

The Austen Women: A Look at Character

Honors Thesis

HNRS 4900

Angela Henderson

Wednesday, November 20, 2002

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“To be ‘happy’ is to seek one’s potential character and a state of being in which one is accurately aware of others’ feelings, with real sensibility, and can behave well in adversity,” so writes Jane Austen’s biographer Park Honan (253). This statement suggests that a happy person accurately perceives the emotions of others and responds appropriately. It further implies that a happy person understands her own feelings, for if one does not understand her own behavior first, she cannot understand the behavior of others. If a woman chooses to marry, she should do so wisely; in nineteenth-century England, a woman’s happiness largely depends on her choice of mate. In her novels *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen illustrates that women increase their chances of happiness when they reflect on their own character and the character of their future mates.

Austen women are good people who are well educated, but they still make mistakes when judging character. The reader, along with the Austen woman, can learn from their stumbling blocks. Marianne Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility*, has grandiose ideas about ideals and the universe but fails to look at real world applications, such as how people behave outside her tightly-cloistered family. Marianne rashly forms judgments. She believes she must behave as she feels, and that to conceal any emotion is to posture. She discounts reason and caution which yields dire results. But she develops insight which helps her cope with adversity.

Anne Elliot, in *Persuasion*, wants to behave prudently, but she lacks a proper guide. Her family conducts themselves foolishly with regards to moral affairs. Anne does not trust her judgment, and so she is persuaded easily by her confidant, Lady Russell. Anne knows good character but proves weak in enforcing her opinion. She

lacks resoluteness, but not morality. She spends eight years examining her feelings about her relationship with Captain Wentworth. When she meets him again, her self-knowledge has strengthened her character.

Elizabeth Bennett, of *Pride and Prejudice*, is a staunch believer in her values and confidently trusts her ability to discern character. But she is overly confident of her abilities. She is intelligent and accustomed to introspection but lets personal bias skew her perceptions. Her ego bars her insight. Her pride also allows for her to maintain her rash judgment of both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham. Through painful self-examination, Elizabeth discovers and admits her errors and learns discernment.

Fanny Price, of *Mansfield Park*, is unlike the other Austen woman; she is correct in her character analysis from the beginning. Her only fault is that she is too timid in voicing her opinion. Fanny knows she has the right answers, yet she lacks confidence to act on her assessments. She needs to be more assertive, and through pursuing her choices she develops that trait.

Austen shows there is no prescribed way of judging character, no blanket prescription for happiness. Even the best of the Austen women has room for improvement. Each person needs sense and morality to adapt to every new challenge life presents. Everyone makes mistakes, but the Austen women learn from theirs. Each has an opportunity to marry, wait, and come to insight about herself and her partner. Each contemplates her choices and rethinks her decisions. And each grows from her experience—the hallmark of good character.

If there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong.

Jane Austen

Sense and Sensibility

People do not always know when they are acting wrong. Elinor Dashwood is well aware of propriety, and her sister, Marianne, learns about it. It is important to have firm moral principles to help guide behavior. Each new situation requires appropriate responses. Many times the course for proper behavior comes after a long period of contemplation. One should fairly weigh all alternatives and control emotional responses. When looking at a person, one should check to see if a person's actions accord with his temperament. Many times people aim to deceive; they profess to believe a certain way, but in actuality their actions prove otherwise.

For example, John Dashwood's rapacious wife, Fanny, persuades him that the occasional gift of a meager present or two more than fulfills his promise to his late father to provide for his half-sisters. Elinor, Marianne, and their mother see through this transparent simulation of support. They see Fanny for the selfish, greedy person she is. John Dashwood isn't necessarily a selfish and inconsiderate person, but his wife's strong influence brings out the worst in him. He lacks the courage and sense to be his own person. John feels as if he is the dutiful brother, but his actions prove him to be otherwise.

John Dashwood and his wife immediately claim their new estate, and his half-sisters and their mother must find new lodgings. During this process, Elinor and Fanny's brother, Edward, form the beginnings of a romantic attachment. Their fondness for one another is obvious to the entire family, and their temperaments suit one another perfectly. But Marianne does not understand Edward's temperament. She notes his lack of passion, and she does not understand how Elinor could ever wish to love a person such as Edward.

Marianne projects her own sentiments of love onto Elinor and assumes Elinor should feel the same way. Marianne believes love to be a burning, consuming emotion:

He is not the kind of young man—there is something wanting—his figure is not striking; it has none of that grace which I should expect in the man who could seriously attach my sister. His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence. And besides this, I am afraid, mama, he has no real taste. (*Sense and Sensibility* 14)

Marianne has romantic notions about what it is to love; she is a sensitive and passionate person. Volumes of Shakespeare and Cowper help form her opinions, but she lacks sense, or real world experience, to know how to appropriately apply these sentiments. True love does not have to be explosive. It can be steady, calm, and reassuring.

The idea of an engagement between Elinor and Edward appalls Fanny Dashwood. She cannot conceive Edward choosing to love a woman of acute sense and feeling. Elinor is poor, and her relation would not improve Edward's financial situation. Fanny views money and social status to be the only criteria to a good match. Therefore she deems their alliance unworthy and rushes Edward away to London under the pretense of business. Elinor sees through this farce.

Shortly thereafter Elinor, Marianne, and their mother and sister move to a cottage from their mother's relation, Sir John Middleton. They start a life of frugality, one of which they are not accustomed. Marianne becomes the object of affection from their new acquaintance, Colonel Brandon. Although Marianne and Brandon make a good match, Marianne is not interested. Brandon is too old, and more importantly, he fails to satisfy

her romantic fantasies. Marianne could increase her social position through the match, but his vast wealth and estate do not interest her. She wants to marry for love.

