

**Social Prostitution in the Guise of Romance:  
The Representation of Women's Lack of Economic and Social Rights in  
Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility***

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## **Table of Contents**

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Social Context and Historical Background.....	4
3. The Money Trouble: Marriage and “Social Prostitution” .....	7
4. Love and Requirement: the Sisters’ Approach to Matrimony .....	12
5. Conclusion .....	16
6. Further Research .....	17
7. Bibliography .....	18

## 1. Introduction

There are many critical studies that explore the attitudes and behaviour of Elinor and Marianne in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). My concern in this discussion as regards the sisters' decisions and outcomes relates to the ways that the novel can be read as supporting a form of "social prostitution", since it delineates the love story of two young women who both need to contract marriage to ensure their survival. Although the sisters have different approaches to matrimony, their behaviour represents what Gilbert and Gubar (1980) term woman's need for duplicity in order to survive in a hostile society that leaves women behind. Consequently, this paper attempts to review some major historical events that created the English society to which Austen's characters belong. I believe that Austen's narration of the two sisters' romances is interconnected with social criticism since it shows, on the one hand, Elinor and Marianne's specific love stories and, on the other, their awareness of how wealth needs to be the main reason for seeking a man so as to ensure survival and to fulfil their expectations.

Copeland (1997) analyses the emphatic relationship between love and money represented in Austen's novel, which shows how aware of financial dependence the two sisters are. Copeland argues that this is not random but is, instead, ironic that the two sister's income at the end of the novel is exactly what they had expected it to be at the beginning. I believe that Austen's irony is very well planned, since she begins the novel with the death of the man who provided the Dashwood's financial security and ends it with two marriages that bring the exact income expected by the sisters. That is to say, once they reach the age of marriage and lose the little autonomy that they had, both sisters forced to play the same social game that every woman in their society needed to play for survival. Despite their differences, both sisters needed equally to be settled as soon as possible to ensure their financial situation; and they both do so in the only way possible for women in their class: by "selling" themselves to the man best able to provide them with at least the minimum yearly income that they deem necessary to survive and to maintain their status.

However, the two sisters romanticize about what they both have to face in life in order to survive, as if marriage in their situation was a pleasant choice they freely took. Even though Elinor restrains her inner desires while Marianne constantly opens her heart, the two love stories show how they overcome their humiliating situation. Love seems to be culturally attached to the girls' natural imagination, but I believe that Jane Austen is trying to soften the outrageous reality that she wants to criticize. For instance, when talking about Edward Ferras, Elinor and Marianne's mother is represented as a woman conscious of the need to guarantee her daughters comfort, but she also seems to be willing to do just about anything in the name of love, which is a sham: "No sooner did she perceive any symptom of love in his behaviour to Elinor, she considered their serious attachment as certain and looked forward to their marriage as rapidly approaching." (15). Does it really matter if he loves her? I believe it does matter since he is the one with money, rights and choice, whereas she is not. Bearing these ideas in mind, I propose to discuss the manner in which Jane Austen reveals to us the stark reality of the sisters' situation and in doing so shows us that the moral ideals of that society are corrupt. In addition, she shows us that the basic aim of young women's lives; to ensure a husband, force them into compliance as apparently willing and enthusiastic participants in a parody of real love, whereas in fact the real nature of their involvement in this is, effectively, similar to prostitution. I aim to trace this idea by a close reading of the novel and by the careful application to my central argument of a range of relevant critical sources.

This approach to the novel tries to show *Sense and Sensibility* as a faithful portrayal of Austen's society since it represents through Elinor and Marianne's love stories a disregarded truth, namely, that women in the middle-to-higher-ranking classes in Austen's time had to sell themselves as "social prostitutes" in the social shop-window of the unofficial market established by a patriarchal society.

