

Converging the Paradox of *Sense and Sensibility*

From the 19th century to today, scholars have debated the principles of Jane Austen with the question, “Was Austen a feminist?” For some, she is a pioneer in feminist literature; for others, her strict gender roles reinforced conservative ideals of a patriarchal society. This debate begins with Austen’s introduction into the literary world and hall of fame: *Sense and Sensibility*. The novel casts a light that places marriage and restrictive female expression at the core of womanhood. Although there are two main female protagonists, most scholars interpreted Elinor’s marriage plot as the central narrative and her reserved, self-sacrificing nature as the pinnacle female figure. Deborah Weiss describes Elinor in her research on *Sense and Sensibility* as “more inductive, largely empirical.” Unlike Marianne, who is “deductive” and causes “social crisis,” Elinor is praised by scholars for her ability to “evade the many social dangers of the morally compromised world” (Weiss 257-258). Although there is a lot of standing within Weiss’s character analysis, it does ignore the internalized suffering that Elinor still faces despite her more “empirical” and protective approach. The sanctioning of Elinor’s internal despair and the stress on Marianne’s external sensitivity is a common disregard in the scholarly conversation regarding Austen’s first novel. Weiss concludes her research with the hypothesis that Austen’s greater purpose for the novel is for the audience to “pay close attention to their own experience—perhaps making Elinor’s of them all” (Weiss 271). This disregard of Marianne creates a shallow reading of the novel, as both sisters are important to the thematic purpose the novel imposes. Elinor and Marianne act as foils to each other; however, *both* of the sisters mourn their respective heartbreaks and are compelled to adopt traits of the other in a defensive transformation. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen reframes the marriage plot around the

convergent foils of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, which turns the oppressive patriarchal structure of marriage into an optimistic feminine sphere where survival and satisfaction are both possible.

Austen's Female Protagonist and the Disappearing Men

To begin the conversation of a feminist purpose in *both* Elinor and Marianne, we must first answer that introductory question, “Was Austen a feminist?” To answer this question, we can look towards the real-world societal perception of women and the increase in feminist ideals during that time. Pam Morris summarizes this environment and the writing of politics as “to attack the dangers that excessive sensibility posed to vulnerable young women” (Morris 38). They go on to claim that Austen, within this context, places sensibility at the satiric front to share “this concern and [how] Marianne’s treatment by Willoughby exemplifies the risk” (Morris 39). The use of these same principles shared by significant feminist figures helps push Jane Austen and her use of sensibility within the two core female protagonists into the light of feminist conservatism. This form of conservatism can be seen in how Austen uses traditional roles within her fictions, which are often seen as regressive and anti-feminist, but skews tradition in a way that emphasizes the protection of “vulnerable young women” and the “dangers” of society that threaten “excessive sensibility.”

William Magee follows this idea with Austen’s use of the marriage plot and argues that it serves a larger purpose within the scope of womanhood. They state that marriage is a framework for her storytelling and provides an optimistic journey for “a young woman entering society” when searching for a husband, which is “virtually the only career then open to a woman” (Magee 198). Unlike other pieces of Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* uses two heroines to “dramatize her theme of two kinds of sensibility” (Magee 200), which then requires two different courtships

and love triangles to frame both sisters' narratives. Both separate marriage plots emphasize the two sisters' sensibility and their converging journeys: Elinor finds quiet companionship with Edward Ferrars, but their struggle is emphasized within their silent nature and lack of communication. Marianne, on the other hand, is unruly and naive, which is underscored by her romanticisation of Willoughby and their openly flirtatious relationship, which is even more highlighted by the failure of it. Both sisters' proposals stress the completion of not only the basic marriage plot, but also each sister's development and renewal of character. This is especially showcased in Marianne, who ends up with the more mature Colonel Brandon, drastically reflecting her shift in sentiments and character.