Marianne sees the opportunity for this in Willoughby. Willoughby comes to her rescue after she twists her ankle, thus setting the wheels of fantasy in motion. She uses her imagination to make the reality of Willoughby fit her fancy. Marianne gushes in his presence, and she flatters him incessantly with her unreserved attention. Willoughby quickly catches on that this beautiful, young woman is infatuated with him. Her brightness overwhelms him, and she wins his favor during their first meeting: “he acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm; and long before his visit concluded, they conversed with the familiarity of a long-established acquaintance” (*Sense and Sensibility* 40). Marianne attracts Willoughby with her magnetism. She does not wait and let Willoughby reveal his character to her through his actions. She lets him know right away that she likes him. Elinor does not approve of this rash behavior, and she wonders how Marianne knows Willoughby’s tastes when he conforms to hers.

Marianne finds no fault with her behavior; she discounts the old-fashioned rules of propriety. She is eager and enthusiastic in her love. Marianne prizes candor, and she assumes that since she likes Willoughby, he is a virtuous man:

I see what you mean. I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against decorum; I have been open and sincere when I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful: Had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared. (*Sense and Sensibility* 41)

Marianne feels the only way to be true is to be open and not reserved. She does not play games, and she does not expect Willoughby to either. Willoughby has no doubts that Marianne likes him, her every action tells him so. She is quick to form her opinion of Willoughby, and, to Elinor's dismay, Marianne does not take time to reflect on his character.

Marianne's mother quickly falls in love with the idea of Willoughby, as well. They see Willoughby as a sort of image, a projection, of their hopes and desires. Willoughby perceives their desires and postures to their fantasy. He plays the part Marianne openly craves. Only Elinor has the sense to detach herself from his conciliating manners and analyze his personality:

In hastily forming and giving his opinions of other people, in sacrificing general politeness to the enjoyment of undivided attention where his heart was engaged, 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 that he and Marianne could say in its support. (*Sense and Sensibility* 42)

Elinor senses discord between Willoughby's personality and temperament, and she does not like Marianne rushing into his alliance. Propriety exists to keep people in check. Elinor believes people should conduct themselves according to the rules of society. She feels opinions are best kept to oneself. Marianne and her mother criticize Elinor for questioning Willoughby's character, but Elinor simply wants Marianne to be careful. She wants Marianne to get to know Willoughby first before she gives him the precious gift of her heart.

Elinor is correct in her prudence. Willoughby turns out to be a selfish, ruthless cad. He uses Marianne's affection strictly to gratify his ego. He enjoys toying with Marianne's emotions and making her fall in love with him. He fails to realize how truly good she is with her openness of temper, keen intelligence, and physical beauty.

Willoughby uses people. He manipulates ladies' hearts and then leaves them.

Willoughby's benefactor receives information that Willoughby conducted himself unwisely with regards to another young woman's affection, Eliza, who is pregnant. His benefactor cuts him from her will, and Willoughby cannot afford the perceived indulgence of an alliance with Marianne. He can toy with her feelings no longer. He must find a new, wealthy benefactor to support him financially. But Willoughby does not own up to his mistakes with Marianne; he simply leaves town, breaks all communication with her, and pursues an engagement with a rich socialite. His true character has surfaced.

Marianne is beyond devastation. She does not understand how Willoughby could toy with her emotions and apparently reciprocate her feelings. Marianne learns dearly from her mistake. Austen's biographer writes: "What [Marianne's] story deeply illustrates is how society preys on the inexperienced, naïve, feeling of heart of a genuine person who is physically as well as mentally vulnerable, and very palpably of flesh"

(Honan 281). Willoughby is Marianne's first love, and she falls madly for him.

Marianne never thinks Willoughby could be a bad person, but she never thinks at all. She is all emotion. Marianne falls in love *before* she knows his true nature. This event serves as the catalyst for Marianne's coming to maturity.

While Marianne and her family bereave the loss of their dear Willoughby, Edward Ferrars comes to pay them a short visit. Edward resumes his awkward and unsteady lovemaking of Elinor. Elinor reciprocates his affection, but she knows that his family does not approve their potential connection: “His want of spirits, of openness, and of consistency, were most usually attributed to his want of independence and his better knowledge of Mrs. Ferrar’s dispositions and designs” (*Sense and Sensibility* 87). Edward has neither profession nor financial independence to allow him to form an attachment with Elinor. His mother intensely despises the idea. Also, Edward is keeping a secret from Elinor, which helps explain his awkward behavior. He previously formed an engagement with Lucy Steele.

Elinor and Marianne are unlucky in love. Both beaux are weary to form engagements with the respective sisters. Edward is engaged to another although his heart belongs to Elinor. Willoughby’s heart belongs to Marianne, but his pocketbook is the property of Miss Grey. While Edward remains a good man at heart, Willoughby steep in his rottenness. The sisters deal with their tragedies according to their temperaments. Because Marianne gives her heart freely and without thinking, she is devastated to witness Willoughby’s true character. Elinor never let her heart grow too accustomed to the possibility of a future with Edward, but the truth still hurts her. Honan states:

Elinor and Marianne have *varying degrees* of sense and sensibility...To have ‘sense’ at its best means being able to control one’s emotions through observation, reason and moral understanding. To have ‘sensibility’ means having an accurate perception of other people and their feelings, in social situations, so as to behave appropriately. (277)

Marianne has the ability to form accurate perceptions when she stops to think. But she rarely stops to think. Marianne gets carried away with her emotions while Elinor is in clear control of hers. Marianne cries, mourns, and simultaneously hopes Willoughby will return soon to her. Elinor resigns herself to be patient and does not let hope unrealistically carry her away. Marianne suffers outwardly and physically, while Elinor maintains a steady sense of decorum. She reveals her true feelings to no one.