## 2. Social context and historical background

In order to understand marriage and its significance involved when Jane Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility* we need to take a quick glance back at certain previous historical events that created an adverse social context for women during the nineteenth-century in England. It has been said that in the nineteenth-century Britain experienced a remarkable prosperity due to the industrialization, colonial expansion and social transformations. However, women's social situation at the beginning of the century was not the most prosperous one since this national greatness did not satisfy the entire society.

First of all, we have to consider the impact of the French Revolution in English society as well as its beliefs and principles. When analysing the effects of the French Revolution some historians have said that circumstances that took place outside England affected the country and its society directly. The previous industrial revolution destroyed the communal industry and split society into rich holders and poor labourers who started to migrate to industrial towns. A new type of labour appeared in these industrial cities where workers, who suffered the effects of the new *laissez-faire* policy, lived and worked under outrageous conditions. However, the revolutionary ideas brought to England by the French revolution fostered the hope, the strength and the agitation of many sympathisers and workers whose social, political and economical rights were systematically neglected. As a consequence, the ruling classes; who felt an increasing threat against the social structures established; reacted against the hazard with a severe repression.

Although *Sense and Sensibility* does not explicitly engage with social and political issues; as is common to all of Austen's later fiction; the fact is that it implicitly and laterally reflects on how all these circumstances affected women. During this period women represented an underclass bereft of basic rights:

“Women constituted a deprived class which cut across social classes, for they were regarded as inferior to men in intellect and in all but domestic talents.

They were therefore provided limited schooling and no facilities for higher education, had only lowly vocations open to them, were subjected to a rigid code of sexual behaviour, and possessed (especially after marriage) almost no legal rights.” (Abrams, 1993: 3)

*Sense and Sensibility* shows us from the first chapter this tyranny suffered by women. Although the French Revolution had huge transformative potential for the female condition due to the revolutionary rights that considered men and women equals and free human beings, the course of events turned against these revolutionary principles. Before this happened, the consideration of marriage as a mere civil contract as well as the right of education for women could have implied an extraordinary social change not only in France, but throughout Europe. However, the revolutionary ideas, that could have deeply transformed the male and female condition and also their society, did not last long. Soon enough the turn of events put down many sympathisers along Europe while the civil rights previously accepted suffered a backward motion in France. When Napoleon was crowned emperor, the inspiring principles of *freedom* and *equality* fostered by the French Revolution became, in the Napoleonic Civil Code of 1804, the principles of *hierarchy* and *authority*. This Code has been considered by many historians as the basis of all European legislation and it represented the moral bankruptcy of all developing democratic ideals. As a result, back in England, women's social situation did not improve; instead it degenerated due to the social repression imposed by the still ongoing fear of the ruling classes.

Therefore, women from all classes of society were left behind as individual rights and duties were not equal between men and women. However, according to Barker and Chalus (2005) traditional historical perspectives and studies have detected that not only economic and social changes marginalized women but also the combination of those changes with “an emerging social ideology of female domesticity that was encapsulated in the notion of *separate spheres*. Such thinking dictated that women and men were naturally suited to different sphere: for women, the private sphere; for men, the public sphere.” (Barker, 2005: 5). Women’s association to domestic affairs and men’s relation to a continuous growth of economical power fostered the subordination of the former by the latter. A conservative reaction against any kind of female independence was assumed among the middle-classes in

a period where, ironically, English liberals embraced the revolutionary ideas brought by the French revolution. However, Barker and Chalus also emphasise that to fully understand how the reinforcement of the patriarchal society established affected women's experience during this period we have to take into account other factors. For instance; and in the view of the topic in this study; class and age are two major factors to consider when analysing Elinor and Marianne's social experience of marriage. Consequently, this issue will be further considered at a later point in this discussion.

### **3. The money trouble: marriage and “social prostitution”**

Austen’s era witnessed enormous distress among women due to their lack of financial dependency and rights, all of which is represented with the utmost care in her novel. Austen herself and her characters belong to a deeply chauvinistic society where women were in a subordinate position. Men were women’s financial protectors and providers although middle-class women were constantly chased by the fear of losing their social position due to their inability to freely dispose of income and inheritance. Such a reality is represented in Austen’s novel through the story of two sisters who are socially forced into marriage after being deprived of the family estate that should rightfully belong to them.

