has read and her self-centeredness. Austen does not seem to be outlawing poetry, but rather warning readers to remember that being overly romantic can distort the truth. It is important to have opinions, but knowing when they should be expressed can lead to an easier life than shocking the members of society.

To prove her point that a good amount of sense can better lead to individuality than an excess of feeling, Austen juxtaposes Marianne's romantic attachment to Elinor's. Edward pales in excitement next to Willoughby: "Edward Ferrars was not recommended to their good opinion by any peculiar graces of person or address. He was not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing" (14). Willoughby's appearance lends itself to fantasies and allows his true character to be distorted, but Edward's plain façade forces Elinor to look more deeply to decide upon his personality. Elinor is in good moral standing for seeing what is truly there and not relying on appearances. As I have explained in my first chapter, morality and a good Christian attitude were favored attributes to have at the time. Elinor takes time to decide if she loves Edward and is better able to recognize her real feelings for him, rather than simply getting caught up in the moment as Marianne does. Elinor is more independent than her sister in that she has organized her thoughts and reactions to Edward and is able to defend them clearly: "I have seen a great deal of him, have studied his sentiments, and heard his opinions....At present, I know him so well, that I think him really handsome; or, at least, almost so" (17). Elinor can look past a person's faults and see who they really are, whereas Marianne, with only her passion as her guide, reacts too quickly to discover the truth.

Willoughby may be the more exciting of the novel's two heroes, but Austen

creates Edward to be the better man. To return to Johnson's analysis of sensibility of the time, she puts forward that "men of feeling," though thought to be chivalric, actually could only feel when women were treated poorly: "...the spectacle of immanent and outrageous female suffering many not be the unthinkable crime which chivalric sentimentality forestalls, but rather the one-thing-needful to solicit male tears and the virtues that supposedly flow with them" (Johnson 15). Now, Austen does not depict female torture on a grand and gruesome scale, but it is interesting how Willoughby only tries to explain his goodness to Elinor after he has hurt Marianne. As he describes how he felt upon receiving Marianne's letters, he uses effusive language: "...what I felt is—in the common phrase, not to be expressed; in a more simple one—perhaps too simple to raise any emotion—my feelings were very, very painful" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 230). Willoughby can only deal with the suffering he caused by explaining his deep emotion. In fact, he even goes so far as to admit that he wishes to appeal to Elinor's emotion. In her essay on sensibility in the eighteenth century, Spacks points out how women were seen to be creatures of feeling, and thus could not help but display "female goodness" (Spacks 507). Austen does not allow Elinor to succumb to pity and absolve Willoughby, though she does feel some sympathy (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 236). Again, it is significant that this story is told from Elinor's perspective, since she has enough sense to balance out her sensibility to really try to understand what Willoughby is about.

Edward, on the other hand, does not use sensibility to make his way through life. He keeps in mind what is expected of him not only in social situations, but also in regards to others' feelings, even at times dismissing his own. He loves Elinor, but is secretly

engaged to Lucy Steele, and intends to keep that promise. He is not the perfect gentleman, just as Elinor is not the perfect lady, but he tries to work a balance between what he feels and how he must behave. Elinor chastises him for remaining at Norland and encouraging her hopes, but in his reply he reveals that he is very reflective, like Elinor, and did not put too much faith in feeling: “I felt that I admired you, but I told myself it was only friendship; and till I began to make comparisons between yourself and Lucy, I did not know how far I was got” (260). With this pronouncement, Austen is using Edward to first show how important it is to not let feelings get the better of a person, especially on a primary impulse. Edward did not let his instant liking of Elinor cause him to do anything inappropriate. Second, Austen at the same time faults him for not being aware of “how far he was got” and disappointing Elinor. Emotions should not rule all, but some sense of them must be understood.

To move away from the heroes and to return to the pair of sisters themselves, I wish to next examine how sense and sensibility can be used to deal with adversity. With each sister, Austen shows how there is a right way and a wrong way to handle misfortune. Marianne chooses the latter path, which is often due to her letting her feelings take over any reason. This is sometimes done out of selfishness, as it is at the beginning of the story when she first learns that there is a growing attachment between Elinor and Edward. She does not concern herself with Edward until her mother hints at a possible union, where she responds, “O mamma! How shall we do without her?” (15). With this exclamation, it can be surmised that Marianne does not wish her elder sister to leave her as she immediately condemns Edward’s lack of passion: “O mamma! how spiritless, how tame was Edward’s manner in reading to us last night! I felt for my sister most severely.

Yet she bore it with so much composure, she seemed scarcely to notice it” (15-16).

Marianne attacks Edward when she fears Elinor will marry him, but fails to consider anyone else’s feelings but her own. Her dedication to sensibility in this scene is only a front to hide her selfishness. She is mistaken to think that everyone wants to have the kind of relationship she wants, which is one full of passion and romantic declarations.

Of course, the most famous scene in which Marianne fails to adequately handle adversity is when she discovers Willoughby’s betrayal. She confronts her love directly, demanding an explanation, embarrassing not only him and Elinor but also other observers. When Willoughby slights her, Marianne cannot get a firm grip on her emotions and “...now looking dreadfully white, and unable to stand, sank into her chair, and Elinor, expecting every moment to see her faint, tried to screen her from the observation of others, while reviving her with lavender water” (125-126). If Elinor had been more like Marianne they would have indulged in these tragic feelings and been ostracized by society. That is not the case, though, and Elinor cares for her sister not only in helping her not faint but also by protecting her from social scandal.