Lucy Steele desperately wants to know the extent of Elinor's and Edward's friendship, and she unburdens the details of her secret engagement to Edward in order to check the response of Elinor. Elinor does not fall for this trap. She behaves civilly, controls her feelings, and uses her head. She will not give Lucy the pleasure of seeing her open and exposed. Elinor understands the importance of keeping her opinions to herself. Elinor achieves this task while gracefully fulfilling her social duties.

Even if Lucy were not engaged to Edward, Elinor still would not like her. Elinor cannot respect a woman who keeps an engagement when her heart is no longer there. Elinor is aware of Lucy's mischievous, artful ploys, and she does not condone them. Lucy Steele is not up to par with an Elinor Dashwood, and Elinor realizes this:

Elinor saw and pitied her for the neglect of abilities which education might have rendered so respectable; but she saw, with less tenderness of feeling, the thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind, which her attentions, her assiduities, her flatteries at the park betrayed; and she could have no lasting satisfaction in the company of a person who joined insincerity with ignorance. (*Sense and Sensibility* 110)

Elinor feels compassion for her adversary, and she is not intimidated by her. Elinor detests Lucy Steele, yet she behaves cordially to her. She puts up with Lucy's pointed remarks with total grace and dignity. Elinor is a model for decorum in every situation.

Marianne differs drastically from her sister in this policy. When Marianne listens to Lucy spout the virtues of Lady Middleton, a selfish, insipid woman who lets her children run wild, Marianne chooses to be quiet rather than to say something she doesn't mean in order to maintain societal appearances, "it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion, and upon Elinor, therefore, the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it always fell" (*Sense and Sensibility* 105). Marianne does not know how to be polite without compromising her values. She would rather offend than to acknowledge the importance of societal roles. Elinor always behaves according to social mores, yet she never compromises her individual integrity—a skill Marianne eventually will hone.

Elinor is more accustomed to looking outward while Marianne focuses chiefly on herself; Elinor is considerate of others' feelings. When Lucy reveals her engagement to Elinor, Elinor cannot help but wonder how this affects Edward, "Could he, were his affection for herself out of the question, with his integrity, his delicacy, and well-informed mind, be satisfied with a wife like her: illiterate, artful, and selfish?" (*Sense and Sensibility* 118). Elinor likes Edward too much to see him waste his talents and his heart on someone so undeserving as Lucy Steele. If Elinor cannot have Edward, she at least wants to see him happy, but his future looks bleak with Lucy Steele. Elinor goes on to say, "As these considerations occurred to her in painful succession, she wept for him more than for herself" (*Sense and Sensibility* 108). Elinor knows Edward's engagement

will not be a true meeting of the minds, and she wishes more for him. Elinor has a pure, selfless love for Edward. With all of his mistakes, he almost seems unworthy of Elinor's unwavering affections. But this is the way true love should be, "[Elinor] epitomizes the novel's deepest theme: the survival of right feeling through sense's protection" (Honan 283). Elinor is confident in her love for Edward, and she does not let the pettiness of Lucy Steele, or the mistakes of Edward, interfere with her judgment. Elinor is also an incredibly good person; she keeps Lucy's engagement a secret—anyone else would tell. But Elinor has the foresight to know that this affects not only Lucy, but Edward, as well. Elinor independently forms her opinions, and she earnestly believes in the power of reflection. She takes time to think how her actions affect others, and she does not respond emotionally.

Marianne does not reflect; she simply feels. She cannot conceal her emotions. She exposes her feelings to everyone and thus increases the odds for getting herself hurt. She lacks self-restraint and the ability to look outside herself. This makes her an incredibly poor judge of character, although in theory her personality is laudable. Marianne prefers to be open than to be quiet because, to her, concealing any emotion is tantamount to being deceitful. She needs to learn about the principles of judgment and to be more aware of a person's character.

Marianne slowly learns of the necessity to change her ways. While in London Marianne inevitably runs into Willoughby, and his behavior astonishes her. He is cold, he is detached, and he is the exact opposite of his former self. She later learns of his engagement and then marriage to Miss Gray. Her romantic fantasy becomes a horrific

reality—this is the effect of rushing into an intimate acquaintance with a person of elusive character. She is crushed. Honan writes:

The follies of others are most amusing when we understand our own. But it may be very painful to understand our own—and we may regret the circumstances that made them seem follies. There is a poignancy about Marianne that is deep enough to criticize not only society, but all adulthood. (280)

Marianne cannot view her relationship with Willoughby as folly until much time passes and she matures. She first must grieve and look deep within herself to understand her feelings and her behavior. Marianne suffers intense emotional and physical pain from her dissoluteness. Willoughby's blatant misuse of Marianne's affections stands, after the fact, as an important reminder to the necessity of prudence: prudence in conduct, and prudence in morality. Elinor in her prudence and maturity, unfortunately, was right all along.