In order to maintain the status aimed and to ensure survival, middle-class women had to face a situation of finding themselves pressured into disregarding their feelings and to accept a different standard of a companion with the image of perfect love. That is to say, women were on the fringe of society and subjected to male dominance and therefore they had almost neither decision-making power nor money. As a consequence, and although the choices that a woman could have were not particularly appealing, women usually had to accept marrying men, through which rank and wealth could be achieved. Whatever these women determined necessary for their welfare is what they needed to seek in a man since women were not legally able to accomplish it: "your brother might be persuaded to give him Norland living; which I understand is a very good one, and the present incumbent not likely to live a great while. That would be enough for us to marry" (107). According to McMaster, Austen seems to like “the Cinderella plot, and to make a happy ending out of marrying her heroine to a man notably above her income and social prestige” (McMaster, 1997: 117), which may seem as if Austen is endorsing the corrupt moral values of her society. However, I believe that if social status is permanently present in Austen’s novels it is because she tries to safeguard the values of human ethics that part of her society wishes to ignore:

“To say so much is not to contend that she approved of the bastions of privilege in her very hierarchical society, or resisted the changes towards freer



movement between the classes that she saw happening around her. Nor did she subordinate moral and aesthetic judgments to issues of social rank. (...) In Jane Austen's world, human worth is to be judged by standards better and more enduring than social status. The importance assigned to class distinction is the source of much of her comedy and her irony, as of her social satire." (McMaster, 1997: 129)

For instance, Marianne's natural impropriety towards hypocrisy and Elinor's satisfaction with a humble life beside Edward shows that social standing is not what Jane Austen cares about, instead, I believe that the issue she wants to address is women's lack of autonomy, a circumstance that practically dragged women into marriage since matrimony was the main way to ensure long-term financial security. Consequently, the girls need to ensure survival through the acceptance of their fate and therefore, once Mr. Dashwood dies, and considering the impossibility for women to inherit anything, the only way for the girls and their mother to maintain their social status is through marriage. Furthermore, this is also Margaret's fate so once Marianne and Elinor are finally settled Margaret becomes the next one who needs to be ready for "social prostitution": "when Marianne was taken from them, Margaret had reached an age highly suitable for dancing, and not very ineligible for being supposed to have a lover." (269).

Although some middle-class women during this period could ensure their survival through employment, Copeland suggests that employment among middle-class women was not a suitable option since it represented not only an inconsistency with the class that they wanted to belong too but also an obvious loss of alternative financial support.. Therefore, Austen's characters aimed to fulfil their expectations through the only option suitable for them and the status they are pursuing: "Employment for a heroine turns the ideology of the genteel novel upside down (...) the heroine's successful employment would invite the hostility of the very society to which the heroine so earnestly aspires to belong" (Copeland, 1995: 163). Hence, employment as an option for Austen's characters is dismissed in her novel and marriage becomes the only way to ensure the sisters survival and status. Even Margaret at such a young age is aware of women's lack of financial independence and fate and therefore she wishes for her family to be able to fix that problem at once: "I wish that someone would give us all a large fortune apiece" (68). Elinor seems to go further in her wishes when talking to her youngest sister about that issue by doing justice to this claim in

default of a better possible solution: “We are all unanimous in that wish in spite of the insufficiency of wealth” (68). This dialogue may suggest that Austen was trying not only to expose middle-class women’s miseries but also to denounce women’s lack of economical and social rights. In this regard, Copeland suggests that Austen’s approach to money is related to three major reasons, which a social criticism about women’s situation is among them:

“Austen approaches the subject, money, from three different, but related, points of view. First, as a member of the pseudo-gentry, that is to say, the upper professional ranks of her rural society; second, as a woman in that society, severely handicapped by law and custom from possessing significant power over money; finally, as a novelist who joins other women novelist in a larger conversation about money.”(Copeland, 1997: 133).