In thinking about the role of sensibility in the novel, Mary Poovey suggests that Austen promotes the value of sense over sensibility by dismissing any serious discussion of the latter entirely. She writes, “Austen also attempts to control the allure of Marianne’s romantic desires by refusing to consider seriously either their social origin or their philosophical implications” (Poovey 188). It could be argued that such a statement is not entirely true, since within the story itself Austen mentions the mother as encouraging sensibility within her daughter and Marianne’s love of poetry with its romantic heroes. The implications are addressed throughout the whole work, as Marianne often causes her

sister embarrassment and gets her heart broken. Marianne is punished for her excessive use of emotion, but the narrative voice does not come right out and give a sermon on why too much sensibility is destructive, especially for a young woman. At the same time, though, Poovey does at first seem to have a point in suggesting that Austen dismisses Marianne's sensibility too easily. Marianne does not end up ruined by her excess of emotion, but she is forced to settle down and marry a man she is not overtly attracted to. In fact, Marianne is sacrificed in the end to give up her feelings to better serve Colonel Brandon's: "...and to see Marianne settled at the mansion-house was equally the wish of Edward and Elinor. They each felt his sorrows, and their own obligations, and Marianne, by general consent, was to be the reward of all" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 267). This does seem to support Poovey's statement, but only if a reader looks at Marianne's marriage in light of the historical context. This was a time in history in which making a comfortable marriage was everything for a woman, but I would argue that Marianne's fate is not entirely a happy one, since she is pushed into a marriage with a man who is not like her in passion and feeling. Throughout much of her fiction Austen has allowed her heroines to end up with their perfect match, but Marianne's marriage is only a good one in the eyes of those around her.

In addition, Austen does not choose to have the narrative voice of the novel expound upon the dangers of a girl who puts too much stock into feeling and independence. Instead, though, Austen warns against the dangers of too much sensibility by putting Marianne in a life or death situation caused by her emotions as she dwells on Willoughby:

Two delightful twilight walks...especially in the most distant parts of them [the

grounds at the Palmers' estate], where there was something more of wildness than in the rest, and the grass was the longest and the wettest, had—assisted by the still greater imprudence of sitting in her wet shoes and stockings—given Marianne a cold so violent...(216).

Marianne cannot be told to take care of her health. To refer to the earlier definition of sense from *The Dictionary of Sensibility*, Marianne is not aware of her body's sensations. She instead acts with "imprudence" as she allows her passionate imagination to give way in the wildest part of the garden and she is punished for it in getting seriously ill. In this way, Austen does address the "implications" of sensibility, since it has the potential to lead to tragedy.

At times, Austen's lack of directly admonishing sensibility leads critics to dismiss the ending of the novel. One such critic is Rachel M. Brownstein, who analyzes three of Austen's novels in her piece entitled, "*Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*." Brownstein does not read the two Dashwood sisters as two different models of womanhood. Rather, she puts forward that "*Sense and Sensibility* corrects the typical didactic emphasis by refusing to choose between Marianne and Elinor. While the action of the novel is mediated by the consciousness of the prudent sister, the narrative rewards both equally" (Brownstein 43). This comment is only relevant if one looks at the social world of the novel as strictly adhering to the rules for ladies at the time. Of course Marianne seems to still be rewarded in the end if one sees marriage, any sort of marriage, to be a welcome and happy one. What I have tried to argue here is that Marianne ends up in a union with Brandon that will never measure up to the one that she wanted to have with Willoughby. In this light, she is not rewarded as Elinor is, who ends up with the man

she wanted all along.

In addition, though the narrator does not directly address the audience with which sister they should favor more, the way Austen portrays Elinor handling her own hardships in comparison to Marianne's methods should resonate with readers and encourage their admiration for the elder Dashwood sister. Elinor is often accused of showing no feeling at all—she seems to be all sense and no sensibility. The great tragedy of the novel at first glance can be mistaken for Marianne losing her sensibility, but readers must remember what Mrs. Dashwood cannot, "...that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much, certainly with less self-provocation, and greater fortitude" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 252). Austen once again proves she is walking the fine line between being conservative and asserting independence. Elinor is surrounded by those who would share in her pain of losing a suitor, yet she chooses a more independent path in dealing with the setback on her own. She is more self-reliant than Marianne. Austen uses this character to prove that having emotion but knowing when to use it involves more power and responsibility than constantly declaring what one is thinking or feeling.

Unlike Marianne, Elinor asserts her independence of mind not by flouting social conventions but by following them while at the same time knowing how she is emotionally responding to the situation, such as when she first learns of Edward's promise to Lucy Steele. This moment can be compared to when Marianne sees Willoughby with his rich heiress, only Elinor handles herself in a much more mature way. She is devastated that her love plans to marry someone else, yet listens politely to Lucy's worries about the arrangement: "... her heart sunk within her, and she could hardly stand; but exertion was indispensably necessary, and she struggled so resolutely

against the oppression of her feelings that her success was speedy, and for the time complete” (98). “Necessary” is a crucial word in this statement. It reveals how Elinor uses her concealment of emotion to hold power. If she were to give away her feelings, then Lucy would triumph in making Elinor subordinate. Instead, Elinor’s composure forces Lucy to seem too frank and open, not the kind of lady Gregory condoned. This does not mean that Elinor is forcing herself to forget her emotions, to pretend that she does not feel. She does return to them later, when she can sort through them and understand not only what is going on but how she feels as well. She too lets her emotions pour forth, but only as she is thinking through them: “After sitting with them a few minutes, the Miss Steeles returned to the Park, and Elinor was then at liberty to think and be wretched” (98). Elinor does not act on her shock prematurely.

Indeed, Elinor’s behavior can in part be attributed to her mother and sister. The pair indulges in great displays of sensibility, first when the father dies and then in their estimation of Willoughby. Mrs. Dashwood is as thoughtless as her middle child as she lets Willoughby charm her. She does not see what is actually before her eyes but views what she wishes: “Her mother, too, in whose mind not one speculative thought of marriage had been raised by his prospect of riches, was led before the end of the week to hope and expect it...” (38). In the Marchioness de Lambert’s essay, she had demanded that all facts be known about a potential suitor. Mrs. Dashwood does not encourage this, and Elinor must be the one to examine Willoughby and find the truth.

Marianne influences Elinor’s actions in another way, in that she causes great worry for the rest of her family. When Willoughby leaves quite suddenly and without sufficient explanation she goes into an emotional fit, which her mother and sisters must

suffer with her: “She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it...giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough!” (62). Because Marianne is so open about her feelings, her family, out of love for her, feels compelled to be saddened too and to try to help. The narrative voice does not explore Marianne’s inner thoughts, so readers are left to see the irony in her actions and judge them negatively. If Marianne’s intentions were as she stated, it can never be known. In this way, Austen once again controls how readers respond to Marianne. Interestingly, the narrative voice achieves this bias against Marianne by alluding to Austen’s feelings about too much sensibility. By pointing out how “Her sensibility was potent enough,” the narrator is ridiculing Marianne’s behavior by suggesting that Marianne could not care how her family felt, for she is too caught up in her own emotion. This is another example of Marianne’s selfishness.