Marianne recovers, Elinor resigns herself she will never get Edward, and fate works it out where she does. Elinor and Edward complement each other with their tastes and personalities. Elinor is rewarded for her patience and sensible decisions: "In every way the severe good sense of Elinor triumphs over laziness, irresponsibility, thoughtlessness in love and the rather confused mind of a decent and good-hearted Oxford graduate. As Marianne began to create Willoughby, so Elinor perfected Edward" (Honan 284). Because Elinor has a very realistic view of Edward, she is able to use her insight to help bring out the best in him. She sees his faults alongside his qualities. Marianne initially fails to perceive Willoughby's true nature. She rushes into his

acquaintance, and presumes he shares all her same tastes and preferences. She does not step back and realistically analyze the situation. She does not allow for introspection.

While Marianne suffers tragically for her mistake, she grows and learns from it, as well. Marianne dearly learns the importance of prudence and introspection; she gains a deeper understanding, and a calmer, steadier nature. When Marianne comes to marry Colonel Brandon, she is mature enough to find satisfaction with his patient and soothing love. She is rewarded for her introspection and maturity. Explosive love demands incessant attention, but it takes refined taste to appreciate a sweet and quiet love.

She, however, was soon persuaded to think differently.

Jane Austen

Persuasion

There are varying degrees of persuasion and different reasons for persuasion. One should check the factors of persuasion to better understand its influence in decision making. Persuasion is a simple, guileless endeavor when it incorporates the best interests of everyone involved. But persuasion takes on hideously dark undertones when used to deceive; some entreat others to do their bidding in order to achieve ulterior goals. Some are easily influenced by society as to which values and ideas should be endorsed. Others hold no firm opinion or belief and are so persuaded by whim or fancy. Some resolutely stand their ground, obstinately refusing to adapt to the dynamic situations around them which demand appropriate responses. The cases of persuasion cannot be clearly labeled black or white; they are myriad hues of gray. Persuasion does not come merely from friends or family. Alternate forces, such as money or social status, persuade some to dire depths merely to secure financial or social gains. Anne Elliot fares better than most characters in *Persuasion*, but she still needs to learn about its influence.

Her father, Sir Walter, is easily influenced by fashion and power. His chief concern is presentation: how something appears to the outside world. As long as the package is wrapped nicely, he doesn't care about its contents. "Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter's character; vanity of person and of situation" (*Persuasion* 24). Sir Walter lets his vanity influence his decisions; he lives beyond his means using style and show to calculate his budget rather than economics. Sir Walter also judges people using physical appearance as the criterion. In his objection to the navy, the profession of Anne's suitor, Sir Walter replies: "I have strong objections to it. First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising man to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; and secondly, as it cuts up

a man's youth and vigour most horribly" (*Persuasion* 39). Because Sir Walter has a title, he is a firm believer in a stratified society. According to Sir Walter, a person's looks should never be sacrificed for something as trivial as gainful employment. Anne could live a happy life with her suitor, Frank Wentworth. But it is not the life Sir Walter desires. He respects wealth and social status, and Wentworth has neither, only the promise. Sir Walter's favorite book, the *Baronetage*, does not account for moral character, something Wentworth clearly exhibits. Sir Walter is too concerned with titles, something Wentworth lacks, and attempts to dissuade Anne from marriage. Sir Walter does not know that true gentlemen do not need titles to prove their worth, and true gentlemen do not look for titles to affirm their decisions. Anne does not esteem her father's opinions because she knows that sound judgment plays no role in his decisions. She declines Frank's marriage proposal, but not because of her father's opinion.

With no help from her father, Anne possibly could turn to her sisters for advice. But she cannot receive help from them either because they are equally as silly as her father. Like her father, rank, fortune, and appearance define Elizabeth's opinions of others. She does not understand the importance of sound moral judgment. Mary does not fare any better; she is a sulky and egocentric:

Mary had not Anne's understanding or temper. While well, and happy, and properly attended to, she had great good humour and excellent spirits; but any indisposition sunk her completely; she had not resources for solitude; and, inheriting a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance, was very prone to add to every other distress of fancying herself neglected and ill-used. (*Persuasion* 57)

Mary persuades herself that she is in constant need of attention. She imagines she does not receive the affection she deserves. Like a child, she throws tantrums when she doesn't get her way. While Anne always shows Mary kindness, and it is difficult to give affection to a selfish and whiny person, Anne never gives into Mary's foolish, egocentric pleas. Anne satisfies her own end while reconciling the needs of Mary.

Anne's elder sister, Elizabeth, requires democratic finesse, as well. Elizabeth acutely enjoys her status as mistress of Kellynch Hall: she handles the house's domestic affairs, leads the way to the chaise and four, and walks immediately behind Lady Russell from drawing-rooms and dining-rooms (*Persuasion* 27). Elizabeth's only discomfort is that her youngest sister, Mary, enjoys the distinction of marriage. Like her father, Elizabeth concerns herself with trivial social affairs such as these. She is devoid of introspection and does not look at life with a larger world view than herself. Anne's family does not provide an appropriate model of behavior. But Anne has enough sense to not let her family's behavior persuade hers.

Her family's reprehensible behavior encourages Anne to learn about life on her own. She comes to a better understanding when she declines Frank Wentworth's initial marriage proposal and has eight long years to dwell over every aspect of the decision. Anne has ample time for introspection, and she matures over this period:

But Anne, at seven-and-twenty, thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen.—She did not blame Lady Russell, she did not blame herself for having been guided by her; but she felt that were any young person, in similar circumstances, to apply to her for counsel,

they would never receive any of such certain wretchedness, such uncertain future good. (*Persuasion* 49)

Anne learns to let each person make his own decisions, and to not let others hold too much control in her decision process. She also learns the value of introspection; she can look to her behavior and see where she erred. Anne at twenty-seven is the oldest Austen heroine. But age is unimportant to Austen because it is never too late for happiness, especially when one deserves happiness because she makes sound moral decisions.