However, not all members of the family are marriageable since Margaret is only thirteen and her mother is a forty year old widow. Contemporary readers may think that Elinor and Marianne’s mother could have some chance either in the marriage market or in the working world but nothing could be more erroneous. On the one hand, and as it has been said, the idea of employment for middle-class women was understood as a disloyalty to their own class as well as an inappropriate way of living since it brings economic survival but no social comfort; an inconvenience that, by the way, Austen probably suffered herself. On the other hand, wealthy men of all ages could take any teenager as a wife due to their economical power and therefore it is easy to imagine that women in their forties and even younger had neither chance nor acceptable proper manners, thus the only wealth that women had was their children. If they were men they could inherit and become their mother’s protectors whereas if they were women they were expected to put their charms up for sale as soon as they reached puberty in order to marry a man who “is very well worth catching” (34), such as the sisters' mother expresses: “Had I sat down to wish for any possible good for my family, I should have fixed on Colonel Brandon’s marrying one of you as the object most desirable.” (238). This could be considered indeed as the practise of the world's oldest profession and I believe that this “social prostitution” is a major issue that Austen tries to criticise in her novel:

“The women’s novel offers prostitution as an intentionally shocking emblem of the general, humiliating economic condition of Everywoman. The oldest profession becomes the woman novelist’s whipping-post to expose an unjust society. (...) World of employment is divided between the miseries of prostitution (married or otherwise) and the equal miseries of respectable employment. Between these two appalling alternatives the difference is only of degree, not kind.” (Copeland, 1995: 187).<sup>1</sup>

The feelings that may arise from the thought that old men were allowed to take advantage of any young girl, thanks to their wealth and possessions, and the actual truth that older women could not and should not access to neither the marriage market nor the working world are issues that show how essential it is to take into account age and class as significant factors of English patriarchal society that affected women. As a result, as prettier and younger the lady was as richer and better the likely candidate became, which is a chance that for instance Marianne was about to lose because of her distress: “She was as handsome a girl last September, as any I ever saw; (...) I question whether Marianne *now*, will marry a man worth more than five or six hundred a year.” (161). Austen shows this awful reality at the beginning of the novel through the beliefs of an immature Marianne. In regards to Colonel Brandon’s age and his intentions with the spirited girl, Austen not only exposes women’s social and domestic subordination as well as marriage’s age limit but also the inconsistency of young women like Marianne who would allow this oppression at any age in order to maintain social comfort and not to fall prey to female employment:

“Mama, you are not doing me justice (...) thirty-five has nothing to do with matrimony. (...) A woman of seven and twenty can never hope to feel or inspire affection again, and if her home be uncomfortable, or her fortune small, I can suppose that she might bring herself to submit to the offices of a nurse, for the sake of the provision and security of a wife. In his marrying such a woman therefore there would be nothing unsuitable.” (30)

However, Marianne’s romantic idealization of marriage makes her think that this situation will never happen to her and therefore, matrimony with a lack of love is unacceptable under her point of view but tolerable under a social perspective:

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<sup>1</sup> Copeland is citing Mary Hays:

Letter from Mary Hays to William Godwin, 1 October 1795. Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, New York.

“It would be a compact of convenience, and the world would be satisfied. In my eyes it would be no marriage at all but that would be nothing. To me it would seem only a commercial exchange, in which each wished to be benefited at the expense of the other” (30).

Nevertheless, *Sense and Sensibility* seems to narrate the learning process of Marianne, the immature younger sister who by the end of the novel learns that to avoid marriage for the sake of love is not something that she can freely afford.

#### **4. Love and requirement: the sisters' approach to matrimony**

As we have seen, when Jane Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility* marriage for middle-class women was the only suitable way to ensure, in the first instance, survival and secondly, comfort and status. I agree with Copeland (1997) in saying that it is not random that the two sister's income at the end of the novel is exactly what they had expected it to be at the beginning of it since this end contains a painful irony in regard to what the two sisters' approach to marriage had involved. The irony lies, above all, in the fact that this approach has been traumatic for both of them even though they end with the financial security expected.