Quite the opposite of this is how Elinor deals with her broken heart. Perhaps knowing how hard it is on the rest of the family to see another member be so hurt, she hides her emotions. It is true that Elinor is also being honorable, in that Lucy Steele requested that her engagement to Edward be kept secret, but Elinor hides this information to protect her loved ones’ feelings in addition to this promise. After coming to an understanding of how she feels about these new developments, she faces her family: “And so well was she able to answer her own expectations, that when she joined them at dinner only two hours after she had first suffered the extinction of all her dearest hopes, no one would have supposed...that Elinor was mourning in secret” (100). Austen respects this type of behavior more than Marianne’s, in that in attempting to “go at it

alone,” Elinor is presented as less selfish than her sister. Her family is already mourning the absence of Willoughby (58), and she does not choose to add to their already disappointed hopes by revealing that her prospects for marriage are diminished as well.

Literary scholars have discussed how Elinor behaves in times of adversity. Nazaar, in her analysis of where Austen falls on the progressive spectrum, sees this character’s solitary suffering as a sign of modernism by referring to great scholars of modernist literature: “...they have focused in particular on the privacy that propriety entails, a reserve implying that the proper lady has something to hide: the deep subjectivity of the modern subject” (Nazaar 147). On the outside, Elinor seems to be striving to be the ideal image Gregory and others like him construct for females, yet at the same time she is trying to discover who she is apart from a proper lady of society. Through this character, Austen reveals her image of a woman that others can attain: one who does not lack social skill yet is still an individual. The performance is important, but one can add her own self to the situation in choosing how to perform. Many times, Austen encourages a woman to adhere to social rules, but how one does that will be unique if one understands how and why she is acting out certain behaviors.

Austen’s famous pair of sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* serve a purpose in Austen’s critique of what a woman was expected to be. One is too concerned with independent feeling, yet does not come across as all that independent. Marianne relies too heavily on first impressions and only sees what she wants to see without regards to other people or facts. She must learn to acquire more social sense and to know not just what she is feeling, but why and what that means in the long run. The other sister, Elinor, is set up to be admired since she has found a way to navigate a harsh social environment while

still understanding her personal feelings. Marianne's trauma is necessary for Elinor's path to be clearly seen by readers. Marianne chooses to put more stock in sensibility than sense, and so she cannot achieve her desires. Her older sister may not at first seem independent and strong, but Elinor's self-control and ability to rely on her sense lead to happiness. Austen rewards Elinor's balance of sense and sensibility, since it is she and not Marianne who ends up marrying her dearest love. Though the younger sister marries well to Colonel Brandon, the union is not full of passion and like-mindedness as was her relationship with Willoughby. Austen encourages a balance of sense and sensibility by giving readers two characters to learn from: one who maintains that balance and one who leans too far in the wrong direction.

Chapter Three: Sisterhood in the Face of Economics: Conflict Between the Rules of Status and a Woman's Individuality

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." –Jane Austen in the opening of her novel *Pride and Prejudice*

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen creates another famous pair of sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, whose differences are used to comment upon a society that upholds the boundaries of class status and leaves no room for the desires of an individual. Throughout the novel, the sisters each explore their own way of dealing with this unfairness. The characters of each young woman are in the sharpest contrast within the scene in the story in which Elizabeth discloses Wickham's allegations against Darcy. Jane comes off as a bit naïve as she searches for a way in which both men can be deemed honorable: "The possibility of his [Wickham] having really endured such unkindness, was enough to interest all her tender feelings; and nothing therefore remained to be done, but to think well of them both, to defend the conduct of each, and throw into the account of accident or mistake, whatever could be not otherwise explained" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 58). Elizabeth reacts strongly on her first impression of Darcy, and thus does not view the situation as being anything other than how Wickham, who has always been charming and amiable, described it. She is prejudiced against Darcy's status and income.

In this scene, one sister seems to be the kind, soft-spoken female promoted during Austen's time, while the other should at first seem to be thought of as blind and selfish. I will attempt to prove that this is not the case, in that Elizabeth is simply trying to cope with a society that is rigid in its rules. In fact, she notices that those who promote decorum the most only do so because they have the power and money to influence how

society is run. Since status was everything and women could only achieve social mobility through marriage, courtship was a central theme in the lives of women during Austen's time. Women should admire Elizabeth for wanting to marry for love and showing disdain for those who place too much importance on class status. Jane is not able to succeed in being the ideal female due to economic circumstances, though she behaves in accordance with the conduct literature circulating at the time. However, because Elizabeth is able by novel's end to balance social norms (in this case marrying securely) and individual desires (she claims to love Darcy), Austen wishes readers to aspire to be more like her over the demure Jane.

When looking at Austen through a feminist lens, one cannot help but notice that the biggest problem her heroines face is usually a lack of money, with the only exception being the title character of her novel *Emma*. Money and the social status one holds have always been linked. In his essay, "Money," Edward Copeland explains that, "Even though Austen herself generally explains each case as it arises, specific incomes also operate as shorthand in her fiction and in the rest of women's fiction—three hundred a year, four hundred a year, five hundred a year, and so on—to express rank, social aspirations, and consumer power" (Copeland 134). Five hundred pounds a year is considered a good amount for one woman, but it is important to remember that the income comes as an allowance from a male guardian or a male-owned estate. The Bennet family, with five daughters that need dowries, only have a two thousand a year income (134). Women from lower classes wanted to move up the social ladder in order to gain a secure income as well as a good name. Copeland points out how Austen was concerned with the problems these aspirations presented, since men of higher rank did not want to

associate with those of lower, or in other words poorer, means: “Austen approaches the subject, money, ...as a woman in that society, severely handicapped by law and custom from possessing significant power over money” (133). Men could make their fortune to broaden their opportunities in society, but women were confined by where on the ladder they were born, which in turn usually affected how well they could marry. This was a situation confronted by mothers like Mrs. Bennet, who pushed their daughters to try to catch a rich man’s attention by emulating the behavior of proper women of the time.