Frank Wentworth earns his right to happiness. His boldness and confidence unite perfectly with the requirements of the sea. He makes his fortune as he promised and quickly rises in the ranks. Wentworth too thinks often of Anne, yet he fails to write her. There is a total breakdown of communication between the two. His pride persuades him from maintaining correspondence with Anne, and his pride is too wounded to reassert her claims to his love. His pride keeps him from his one true love.

Frank returns as Captain Wentworth and sets out to find a new partner—he has no hope with Anne. He does not seek to find Anne, but they meet again at Kellynch while Anne stays with her sister Mary's family. Captain Wentworth cannot believe the change in her physical appearance from the blossoming beauty she was eight years ago. He tells Henrietta, “[Anne] was so altered he should not have known [her] again” (*Persuasion* 81). Without love, Anne loses her bloom. And without Anne's love, Wentworth loses his respect for her. Anne understands Wentworth's meaning explicitly:

He had thought her wretchedly altered, and, in the first moment of appeal, had spoken as he felt. He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shown a feebleness

of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. It had been the effect of overpersuasion. It had been weakness and timidity. (*Persuasion* 81)

Yes, Anne was persuaded by her friend, Lady Russell. But Anne is now more mature and confident of her own judgment. It would have been an imprudent match for the two of them at an earlier time. Wentworth had no means of providing for Anne when he proposed; he had no fortune, just the promise of fortune. Lady Russell has no faith in his promise to her friend. A promise is no firm ground for a relationship because something easily could happen to shake that foundation; Lady Russell understands this. Taking everything into consideration, it is justifiable that Lady Russell's opinion weighs so heavily with Anne.

Anne Elliott lets her dear and trusted confidant, Lady Russell, persuade her out of a potentially ill-suited marriage because she lacks proper moral guidance. Anne wants to do what is right, and Lady Russell is her only sensible advisor. Anne truly loves Wentworth, yet with neither fortune nor steady profession to recommend him, Wentworth's future is uncertain. Lady Russell wants to ensure Anne will be well taken of. She knows exactly which method to use to dissuade the principled Anne Elliott from marriage. Anne listens to Lady's Russell's objections because Lady Russell says that the alliance would hurt Wentworth, and Anne trusts her opinion. "The belief of being prudent, and self-denying principally for *his* advantage, was her chief consolation, under every misery of parting—a final parting" (*Persuasion* 48). Anne is not selfish, and she loves Frank enough to let him go, especially when she feels what she is doing is right. As a result, she suffers the loss of his companionship for eight long years. Anne is not to be

frowned upon too harshly for listening to Lady Russell's advice; she did the best that she could at her young age, and she could have done worse. Lady Russell is only looking out for Anne's best interests and is not trying to cheat her out of her opportunity to love. Lady Russell is too good, and loves Anne too much, to ever do something like that to her.

Captain Wentworth fails to comprehend Anne's dilemma, and he is too harsh on her. He still loves her, yet he actively woos other young women in her presence. Anne bears all of this with grace and tact—so much so that Captain Wentworth is unable to discern her true feelings towards him. Austen's biographer writes, "Anne is like Cordelia and Ophelia, holding her tongue and not knowing the mind of the man she loves" (Honan 382). Neither knows the nature of the other person's true feelings. Anne will always love Wentworth, but she keeps her feelings to herself. She patiently resigns herself not to hope.

Anne waits and lets Wentworth come to terms with his feelings. He cannot escape the fact that he feels Anne is of weak and persuadable character. Her refusal hit him hard. Wentworth does not know what to think of Anne, so he simply avoids her. When he courts Louisa Musgrove, he praises her on her "character of decision and firmness" (*Persuasion* 108). Wentworth goes on to say, "It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on.—You are never sure of a good impression being durable" (*Persuasion* 108). These statements are in clear retaliation to Anne's treatment of him. He doubts that he made his love clear to her. He feels his love was not strong enough for Anne. He does not want to see his heart broken again. Louisa, eager to secure Captain Wentworth's affection, takes these statements seriously and uses them as a justification for obstinacy. Louisa does not

understand that each situation requires an appropriate, individualized response. While it is good to be firm in one's opinions, one should know when to listen to the advice of others. Honan writes, "To be persuadable of duty means being conscious of what we rightly owe others in our behavior" (384). Austen drives this point home when Louisa cracks her head on the pavement when she carelessly jumps from the Cobb. Captain Wentworth begs Louisa not to jump, but Louisa wants Wentworth to believe she is secure in her opinion and cannot be swayed. Louisa jumps without considering the risks. She lacks the sense to discern when to keep her opinions and when to change them.

Louisa's fall opens the way for Wentworth to enter back into Anne's life. He witnesses Anne's keen sense of judgment, and how she expertly handles the situation. He realizes Anne is an intelligent and good woman, and she always was. Yet he is slow to rush into an attachment with her. He does not know if Anne reciprocates his feelings. Plus Anne has an ardent admirer in her cousin, Mr. Elliot. Mr. Elliot flatters Anne with his compliments, and he calls on her with every opportunity. Wentworth does not know how to proceed during these circumstances.