Marianne and Elinor's love stories may seem as a representation of an ordinary middle-class woman who had to face marriage in order to fill her pockets, whatever size they may be, and their hearts, if possible. Therefore, although the two sisters know that they need to seek financial security in marriage they also try to find a companion to love. However, Austen's exaltation of love through the sister's romances may seem as if she is willing to ignore the outrageous reality of women or an attempt of sweetening what is actually a requirement for survival. However, although it is through romance that the sisters assume their fate, I believe that Austen tries to show how women's involvement into the harsh reality of "social prostitution" becomes bearable since it represents an actual process of patriarchal domination and domestication in order to force women to accept a social role that does not go further than the domestic sphere: "Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, (...) and finding her only pleasures in retirement and study, (...) 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" (268). In addition, I believe that Austen tries to represent the painful awakening of women from innocence to full consciousness of the world they live in, a world that denies women's integrity and dictates their will. Marianne, our innocent seventeen year old heroine, learns through Elinor and her own experience and suffering how unfair the social reality is for women even though she accepts at the end a man who she does

not want. Austen shows through Marianne how traumatic this learning process may be for women:

“The initiation into conscious acceptance of powerlessness is always mortifying, for it involves the fall from authority into the acceptance of one’s status as a mere character, as well as the humiliating acknowledgment on the part of the witty sister that she must become her self-denying, quiet double” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1980: 161)

Moreover, Marianne’s awakening from innocence almost kills her when she realises that love is not what moves the world, which shows the actual disturbance for women when facing the true reality of marriage: “I saw that my feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave” (244). However, and taking Elinor as an example to follow, Marianne learns not only how she has to behave as a lady but also what she needs to seek in marriage: “whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, (...) regretting only *that* heart which had deserted and wronged me” (245). By the end of the novel Marianne leaves behind her wishes, her feelings, her hopes, her manners, her beliefs and even her essence, and her status as a unique woman becomes finally set as wife instead of a free individual. In this sense, Gilbert and Gubar (1980) analyse the dichotomy represented by Elinor and Marianne as a representation of women’s necessity of duplicity when awakening as mere objects for whom choices have been made:

“Assertion, imagination, and wit are tempting forms of self-definition which encourage each of the lively heroines to think that she can master or has mastered the world, but this is proven a dangerous illusion for women who must accept the fate of being mastered, and so the heroine learns the benefits of modesty, reticence and patience.” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1980: 161)

Consequently, at the beginning of the novel Marianne is not willing to marry a man only for the sake of money, comfort and status but by towards Elinor and her experience she learns that love and wealth are not always provided together, thus she takes what is left for her in order to survive:

"Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another" (268)

Love has been an illusion that has worked only for Elinor but at the expense of renouncing wealth. Therefore, although love seems the only thing that the sisters aim towards in life, the fact is that at some stage they are both aware of the stark reality of women in their society. Austen shows this reality from the very beginning of the novel by presenting the real social context in which the heroines are going to develop their "class-consciousness" to which they belong, a subordinated underclass that Austen seems willing to expose through romance:

"The novel begins like a novel of social realism. In the first paragraphs the narrator sounds like a lawyer or a banker; family alliances, the estate that is the heart of paternalistic society, even the deaths of loved ones, are all ruthlessly subordinated to economic facts (...) that will govern the futures of Elinor, Marianne and Margaret. And given this probable development, the reader can understand why romantic fantasies are appealing." (Poovey, 1984: 188).

That is to say, through increasing Marianne's awareness towards the social situation of her gender, Austen seems to criticise this humiliating reality for women to foster the awakening of universal values. Austen shows us through Marianne's experience how traumatic the acceptance of this social reality may be for women in order to reveal that true love is often an illusion that needs to be disengaged from marriage to ensure women's survival: "Austen caricatures just enough of Marianne's responses to nature and love to make her seem intermittently ridiculous, and, when her desires finally explode all social conventions, Austen stifles her with an illness that is not only a result but also a purgation of her passion." (Poovey, 1984: 189).