Throughout the novel, Austen does not shrink away from setting up the Bennet sisters as complementary opposites. The third person omniscient narrator, as in *Sense and Sensibility*, chooses one of the sisters to focus on. In *Pride and Prejudice*, this character is Elizabeth, who gives readers the most direct evaluation of Jane’s character: “Oh! you are a great deal too apt you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in any body. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 10). In response, Jane makes an interesting pronouncement: “I would wish not to be hasty in censuring anyone; but I always speak what I think” (10). Such a declaration is reminiscent of Elinor Dashwood. Jane wishes to take the time to really understand someone and does not want to dismiss anyone too quickly. This is exemplified many times in the novel as she tries to defend Darcy’s character. For example, when the rest of Meryton is dissatisfied with Darcy’s manners, it is only Jane who attempts to see past the prejudice against him: “Miss Bingley told me...that he never speaks much unless among his intimate acquaintance. With *them* he is remarkably agreeable” (13). Jane’s opinions are often dismissed by others who mistake her keen understanding for a propensity to be kind. In fact, Jane is

often correct in the observations she makes concerning Darcy.

Much of the time, both sisters' personalities are revealed through other characters in the story. Mr. Bennet shows his favoritism in regards to Elizabeth as he states, "...they [the other Bennet daughters] are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzie has something more of quickness than the other girls" (4). It is interesting that Austen chooses to have a male character choose Elizabeth as his dearest child, since "quickness" here can be interpreted as wit. Nonfictional fathers during this time did not seem to want to encourage this trait in their daughters. Dr. Gregory denounces such a quality in a woman: "Wit is the most dangerous talent you can possess...Wit is perfectly consistent with softness and delicacy; yet they are seldom found united" (Gregory 11). With this statement, it can be surmised that Gregory believes wit can have good connotations if it is used properly, such as when talking about womanly topics like marriage and children, but too often it is associated with harshness and indelicacy.

Perhaps Mr. Bennet's preference for Elizabeth over the more socially acceptable Jane can be attributed to his own lack of conventional behavior and attitude. As the narrator describes him: "Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humor, reserve, and caprice..." (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 4). Mr. Bennet fails often in his duties as a father, most of the time in not standing up to his wife, and more specifically in letting Lydia have her way in visiting Brighton. He soon comes to regret his laxness as he states, "Who should suffer but myself? It has been my own doing, and I ought to feel it" (194). Elizabeth must come to the same conclusion when she thinks she has lost Darcy forever. Although she is not lazy like her father, it was easier for her to dismiss Darcy's true character in light of his refusal to dance with her. Within their

family unit, Mr. Bennet and Lizzie must each feel the pain of not adequately paying attention to society.

In setting up an argument about the emphasis Austen places upon the importance of social position, one must start with the smallest institution of the novel: the family. The Bennets are constantly forced to confront their inadequate social status. At the very beginning of the story, Mrs. Bennet is presented as a busybody who thinks only of marriage for each of her daughters: “The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (4). The family’s financial straits come to the fore again as Mr. Collins comes to visit, a point at which readers learn that none of the Bennet girls are able to inherit their father’s estate due to an entail that calls for a male heir. Mr. Collins plans to choose a wife from Longbourn, an idea that finds much support from Mrs. Bennet, for it would secure her future and allow the girls to keep their home: “Mrs. Bennet treasured up the hint, and trusted that she might soon have two daughters married; and the man whom she could not speak of the day before, was now high in her good graces” (48). The Bennet family is often the focus of the story, and since social mobility was an important issue at the time, the characters are often depicted as struggling with their lowly position and striving to try and improve it.

In her book *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Mary Poovey examines the family relationships in Austen’s novels. She points out that:

As the actual basis and ideal model of the contract between an author and an audience, the family also promised a context of shared experiences, assumptions, and values against which the writer could play and to which he or she could eventually return... For if an author can assume a set of basic assumptions and

values, such as family members share, then he or she can depend on the reader's returning with the narrator to that common ground, in spite of liberties to stray that have been permitted in the course of fiction...for they [these liberties] foster the illusion that challenges to ethical and aesthetic authority are actually being engaged and defeated in their own terms (Poovey 204).

The Bennet family includes many different characters who each have their own personality. However, what they all have in common is the economic situation and they all believe in the value of marriage. Their differences emerge in how they deal with their low class position and how each girl approaches the thought of matrimony. Readers are invited to participate in the action of the novel by judging which characters follow the most desirable path in dealing with these preoccupations. Austen does influence, though, how the readers will react to events in the story by aligning the narrative perspective with that of Elizabeth. Readers do not often learn the motives of other characters, but Elizabeth's are clearly expressed, as when she turns down her proposals, and so a greater understanding of how she is coping with an unfair economic situation is fostered within readers. Jane is still sympathized with, which is due to her goodness. Austen reminds readers of Jane's social acceptability by having other characters comment on her proper femininity, yet it is also constantly put forward that her family's status holds her back.

Throughout the story, Mr. Bingley's sisters are the most obvious in their disdain for the Bennets' low connections. This fact is somewhat ironic in that their family is not too distinguished either: "They were of a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired through trade" (11). Though their money may have been

made in a lowly fashion, the women still are able to fall back on a respectable name. Jane has neither money nor a noble ancestry. The Bingley sisters may look down upon the Bennet family, but they do sympathize with Jane. They recognize Jane's proper sense of decorum, but cannot look past her faults, which are out of her control. As Miss Caroline Bingley puts it, "I have an excessive regard for Jane Bennet, she is really a very sweet girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it" (25). The Bingley women like Jane, but not enough to see her marry their brother.

So, it would seem that Jane is as close as one can be to the ideal woman of the time, but she is not able to achieve the success a woman was promised. Austen uses this situation to show how, no matter how much a girl tries to live up to society's standards, the image can never quite be attained. Social class was a prevalent force at the time but was not a written rule of decorum, like virtue and learning feminine points of conversation were. The issue of social hierarchy is shrewdly studied in Juliet McMaster's piece entitled, simply, "Class," in which she concisely states what Austen was attempting to do in her fiction:

In Jane Austen's world, human worth is to be judged by standards better and more enduring than social status; but social status is always relevant. With amused detachment, she registers exactly the social provenance of each of her characters, and judges them for the ways in which they judge each other. The importance assigned to class distinction is the source of much of her comedy and her irony, as of her social satire (McMaster 129).