Anne is not interested seriously in Mr. Elliot's affections. But everyone around them feels as if an engagement has been formed. Anne's friend, Mrs. Smith, is hesitant to voice her true opinion on the supposed engagement to Anne for fear that she would hurt her. Mrs. Smith serves as a reminder to Anne of unwise attachments. Mrs. Smith married without knowing the true nature of her husband. Honan writes,

Having married imprudently she gives Anne a glimpse of an alternate fate—of what *could* have happened if mere romance had led Anne to marry Wentworth—and like a good oracle in a fairy story Mrs. Smith

withholds her knowledge of evil, and then reveals it to equip Anne to understand Mr. Elliot's depravity and the hazards of yielding to advice.
(382)

Anne is not aware of Mr. Elliot's true character until her friend reveals it to her, and then it becomes obvious to Anne by his every action. Mr. Elliot is a selfish, immoral person seeking to benefit himself in any means possible. Anne is upset that she was persuaded by his appearance and by his flattery to believe him to be otherwise.

Both Anne and Captain Wentworth suffer from the effects of persuasion. Hers is a persuasion away from an engagement, and his is a persuasion from his pride. Anne suffers and looks inward for the eight years afterwards, while the novel suggests that Wentworth tries to forget and to not think about the engagement. Wentworth feels resentful and cannot move forward. Austen rewards Anne for her introspection, and shows Anne has an opportunity for redemption; she may regain her bloom. When Anne spies Wentworth at a party in Bath, she knows, "She [is] in need of a little interval for recollection" (*Persuasion* 213). Anne constantly capitalizes on opportunities for introspection. She tries to look at her feelings, and where they come from. Anne hopes that by better understanding her feelings, she can better control her behavior.

Anne also seeks to understand the behavior of others. She is an apt observer of Wentworth's temperament. She understands his feelings by discerning his responses. Anne is a judge of character. One needs judgment to discern the varying needs of each situation, and one should have the courage to evaluate each new situation independently. There is no blanket prescription for happiness. "With no belief in static virtues, his or her own or anyone else's, she [Austen] viewed life as a struggle never won, and felt that even

a conquest of the self was meaningful only for a moment” (Honan 376). Because something worked in the past does not guarantee it will work again in the future. One needs judgment because life tests people every day. Wentworth comes to realize this and reconciles with Anne. He tells Anne, regarding the fall of Louisa from the Cobb:

There, he had learnt to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind. There, he had seen everything to exalt in his estimation the woman he had lost, and there begun to deplore the pride, the folly, the madness of resentment, which had kept him from trying to regain her when thrown his way. (*Persuasion* 272)

It takes a tragedy for Wentworth to realize his mistake. When his mistake becomes apparent to him, he has the courage and intelligence to learn from it, and he does not want to waste any more time. Life is in proportion again.

Anne is almost too good for him. She waits ever so long for him. No other man could tempt her into marriage, and she had had the original offer to be Mrs. Charles Musgrove. Charles is a good man and lacks the faults of Mr. Elliot. But Anne can only love Wentworth. Hers is a model for hope and patience. Hers is a model for introspection. Wentworth is infinitely grateful to Anne for her fortitude, and they marry knowing the true character of each, and how lucky they are to have one another.

It is very often nothing but our own vanity that deceives us

Jane Austen

Pride and Prejudice

Vanity and ego filter individual perceptions. People view the world through personal experiences, through their own emotional filter. The more vain a person is, the more he or she believes in the paramount importance of self. Vanity, when unchecked, leads to rude and selfish behavior because a person looks out for himself instead of others. The gratification of the ego becomes the goal of most actions. Typically, the higher a person thinks of himself, the lower he thinks of others. An engorged ego prohibits affection and benevolence toward others. Vanity also clouds individual insight because it is easier to believe perceptions which flatter the ego than it is to accept perceptions which show otherwise. When a person's insight is hazy and opaque, or seldom used, it becomes difficult to see the true self and accurately critique it. Both Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* allow vanity and pride to bar their insight and hinder their self-examination; both must learn to overcome pride's effects.

Darcy feels he is better than Elizabeth because of his wealth and social status. He thinks that since Elizabeth is not a person of high social status, he does not have to treat her nicely. He rudely offends Elizabeth at their first meeting when he says of her to his friend, Mr. Bingley: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me" (*Pride and Prejudice* 7). Elizabeth overhears Darcy's exchange, and because she is confident, she laughs away his impertinence. But this insolent image scars her initial perception of him. She knows Darcy feels superior due to his wealth. He becomes prejudiced in her mind. Elizabeth sees his arrogance and misconstrues his mannerisms as

further proof of his pride. Although Elizabeth does not like Darcy, she still treats him with respect. She knows how to behave properly. She checks her laugh when she perceives he would be offended (*Pride and Prejudice* 37). But despite her consideration for his feelings, Darcy does not consider Elizabeth's feelings when he voices his rude opinions.

Elizabeth is especially sensitive to her feelings when it comes to Mr. Wickham. He says all the right things to Elizabeth, and he does not slight her. He pays her a compliment when he talks to her rather than to all the other young ladies present at Mrs. Phillip's house. Elizabeth thinks nicely of Wickham because he behaves nicely: "...his manners recommended him to everybody. Whatever he said was said well; and whatever he did, done gracefully. Elizabeth went away with her head full of him. She could think of nothing but of Mr. Wickham, and of what he told her, all the way home" (*Pride and Prejudice* 64). Wickham is a charmer. Elizabeth likes to think about Wickham because, unlike Darcy, he makes a good first impression on her. As with Darcy, that first impression erroneously affects Elizabeth's judgment of Wickham. Elizabeth eagerly fosters a friendship with Wickham based on their mutual dislike of Darcy. Wickham fills Elizabeth with unfounded gossip about Darcy, which reinforces her idea of Darcy, and she is more than willing to listen anxiously to everything Wickham says of Darcy without question. Her vanity obscures her judgment. Sometimes people believe what they want to believe when it falls readily into preconceived assessments.