Austen's focus on each sister's journey to a secure and happy domesticity while disregarding the men's narrative creates a feminist insight of the marriage plot. This feminist approach, with the erasure of male characterization and perspective (Morrison 341-343), promotes female dominion within the constraints of gender roles. This understanding is essential to the reading of *Sense and Sensibility* to fully grasp how Austen navigates a feminist paradox that struggles between: "condemn[ing] stereotypical and limiting roles for women" and "elevate[ing] traditional women's roles and concerns" (Morrison 346). There is a real-world battle within the feminist sphere that has trapped itself between the validation of women's roles and the protection of said women. Austen isn't concerned with the omission of this oppressive foundation in her fiction, but she also doesn't want to focus on the "victimization of women in a way that adds a certain lustre to male domination" (Morrison 343). This doesn't mean that the struggles of women are discarded; instead, these "concerns" are elevated in *Sense and Sensibility* with her convergent foils, Marianne and Elinor, that connect female struggles with the normalization of the feminine sphere.

The Establishment of Foils

The distinct foil between Marianne and Elinor's characters is recognised from the beginning of the novel with the two sisters' introduction, but it can be better understood throughout with their artistic expression. Elinor's artistic outlet showcases her internalized and neglected emotional distress and the control she attempts to have over how she is perceived. Similar to the nature of her sentiments, Elinor's artistic capabilities are often unacknowledged; however, notably at the start of Elinor's turmoil, her use of illustrations is described. She actively attempts to repress her sentiments through her artistic endeavors with the passage,

Elinor sat down to her drawing table as soon as he was out of the house, busily employed herself the whole day, neither sought nor avoided the mention of his name, appeared to interest herself almost as much as ever in the general concerns of the family, and if, by this conduct, she did not lessen her own grief, it was at least prevented from unnecessary increase, and her mother and sisters were spared much solicitude on her account (Austen 76-77).

Within this description, she privatizes the distress and waits until the source of it—Edward—is gone so she can internalize it rather than confront it. She takes an entire day, but the drawings don't turn into an emotive outlet for herself; instead, it becomes a way for her to avoid the situation and paint a mask that doesn't reduce sorrow and instead only "spares" her family from the pain. This approach does succeed in her self-sacrificial way of concealing her unease, but throughout the strife she faces, it never "lessen[s] her own grief." Instead, the ache continues to slowly boil to the surface.

Marianne's choice of art is the Pianoforté which exemplifies her use of outward communication and desire for passionate connection. It was in constant use, most often in a duet

with Willoughby, but as the tide begins to shift in their relationship and Marianne is left behind, the piano doesn't silence itself; instead, the songs intensify with melancholy and tears. Days after Willoughby's departure, Marianne is described as having played, "over every favorite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby [...] She spent whole hours at the pianoforté alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by her tears" (Austen 62). Unlike Elinor, Marianne addresses her sorrow and her emotions within the comforts of her private life and other close companions. She feels very strongly and permits herself to show it, which, within a few days, results in "a calmer melancholy" though with the "occasional effusions of sorrow as lively as ever" (Austen 62). Marianne's sensibility can be seen reflected in music: it is loud, boisterous even, but quick in passing, much like her courtship with Willoughby. This juxtaposes against Elinor's landscape drawings, which are picturesque, substantial, and long-lasting, but also silent.

The Dangers of Courtship

Part of Marianne's humility journey is paved through her heartbreak from Willoughby, which removes some of her original naivety. Marianne's initial introduction to Willoughby foreshadows the danger of their affection with her preestablished ignorance of danger. After ignoring the warnings of rain, Marianne goes on a walk with Margaret until the clouds suddenly "united over their heads" and rain started to pour down over them. The two sisters were then "obliged, though unwillingly, to turn back, for no shelter was nearer than their own house [...]" but a false step brought her suddenly to the ground" (Austen 31). In this early demonstration of Marianne's character, we can see her desire for freedom with her determination to leave the confines of her home and domestic life despite the warning of dangerous weather. At first, the outdoors seems comfortable and safe, filled with "delightful sensations" (Austen 31) until the sudden change of clouds and pouring rain. The outer environment ultimately proves to be

dangerous as in her attempt to flee back to the safety of her home, she is “brought suddenly to the ground,” injuring her ankle in the process. The fall is allegorical of the danger of becoming a fallen woman, with the explicit harm of the fall and the hidden threat from the man she meets. Marianne’s fall literally pushes her into the arms of Willoughby, who carries her back to the cottage, starting their romantic escapade and foreshadowing the pain she will endure.