Austen does not directly sermonize about the unfairness of social class, but through her

writing it can be determined how she wants to slant readers' opinions against those who make class all-important. Miss Bingley is one such example, since the narrator points out not just what this character says about Jane's social situation but also how Caroline conveniently forgets her own less than pure bloodline.

In describing the appeal of Austen's work, Poovey suggests that Austen can be categorized with the likes of those who are considered to be more radical feminists during the late eighteenth century, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and, to a lesser extent, Mary Shelley. Austen's view does differ, Poovey concedes, but only because she was brought up in a social class that emphasized propriety, more so than the lower statuses occupied by the other women mentioned. Poovey writes, "Jane Austen did concern herself with many of the same issues as Wollstonecraft and Shelley—with the process of maturation, for example, and, more important, with the complex relationship between a woman's desires and the imperatives of propriety" (Poovey 172). I would add to this assessment by arguing that Austen did call for change by stressing a balance between a "woman's desires and the imperatives of propriety." This is done through marriage, most of the time. Austen's heroines, Elizabeth included, marry for love. It also just so happens that the men whom these women love have money. Such a connection could be why Poovey feels she must mention the comparison between Austen and her more radical peers, since Austen does invite criticism for what McMaster calls the "...Cinderella plot, and to make a happy ending out of marrying her heroine to a man notably above her in income and social prestige" (McMaster 117). However, I put forward that Austen uses these "happy endings" to encourage her female readers to think that if they act more like her heroines, they can overcome some of the obstacles that a rigid social world presents.

To return to the novel, Elizabeth does indeed concern herself with propriety, especially in regards to her family's behavior. At the Netherfield Ball, Elizabeth is often embarrassed by her family's lack of decorum. Her family is openly discussing Jane's hopes, flirting outrageously, and then there is the way Mr. Bennet handles Mary's playing: "That will do extremely well, child. You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 69). He has announced to the room at large that Mary should not be playing, for she has exceeded the time allowed to show off her accomplishments. In addition, by using the phrase "chance to exhibit," it can be surmised that Austen realizes that at this time society expected young ladies to perform only to show others, and not to play because they enjoy doing so. Mr. Bennet has broken with decorum by publicly acknowledging that girls perform because it is a rule of propriety. Rules should remain unspoken. With all of this, the narrator breaks in with a description of Elizabeth's private feelings: "To Elizabeth it appeared, that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit, or finer success..." (70). Elizabeth understands that a certain amount of propriety must be maintained, especially if everyone's hopes for her sister's union with Mr. Bingley are to be realized. These hopes are not the problem, but the rest of the family does not seem to understand that to marry Jane into a good economic situation means displaying a decent amount of propriety in order to hide the fact that they are not on par with the Bingleys' pedigree.

Elizabeth also can be considered accomplished due to her musical abilities. She seems to play somewhat for enjoyment, but perhaps not on the same scale as Marianne in

Sense and Sensibility. The narrator observes, “Her performance was pleasing, though by no means capital” (17). Her sister Mary takes her turn at the instrument, and it is noted that, “Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well” (17). It is also during this interlude that Austen makes an implicit remark upon society’s demand for beauty as well as accomplishments and connections. This is done with the description of Mary, “...who having, in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments, was always impatient for display” (17). This suggests that society does want an accomplished lady, but she must also have looks to go along with the display of her accomplishments. It is not enough at the time to strive for only parts of the ideal woman. Plainness is something that cannot be fixed by following social rules. The fact that Mary is also poor does not help her either. Economics denies Jane the distinction of being a proper female even with her beauty, and economics denies her sister the same title by negatively adding to her lack of looks.

Later, Lady Catherine de Bourgh judges Elizabeth’s lack of skill at the pianoforte more harshly than her friends and family. Whereas the party in Meryton knew Elizabeth and was disposed to like her and her talents, Lady Catherine uses Elizabeth’s faults in this accomplishment to comment on her deficiency in being a proper lady. Upon hearing Elizabeth play, she states, “I have told Miss Bennet several times, that she will never play really well, unless she practices more” (115). To add to the insult, Lady Catherine is kind enough to offer the housekeeper’s room to Elizabeth in order for her to practice. It is interesting to note that Lady Catherine’s daughter Anne never learned to play, though her mother is convinced that “Anne would have been a delightful performer” (117). Perhaps

though Anne will make a good match without any accomplishments, since she has a good family background, as opposed to Elizabeth, who must explore other avenues.

Elizabeth's femininity is called into question another time, before Darcy's arrival in Kent, when she first meets Lady Catherine. The great woman asks, "Do you draw?" (109). Elizabeth answers that she does not and neither do any of her sisters. The Bennet girls do not visit London often, nor did they have a governess. Lady Catherine makes a special objection to that fact: "I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it" (110). One must recall *The Young Lady's Pocket Library*, in which the Marchioness de Lambert advises against governesses who are too lenient with their charges. A mother must be involved to make sure her daughters are learning the proper values of decency and modesty as well as the formal aspects of education. Lady Catherine seems to be the type of person who would make sure the governess was doing a good job in forming a socially acceptable female. The Bennets' lack of a governess is seen as evidence of their low class and absence of true education.

Though Elizabeth at times does make an effort to maintain the social standards that dictate female propriety, she is also often trying to separate herself from such an image and wants to form an individual identity. Most of the time this is done by using her wit to comment on society and those who rigidly subscribe to its demands. For example, when she arrives at the parsonage at Rosings, a big fuss is made at the appearance of the de Bourgh carriage. Elizabeth does not see why such a reaction is necessary, even if the scene was caused by a rich patroness. She says, "And this is all? ...I expected at least that the pigs were got into the garden, and here is nothing but Lady Catherine and her

daughter” (106). Elizabeth also shocks the company in mistaking the housekeeper for Lady Catherine. She does not show the proper amount of deference to those of the higher class. Instead, she ridicules those who do comply, like Mr. Collins.