As a result, the sisters' initial pursuit of love and wealth becomes a necessity to set and survive, which is anticipated by Austen at the beginning of the novel by showing that Marianne is not so unaware about the real nature of women's involvement in marriage and the difficulty in finding love: "The more I know of the world, the more am I convinced that I

shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much!” (16). Marianne needs love and money but she also knows that these two requirements are not always provided together thus, throughout the novel, she learns to accept how the world really is by deciding to sell herself to Colonel Brandon in order to get at least one of the two things she needs. Therefore, Marianne’s imagination and dreams become through pain tolerable with the reality of marriage since it represents the only way to get the financial security and comfort that she determines she needs. In addition, after plenty of suffering Elinor ends up marrying the man she loves but by doing so she also accepts the lack of wealth. Both sisters suffer the consequences of a society that neglects on the one hand, women’s financial independence and social rights, and on the other, women’s self-definition and uniqueness since they are all dragged to a world of restraint, acceptance and submission that represents women’s social subordination to the domestic sphere. In this regard, Gilbert and Gubar (1980) suggest that Austen tries to expose through the two sisters’ different behaviours, and therefore approaches to matrimony, woman’s necessity for duplicity in order to survive:

“Austen’s self-division – her fascination with the imagination and her anxiety that it is unfeminine – is part of her consciousness of the unique dilemma of all women, who must acquiesce in their status as objects after an adolescence in which they experience themselves as free agents.” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1980: 161).

Consequently, I believe that *Sense and Sensibility* narrates the story of two sisters who stand facing the situation of having to choose not only between love or money but also between renouncing one's own identity and individualism or save themselves from the miseries of poverty.



## 5. Conclusion

As it has been shown, *Sense and Sensibility* narrates the two sister's experience in a very particular stage of women's life, when they deal with marriage, a situation that as we have seen was practically unavoidable for women like them as a consequence of the social discrimination suffered by the chauvinist society they lived in. Austen's insistence in talking about money as well as her persistence in exposing the problems emerged by women's financial dependency supports the idea that what Austen wanted to relate in her novel was not a fancy description of two unlikely love stories but to report through two different perspectives the actual condition of women in her society, a condition that dragged women to a situation similar to prostitution.

I believe that from the very beginning of the novel to the end of it the major concern for the sisters is not to find a man to love but a financial provider to replace the one that they have lost. No matter how the sisters initial expectations are, each one reaches their individual ambition by the end of the novel, even though they have had to give up many of their initial claims along the way. This seems undoubtedly as if Austen tried to display a multidimensional problem that affected all women to a greater or lesser extent. Consequently, the recurring theme addressed through the whole novel is the money trouble for women as a consequence of their lack of social dependence and rights, which suggests that Austen has planned the opening and the ending of the novel according to this major concern. Thus, if Austen's major concern in *Sense and Sensibility* has been to report the underclass status of all women, it is not unreasonable to think that what she wanted was to criticize female subordination by revealing women's situation. Accordingly, she seems to put forward what society needs to change in order to build a fairer world based on universal human rights. In light of all this, what I am certain is true is that underneath the love stories narrated in *Sense and Sensibility* lurks an ironical romance loaded with social criticism.

## 6. Further research

This study has tried to approach *Sense and Sensibility* as a faithful representation of Austen's society by intending to show how this portrayal was a fairly constant criticism about the lack of women's rights in Austen's England. I did so by paying continuous attention to the two main characters and widespread female circumstances that put them in a position of having to "sell" themselves to men for survival, that is to say, a situation that might be called "social prostitution". Therefore, new studies could complete this research by analysing the male characters in the novel as well as the male condition in order to examine the representation of gentlemen as "purchasers" in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

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