From the beginning, it is considered that Elinor makes the correct choice in suitor, as her initial affection is the same man she eventually marries, but they still struggle in their courtship. From the start of the relationship, she refuses to admit her deeper admiration for the elder Ferrars' son and instead describes her opinion of him as “esteem” and in high regard rather than genuine affection in order to protect herself. Elinor explains this hesitation as, “till his sentiments are fully known, you cannot wonder at my wishing to avoid any encouragement of my own partiality, by believing or calling it more than it is” (Austen 16). Elinor believes that caution in making her regard for Edward known will prevent any embarrassment or heartbreak in false assumptions; however, despite her attempt to ignore her feelings until permitted, when she learns of Edward's engagement to Lucy, the heartbreak is set deep within herself. Directly after the discovery, Elinor plays along with the conversation with “a composure of voice, under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond anything she had ever felt before. She was mortified, shocked, confounded” (Austen 99). Despite her proactive measures and esteemed sense, Elinor isn’t safe from the pain and devastation of a heartbreak; in fact, she is just as blindsided as Marianne.

The Humility and the Convergence

The climax of both Marianne and Elinor’s turmoil showcases a level of growth, each converging aspects of the other through their speeches of humility. These speeches often arise in

Austen's novels as a way for the protagonist to reflect on the past and push forward to a resonating renewal. Ashly Bennett says that, "rather than repress or disavow sensibility in order to avoid its shame, Austen revises the emotional intensities and investments of sensibility through shame, and especially through innovative novelistic displays of shame." (Bennett 378). Instead of hiding character faults and over-sentimentalism to avoid the audience's potentially negative perspectives of these women, Jane Austen emphasizes these shameful characteristics to highlight "emotional intensities" and complexity within her character studies. The reflection of past shameful actions takes the stage in the form of catharsis, which highlights the nuance of character development and expands past the barriers of fiction to emotionally connect with readers. For readers and scholars, this "shame proves central to imagining a more fluid relation between emotional absorption and detachment," which is essential to the comprehensive reading of *both* sisters as it is "necessary for complete, competent, and pleasurable interpretation." (Bennett 398).

Elinor's cathartic reflection focuses on revelation with a sense of humility and anger within her loss of governance over her sentiments. From the fictitious community and real-world audiences, the two sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* are defined by their reputable nature: Marianne is deemed sociable and all-feeling, while Elinor is reserved and "empirical" (Weiss 257). Morris describes these two opposing sides within the novel as being "categorised as either cold-hearted or warm-hearted" (Morris 49), making this black-and-white categorization force Elinor into the box of "cold-hearted" due to her guarded sensibility. Even her closest companion, Marianne, believes her to be frigid as she shouts out in frustration, "Cold-hearted Elinor! Oh! Worse than cold-hearted" (Austen 16). This presumption continues until the accumulation of silent suffering causes Elinor to acknowledge the long, wilting grief she has felt in "the

punishment of an attachment,” without any of its “advantages” due to the secret engagement of Lucy and Edward (Austen 192). She finishes her speech to Marianne by declaring, “If you can think me capable of ever feeling—surely you may suppose that I have suffered *now*” (Austen 192). In this moment, Elinor finally admits her sorrow and addresses the further anguish she has felt because of the prejudices her sister has about how Elinor showcases her emotions. There is a sarcastic tone in the final line addressing the irony of Marianne’s constant critique of her “cold-hearted” sentiments in comparison to how much she truly is suffering.