At the same time that she is using Elizabeth to point out the silliness of society, Austen also shows how this can lead to trouble. As Poovey points out, “Elizabeth chooses to ignore all of these warnings [of what could happen in the future], of course, because, with the arrogance born of youth, natural high spirits, and intellectual superiority, she believes herself too good for such a fate” (Poovey 197). “Such a fate” refers to that of her future marriage prospects being next to nothing. Elizabeth may have a practical sense of how society works, but she wants something different for herself in her choice of suitor. The economic problem looms, though, and Elizabeth must realize that she will need some sort of financial support after her father’s death.

With this thought I argue against Poovey’s comment above, since it would seem she is dismissing Elizabeth as one who believes everything will turn out in her favor. To turn to the text itself, Elizabeth is often presented with the idea that she may end up an old spinster. Mr. Collins does this the most directly as he tries to talk Elizabeth into marrying him, saying, “...and you should take it into farther consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made to you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 74). I wish to put forward that Elizabeth is aware of her financial difficulties, even if she refuses two eligible bachelors who could increase her social situation. She is determined to find a suitor who can both provide comfort and fulfill her idea of a well-matched

husband.

As an argument for this assertion, I would discuss the male villain of the novel, George Wickham. Interestingly, he is one of the few characters Elizabeth does not judge or accuse of hypocrisy, at least initially. I argue that this is due to his economic situation, which so closely resembles her own. Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy in each of their proposals presented themselves being above Elizabeth and “saving” her. Wickham claims he has been cheated out of a comfortable future and must now make his own way in the army. Elizabeth is drawn in by his story because he sounds opinions that she herself subscribes to; that is, that the class system favors the rich and mistreats the poor. As Wickham puts it, “The world is blinded by his [Darcy’s] fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing manners, and sees him only as he chuses to be seen” (53). Elizabeth prides herself on being able to see past people’s performances of social decorum and thus with Wickham she wants to prove that she is not blinded by money or social standing.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth does not entertain hopes for marrying Wickham due to his and her monetary circumstances. Her aunt, Mrs. Gardiner, advises Elizabeth to be careful, for love must take into account financial matters: “I have nothing to say against *him*; he is a most interesting young man; and if he had the fortune he ought to have, I should think you could not do better” (96). Mrs. Gardiner here is much like the Marchioness de Lambert, for she realizes that many things go into a good match besides mutual attraction. Elizabeth heeds this warning, but perhaps one day she will find a man who is attractive and comfortably settled. She recognizes the importance of any marriage she enters into, for it will affect her family: “My father’s opinion of me does me the greatest honor; and I should be miserable to forfeit it” (97). As Mrs. Bennet hints at the

Netherfield ball, how one sister marries can affect the rest of them by providing good connections: "...as Jane's marrying so greatly must throw them [her younger siblings] in the way of other rich men" (68). Elizabeth must remember that during this time marriage was not between two people alone, but also involved each person's family. It is her duty to make sure not only she is taken care of but to try to find a way of helping her entire family.

Though Elizabeth recognizes the "imprudence" of a girl that discards any thought about economic security in marriage, she at the same time makes fun of those girls suffering from too much sensibility as she threatens, "...young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune, from entering into engagements with each other, how can I promise to be wiser than so many of my fellow creatures if I am tempted..." (97). Such an allusion to the dangers of sensibility is once again addressed, as it is in my earlier chapter on *Sense and Sensibility*. I argue that Austen forced Marianne to fall victim to her excessive passion and emotion to show readers how sensibility can be harmful to a girl and her family. Here in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen reinforces her stance against too much feeling in women by pointing out the trouble that can occur without thinking the financial aspect of a relationship through. Elizabeth makes this statement in jest, but it also foreshadows what is to happen between Wickham and Lydia, who cause a scandal by running away together yet cannot remedy the situation by marrying, for the Bennets have no substantial dowry (183).

In contrast to her impressions of Wickham, Elizabeth's first reaction to Darcy is a telling one, in that she prides herself on recognizing the faults of polite society, yet at the same time she is prejudiced against Darcy for not adhering to the codes of gentlemanly

conduct by not dancing with her, but rather insulting her appearance: “Mr. Darcy walked off; and Elizabeth remained with no very cordial feelings towards him” (9). Elizabeth controls her emotions, however, by making fun of him for not being a proper gentleman: “She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous” (9). Elizabeth flouts tradition at some points with her disparaging demeanor towards the upper class, and this is another example. The richest people in society make the rules, but they also do not always follow them.

Like Elizabeth, Darcy is also critical of social rules, yet is at the same time aware of their importance. His most obvious critique of society is his great dislike of the arts women are encouraged to promote in order to catch a husband. Miss Bingley, once Elizabeth retires to her sister’s bedside during their stay at Netherfield, condemns the poorer lady’s opinions as a ploy to gain a man’s (specifically Darcy’s) attention. Darcy, however, responds, “Undoubtedly...there is meanness in all the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable” (28). With this remark, Darcy seems to be putting forth the remarkable idea that a woman can succeed in gaining his approval only by being herself.

Darcy’s progressive bent is checked, however, by his being brought up to believe in and act according to certain standards of propriety. As he explains to Elizabeth at the end of the novel, “...I was spoilt by my parents, who though good themselves...allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to *wish* at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own” (241). With this comment,

Austen suggests that the higher classes teach each new generation how to maintain the social class system. Perhaps by doing this it can also be considered that Darcy and Elizabeth can teach their children, who will be born into a good name, how to stop such snobbery. Elizabeth changed Darcy's way of looking at society, and so perhaps more people can be made to do so as well.

Like society, Darcy needs time to change his views. His distorted outlook is best exemplified in the scene in which his first proposal to Elizabeth takes place, in Kent. He has before this time purported his love of honesty, and so he does not hide from Elizabeth his reservations about his attachment to her. Readers are then left with a moment that includes on the one hand a man who is disregarding social rules in a marriage proposal, and on the other they find a man who is concerned with the social reception his marriage may invite. The scene is depicted in the words of the third person narrator, who favors Elizabeth's limited point of view: "His sense of her inferiority—of it's being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit" (125). Such a restriction of viewpoint does not allow for readers to see inside Darcy's head, to show why he said those things, or why they were important to convey. Instead, Darcy is made to seem pompous and backward.