Likewise, Darcy initially allows for society to dictate his perception of Elizabeth, and his haughtiness precludes no meaningful relationship can be formed at a mere country ball. She is lower in rank and lacks fortune to amend the difference. Darcy

should not be blamed for hesitating to make a connection with a family of inferior social and moral status. Elizabeth's mother talks freely of a pending engagement between her daughter Jane and Mr. Bingley even though no agreement has been made. Mrs. Bennett loudly voices her dislike of Darcy and his arrogant ways. Elizabeth's sister Mary sings horribly, and Mr. Bennett rudely cuts her off without consideration of her feelings. Elizabeth's cousin Mr. Collins absurdly introduces himself to Darcy, a social blunder, and Elizabeth judges all too well how Darcy will receive him; Darcy cannot believe Collins's gall. Her family commits almost every conceivable social blunder. Darcy cannot get past these images of Elizabeth's family.

Darcy lacks the social courage to separate Elizabeth from her family's vulgar ways. Her relatives tarnish Darcy's perception of her. Her family behaves poorly because they lack discernment. Her father, although he is a good judge of character, is lax to instill virtue in his daughters and therefore does not serve as a proper role model to them. Austen's biographer writes, "Conduct books and education manuals had advised daughters to heed their mothers, fathers or guardians, but Elizabeth's parents are useless—Mrs. Bennet is as puerile as her husband is cynically detached, wry, bitter and only affectionate when it suits his mood or convenience' (Honan 308). It is Mr. Bennett's fault that his children do not know how to behave properly because he is well aware of the foolish example their mother sets. Elizabeth and Jane have natural sense; little evidence exists to prove he fostered their rectitude. Their mother does not understand the importance of discernment. The reader knows early on that Mrs. Bennett is not a good judge of character: "*Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was

discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (*Pride and Prejudice* 3). She changes opinions hastily, and she does not stop to think before voicing them. Her youngest daughters embody the same capriciousness. Two daughters only look as far as the next village to monitor the activity of its naval regiments; securing an eligible beau monopolizes their every waking thought. The third younger daughter, Mary, tries too hard to be virtuous. She yearns to appear as accomplished as her eldest sisters. This overwhelming desire alters her perceptions so that she is unaware of her own personal beauty and charm. It is a miracle that Jane and Elizabeth turn out so well amidst all this ridiculous behavior. Jane and Elizabeth understand the importance of discerning character and behaving properly in spite of their family’s follies.

Regardless of her family’s vulgarity, Darcy remains infatuated with Elizabeth. He cannot get her saucy image out of his mind. He sees in her a young woman not afraid to voice her own opinion and do so with incredibly good sense. She is his intellectual and moral equal, and she would make for an amiable, gregarious partner. Elizabeth is a challenge for Darcy. They banter delightfully in their conversations, “Her dialogues with Darcy are intelligent sexual combats, full of challenge, thrust and hurt” (Honan 313). Elizabeth throws down the gauntlet in a manner Darcy respects. He returns her flirtations with dry humor. The more Elizabeth and Darcy interact, the more intrigued with her he becomes. Darcy feels he must propose to Elizabeth even though it will be an unwise social match.

But Mr. Collins beats Darcy to the punch. Lady Catherine de Bourgh advises Collins to marry, and marry soon, so Collins sets off with the exact intention of doing so.

He is not in love but wants to enjoy the social benefits of marriage. His only concerns are making social connections and promoting his personal interests. He exists to gratify his over-inflated ego and does so under the pretence of false modesty. He flatters with such frequency that one doubts the sincerity of his compliments. Discerning judgment helps one identify sycophants such as Collins. When he proposes to Elizabeth, after first imagining himself to love her older sister, Elizabeth cannot believe he is sincere in his proposal:

My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add to very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly, which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honor of calling patroness. (*Pride and Prejudice* 80)

Collins wants to marry to make his patroness happy, not Elizabeth. He reveals his foolishness to Elizabeth through his absurd proposal. Elizabeth emphatically declines him. She is not in love with him, nor could she ever be. All of the reasons selfishly pertain to Collins, and he cannot understand why Elizabeth would refuse such an offer. His ego leads him to believe he is a better catch than he is. Many a young lady would jump at the chance to be secured in a seemingly respectable position; in fact Elizabeth's friend, Charlotte Lucas, accepts the offer that Elizabeth quickly refused. Elizabeth is surprised to find out that Charlotte does not share her same tastes and preferences.

Elizabeth eventually comes to a finer understanding of Charlotte's situation in life and her decision to marry Collins when she spends time with them.

Elizabeth's mother stoutly rebukes her declination of Collins's marriage proposal, and she sees it as a snub that he marries Charlotte. Charlotte will one day find herself mistress of Longbourne as the estate is entailed to Collins. Mrs. Bennett wants the house to go to one of her daughters rather than to an outsider. Mrs. Bennet says to Elizabeth, "Miss Lizzy, if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead" (*Pride and Prejudice* 86). Mrs. Bennett views marriage as a financial agreement. She wants to ensure her daughters will be taken care of; ironically she does not hear about Darcy's initial marriage proposal. She most certainly would let his wealth displace her contemptuous caricature of him.