Learning from the misconception that emotions could be controlled, when Elinor and Edward reunite, they are open and vulnerable about the pain they have suffered and the love they feel for each other. The narrator summarizes the atonement as, “His heart was now open to Elinor, all its weakness, all its errors confessed” (Austen 266). The process of the humility journey ends with Edward's regret and apology, which puts focus back onto the completion of Elinor’s journey of rejecting her self-repression and overly submissive nature. The success is obvious when Mrs. Jennings visits “Edward and his wife in their Parsonage by Michaelmas, and she found in Elinor and her husband, as she really believed, one of the happiest couples in the world” (Austen 276). Their relationship is put on a pedestal in comparison to other marriages, with them being “one of the happiest couples” while also having a sense of equality about them. Elinor is no longer the quiet, selfless “angel of the house” archetype that embodies submission, but instead is at the same level as her husband. The couple is described as “Edward and his wife” as well as “Elinor and her husband,” pushing the focus of a spousal dependence from both sides and placing them equal to each other's titles.

Marianne is a much more obvious “humiliated heroine,” with the descriptions of her excessive feelings and the dangers she imposes. The most prevalent instance of a cathartic

reflection happens with Marianne and is much like Elinor's, with a focus on sororal dynamics and regret. However, there is a prevalent difference in the emphasis of shame, which Marianne focuses on for the pain she has caused herself and others, aligning with Austen's "humiliated heroine," while, for Elinor, the shame is forced onto the man to complete her journey. In confronting her past, Marianne admits, "I saw in my own behavior since the beginning of our acquaintance with him last autumn, nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others" (Austen 254). Behind her seemingly unending misery from Willoughby and a near-death illness after once again recklessly going out during bad weather, she begins to see the errors of her ways. Marianne summarizes this understanding and her lack of self-control with one powerful line, "Had I died,—it would have been self-destruction" (Austen 254).

Many scholars view Marianne's marriage as a disappointing outcome and a form of retribution for her past; however, her journey into womanhood and her search for balance between humility and independence often get overlooked in the analysis. Marianne first expected a life of "irresistible passion," then, afterwards, with "calm and sober judgments," she believed she would live with her mother in eternal "retirement and study" (Austen 279). Nevertheless, at nineteen, finding the harmony between her sense and sensibility, Marianne is "submitting to new attachments, entering new duties, placed in a new home" (Austen 279) since she is now married to Colonel Brandon. There is a sense of responsibility and "submission" to the societal expectations of being a wife, and despite the oppressive gender expectations of this choice, there is also a rationality and security within her decision. Marianne represents the conservative politics within Austen's works; she subcumbs to the traditional gender roles, which subvert her original sensibility of "irresistible passion." However, this secure marriage not only provides Marianne with financial and social shelter, but also turns into a loving matrimony as, in time,

with “consolation” and “animation,” her whole heart became “as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby” (Austen 279).

The Happy Ending

Elinor and Marianne's journey represents the balance between two opposing forces—the conservative and the feminist, or more specifically, the survival and the satisfaction. Elinor, who promoted the idealized female self-sacrifice and submission, gains candidacy and assertion, while Marianne, who encompassed naivety and impropriety, grows more sense and rationality in her choices. Marianne's growth is equally necessary to Elinor's in the representation of Austen's feminist conservatism and humiliated heroines. With shame, Marianne reflects and overcomes her misconduct, finding the thematic balance between decorum like Elinor and the youthful extravagance she initially held. The feminist paradox finds its solution in the completion of Elinor and Marianne's marriage plots as the evolution of their sensibility showcases both female agency as well as optimism in traditional female roles. Both sisters' accumulation of each other's sensibility can be seen as a lesson for Austen's female audiences on how to exist within patriarchy. However, Austen's novels push past conservatism into the protective feminist territory where exemplary choices will lead to love and optimistic co-existence within oppressive societal norms; also known as the Austenian marriage plot.

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