I wish to argue that Austen chooses to tell the story by describing the events as Elizabeth sees them so that readers can participate, as Poovey puts it, in her transformation from one led by appearances and prejudice to one who looks more deeply at people and their motives. This process begins with Darcy's letter. Upon learning

Darcy's side of the story, Elizabeth, like Elinor Dashwood would have done, forgoes labeling it as true or false immediately, but takes the time to examine both the men involved (Wickham and Darcy) and her feelings. Then, she allows herself to come to a conclusion: "Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love has been my folly...I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away..." (137). Then, Elizabeth states the most important line in her quest for individuality: "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (137). Now, Elizabeth is more aware not only of the true characters of the people around her, but she has also gained greater understanding of herself. Poovey, in commenting on Elizabeth's past faults, suggests that, "As Elizabeth embellishes her surroundings with imaginative flourishes, we begin to see that indulging the imagination can harm others and that it in fact serves as a defense against emotional involvement" (Poovey 195). Now that Elizabeth can see more clearly, she is able to feel emotion and decides that she has fallen in love with who Darcy really is.

Though the letter is an important turning point in Elizabeth's transformation from a cynic to one who understands where people are coming from, she must meet with Darcy again to study him in a new context. Austen provides this with a visit to Pemberley, where Elizabeth is forced to see Darcy and prove that she was wrong in her judgment of him. Austen uses Elizabeth's new observations to comment about how social class can be used to good effect by being a strong man who provides both for his sister and those who help him to maintain his living. McMaster puts it best as she states, "Austen, like other social commentators, insists that with the privileges go extensive responsibilities. Elizabeth freezes Darcy off when he is proud and pretentious; but she

warms to him when she discovers how as master of Pemberley he uses his extensive power for the good of those around him” (McMaster 118). Elizabeth and Darcy complement each other in that Darcy shows Elizabeth that being of a higher social class means also helping those dependent on him, and Elizabeth shows Darcy that social class does not excuse using that power over everyone who is lower than him.

Lest readers think that Elizabeth has finally despaired about her future and chooses to marry Darcy for comfort and security, Austen again relies on the narrative voice to give insight into Elizabeth’s inner thoughts and feelings. When a visit to Darcy’s estate is first proposed, Elizabeth is reluctant to go since she may encounter him and face head-on a source of embarrassment for her. She is only appeased by the information that Darcy is away (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 158). Upon learning that Darcy has arrived at Pemberley early, Elizabeth is not happy at the chance to renew the acquaintance and does not harbor hopes that he still feels attracted to her: “She had instinctively turned away; but, stopping on his approach, received his compliments with an embarrassment impossible to be overcome” (163). Elizabeth does not want to seem as if she wants to be proposed to again, even though she comes to love the Darcy she now better understands.

Social status threatens to get in the way of happiness once more as Lady Catherine descends upon Longbourn to save the “shades of Pemberley.” She wishes Darcy to marry her daughter and tries to force Elizabeth to not to marry her nephew so this can arrangement can occur. To insure such a promise, Lady Catherine uses her status and Elizabeth’s lack of position to strengthen her argument about why a marriage between Darcy and Elizabeth would be wrong since she “...would not wish to quit the sphere, in which you have been brought up” (232). Elizabeth makes one of the strongest

statements in the story regarding the issue of class as she replies, “In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal” (232). It is not only status Lady Catherine is concerned with, however, but also money. Elizabeth’s mother is connected to trade. The Bennet name is tarnished by whom her father decided to marry, a situation Lady Catherine wants to prevent for the Darcy name. Lady Catherine cannot persuade Elizabeth to refuse Darcy if the opportunity presents itself, but now it is up to Darcy to see if he can once again overcome his reservations about marrying a woman from a lower class.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth is forced to wait until Darcy asks for her hand again instead of being direct about her feelings, a consequence of living in a society that gives women little power. Darcy, for his part, explains he was silent “Because you were grave and silent, and gave no encouragement” (249). The couple is able to laugh at their misunderstandings but this scene is also important in that it reveals how their marriage will be. Elizabeth has not lost any of her directness as she teases Darcy, and Darcy has learned to respond in kind. This is not the standard marriage Wollstonecraft warned against in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, wherein she fears marriages that change a woman: “Still, highly as I respect marriage, as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I cannot avoid feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind” (Wollstonecraft 155). Elizabeth is not forced to bend to the will of her husband. Instead, they bring the best parts of themselves and are partners in their union: “My good qualities are under your protection, and you are

to exaggerate them as much as possible; and, in return, it belongs to me to find occasions for teasing and quarrelling with you as often as may be..." (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 249). Readers, in seeing Elizabeth's transformation, are expected to be happy for the heroine, since she does not have to change any more than she herself desires.

As a final point of study, it is worthwhile to notice how the end of the novel, for the most part, comprises a summary of the economic fortunes and marital situations of the characters. Elizabeth is the wife of a wealthy husband who is able to help out her family financially—even her brother-in-law George Wickham: "...for Elizabeth's sake, he assisted him farther in his profession" (253). Kitty and Mary remain unmarried, but it is hinted that Kitty is doing well for herself, since "She was not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia," (252) and Mary, even though she remains at home, is better able to deal with her struggle to make herself noticed, "...as she was no longer mortified by comparisons between her sisters' beauty and her own" (252). The theme of sisterhood makes its mark at the end of the novel, in that the two eldest Bennet daughters are together again: "...he [Bingley] bought an estate in a neighbouring county to Derbyshire, and Jane and Elizabeth, in addition to every other source of happiness, were within thirty miles of each other" (252). The novel ends with the Bennets' change of fortune: they are no longer preoccupied as much with their financial situation and their status has gone up due to Jane and Elizabeth's marriages.

Though sisterhood is not a central theme of *Pride and Prejudice* as it was in *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane and Elizabeth, and to some extent their younger sisters, play off each other in addressing the importance of class status at the time. Jane is often abused for her family's lower class standing, even though in many respects she is what society

wanted in a woman at the time. Elizabeth at the beginning of the story prides herself on being able to point out the faults of how society is set up and managed, but she comes to learn throughout the course of the novel that social status, even with its unfairness, is something that must be compromised with. Austen rewards Elizabeth for her newfound understanding by giving her a well-matched husband and helping her sister find a happy marriage as well.

Conclusion

“You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking of your approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike them.” –Elizabeth to Darcy in Pride and Prejudice, Volume III, Chapter XVIII

A point of contention among literary scholars regarding Jane Austen is the issue of where to place her on a feminist spectrum. Although most see something progressive about the treatment of women in her novels (many times this is used as an explanation for why her work has remained popular long past her time), some see her as not being radical enough to induce change. Some see her as a feminist who commented, albeit subtly, on the unfair status of women for her time. There are even a few critics who view Austen as a writer who looked beyond feminism and created an environment in which men and women coexisted respectfully, defined as a post-feminist view. The range of Austen’s feminism has produced many opinions.

What I have tried to argue is that Austen lived in an environment that was not ready for radical feminism. As Vivien Jones points out in her essay “Feminisms,” Austen was writing at a time when England was concerned with the happenings of the French Revolution: “Burkean conservatism explicitly combined ‘conservation’ with ‘a principle of improvement.’ It spoke compellingly to a governing class anxious to maintain its position in the face not only of war, but of growing demands for social and political change” (Jones 286). Any hint of revolution created panic and thus those like Wollstonecraft were discredited in an attempt to stick to the status quo. I would bring Austen into this discussion by suggesting that she emphasizes in her works the “principle of improvement” by pointing out the faults of the higher social classes. My chapter on *Pride and Prejudice* addresses this concern, in that Elizabeth does not disregard all social tradition, which would have ruined her, but instead she learns that a healthy cynicism can

go along with this recognition and she is allowed to settle comfortably with Darcy. For his part, Darcy comes to realize that social class does not need to be so strictly observed, since doing so limits the type of respect a person can command. The balance this couple achieves between decorum and personal desire is an example of Austen attempting a compromise between feminism and conservatism. In *Sense and Sensibility* as well I have tried to show how Austen did not try to step too far into the realm of revolutionary. She sets up the two heroines, sisters Marianne and Elinor, as one who tries to be too different from the social standard and the other who balances social rules and an acknowledgement of feeling. Austen writes in such a way that readers sympathize with Elinor, since, in maintaining this balance, she is rewarded with being a strong woman in taking care of her family and marries the man she loves. Marianne, on the other hand, does indeed have a tragic story, but Austen uses her not to be an object of sympathy but rather as a warning against completely dismissing society's influence. In not directly preaching about the situation of women, Austen avoids a radical label and thus ensures that her work will not be dismissed as being too political.

Of course, there are more directly feminist elements in the plots of Austen's novels. To return to Jones' piece, she points out how Austen could be considered a progressive feminist, since she writes with "...the acute awareness of the financial and therefore social vulnerability of women of her class which is central to all her fiction" (283). This is glaringly evident in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. While I agree with Jones' earlier assessment that Austen did not reach too far out of society's comfort zone, there are themes with her work that should elicit an acknowledgement of the unfair position women are often put in. In my second chapter, I

discussed how Elinor is forced to take care of her family since her half-brother, whose mercy the Dashwood women are subjected to, refuses to take care of them. In the other novel, the Bennet family is a motif used by the author to show the importance of status. The heroines illustrate how the means women have available to them to help them move up and down the social ladder are often unfair. Jane is near perfect, if only she had a respectable family line, but she is almost denied the ability to improve her station through marriage. Looks are really as important as status, an unjust assessment for a woman like Mary who is well-read and virtuous. Austen does not directly sermonize to her readers, a fact which, I think, reinforces the idea that Austen did not want her work to be shunned like Wollstonecraft's, whose *Vindication* was very explicit and demanding. At the same time, she was not a post-feminist writer because she points out society's faults continually in her fiction. In order to be perceived as a writer that creates a post-feminist world in her fiction, Austen would have to have made social issues disappear. The male and female characters would only be concerned with bettering themselves as human beings and not struggling against an unfair society. I have attempted to show that Austen is actually quite concerned with social inequality.

Beyond her plots and characters, Austen's approach to the creation of her stories also reveals her quiet call for attention to the unattainable ideal that women are socialized to want. In Rachel M. Brownstein's analysis, "*Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*," she compares Austen's work to other novels written about the lives of women at the time: "The women-centered novel was deliberately didactic, conscious of setting standards of morality and behavior in a world that wanted them. It was critical of mere materialism; it valued genteel manners, female subjectivity, women's lives, and

affection in marriage, and above all the unique, superior, integral self” (Brownstein 35).

At first glance, it may seem that Austen did this, but instead, as I have attempted to discuss, she took these novels that often promoted the rules of decorum and responded to them by making a heroine who makes her way through a world that is against women ever achieving the ideal image of femininity. I think Brownstein sums it up best as she states, “Embracing and parodying the novel form, Austen keeps a neighborly distance from its tropes and premises, seeing them as analogues of her culture’s conventions and values” (35). Again, Austen is not directly coming out and criticizing society, but rather is pointing out its shortcomings and hypocrisies and putting forward a new way to live: respecting the social norms but understanding their limitations and finding room for an individual to develop.

As for the theory that Austen was a post-feminist, the discussion about how she uses feminism and supports some parts of convention should prove that Austen did not write about a world in which men and women were living equally (Jones 282). The only way Jones’ assertion could be relevant to Austen’s sense of compromise is that the heroines often do marry into a relationship that is full of mutual respect and love. Elinor finds a man who also learns throughout the course of *Sense and Sensibility* that emotion needs to be managed in order to live in a rule-oriented society, but cutting it off completely can be just as dangerous. In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth and Darcy each teach the other a lesson about what to respect about social class and what to change for personal happiness. However, the rest of the characters are often left to work through a world that is at the mercy of traditional hierarchy, a point that Austen does not wish to be overlooked.

What I have argued here is that Austen did concern herself with feminist themes, but instead of making demands she satirizes her social world in such a way that readers sympathize with her heroines. These characters are often not the perfect example of femininity that was stressed by moralists and conduct guides at the time. The theme of sisterhood and family serves to show certain women in a positive light, such as Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. These two heroines are juxtaposed with their sisters and family to promote an awareness of what society expects and respect for these standards. However, at the same time these characters show that a woman can feel and examine her own mind in order to better understand herself and others. Austen promotes a balance between what is expected of a woman and what a woman wants for herself.

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