Darcy proposes to Elizabeth while she is staying with the Collinses. He loves Elizabeth, yet he still looks down on her, and especially her family. Darcy tells Elizabeth, "In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (*Pride and Prejudice* 142). Darcy is thinking only about his feelings; he does not ask Elizabeth how she feels about him. They are not in love, yet. Darcy is shocked when Elizabeth refuses his proposal, and he thinks she should be more considerate of his feelings, especially since he must lower himself to make this union.

Elizabeth sees the superciliousness of Darcy and the harm he causes; he uses his influence over Bingley to persuade him against forming an engagement with Jane. Jane and Bingley suit one another perfectly, yet it is an inferior connection on Bingley's

behalf. Elizabeth further alleges that Darcy conducts himself with excessive haughtiness in every affair. She also believes he forever ruined Wickham's chance for prosperity when he denied him his living. Her grievances against Darcy are many. She could never love a man like Darcy when he has been the source of so much pain to her, her family, and her friend.

Elizabeth wants to marry for love, and the type of man that will gain her devoted affections must be intelligent, moral, and of steady and respectable character. Elizabeth thinks she finds this in Wickham, but she does not disdain him when he pursues a relationship with a female of greater wealth. Elizabeth is well aware that many chose partners based on wealth, and she does not let this trait scar her perception of Wickham.

But Wickham's concern with wealth should serve as an indicator of his value system. He does not seek a bride based on love and personal merits. He wants wealth, and he wants to earn it the old-fashioned way—to get someone else's. Wickham does not choose his partner based upon moral character, or even love. Wickham has an ulterior motive. On the surface he affably charms his admirers. With finer inspection Wickham proves to be a gambler, a womanizer, and a threat, especially to vulnerable young ladies. He uses people. Wickham serves himself at any cost. He does not learn from his mistakes; in fact, he does not see the error of his ways.

Elizabeth likes to think of Wickham as a possible suitor, but she never acts carelessly with him. When she realizes his true character, she scolds herself for letting vanity bar her insight. Honan comments, "Saved from an evil despite her misjudgment of Wickham, helped by the Gardiners, quick and accurate in seeing Darcy's pride, she has been all along more nearly right than wrong" (Honan 312). Elizabeth escapes evil

because she contemplates her actions. Many can relate to Elizabeth; she makes mistakes, but she is a good person who learns from her errors. When Elizabeth realizes her mistakes, she truly is sorry for them. She chastises herself severely. Austen's biographer states:

She [Elizabeth] thinks privately rather than aloud, often talks to herself, and is given much time for reflections, first in her bristling regard for Darcy, then after she compounds errors of self-assurance in responding to Wickham, Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine and Colonel Fitzwilliam and to Darcy's first proposal and letter, and later in her humiliation over her family and her visit to Pemberley. (Honan 313)

Elizabeth begins to take advantage of opportunities for introspection. She also realizes that Darcy is of good character. His fault is that he let his pride obscure his judgment, but she forgives Darcy for this because she has made the same mistake. Personal prejudices biased their perspectives. Pride makes Darcy hesitant to change; Elizabeth can understand this now. "...if prejudice and pride cause her fall, she falls with their saving grace—perhaps not far enough since she is protected by the light militia of her wit, good humour, mild vulgarity and effrontery" (Honan 312). Prejudice and pride bias her judgment, but Elizabeth is intelligent enough to see her error and fix it. Her ingenuous temperament, both toward herself and toward others, let her become all the better for having made her mistakes.

Elizabeth learns much from her trials. She rushed quickly into her friendship with Wickham. Red flags warning her of his behavior were there all along if she would have looked: Wickham fails to appear at the same social events as Darcy, and Wickham does

not voice his opinion of Darcy until Darcy leaves town. Yet she chose to believe a truth which flattered her ego. She also predetermined never to find good in Darcy, “*That would be the greatest misfortune of all!—To find a man disagreeable whom one is determined to hate!*” (*Pride and Prejudice* 68). It is wrong to set out with deliberate bias towards a person’s character. One should let a person reveal his or her character through actions, then make judgment.

After Elizabeth reveals her character to Darcy, he is able to judge her in a new light. Likewise, she sheds insight on his behavior. Darcy steps outside of himself and sees the Darcy Elizabeth sees. He gains a new perspective on his character. While it is very humbling to have his personality scorned, it proves to be a fulcrum from which he pivots. Darcy gains new insight and understands the necessity of introspection. Likewise, Darcy reveals his character to Elizabeth in a letter in which he justifies his actions. With a broader view of Darcy, Elizabeth criticizes him less. Both gain understanding about one another’s characters, and both come to love the person whom reflection reveals.

Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett eventually make for a perfect match. Headstrong, intelligent, and sometimes vain, both stand firmly on their principles. Mr. Darcy realizes what a gem he finds in Elizabeth. Both speak their minds and exhibit open, honest characters. Although Darcy is somewhat reclusive, Elizabeth perfectly complements him with her gregarious nature. Each brings out the best in one another and helps one another learn from mistakes, as all good married couples do.

A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of.

Jane Austen

Mansfield Park

With a firm belief the maxim that wealth sires happiness, Sir Thomas cannot understand why Fanny Price refuses a marriage proposal from the debonair Mr. Henry Crawford. Fanny lacks social status, and Crawford would be a good match. But Fanny does not love him, and she knows Crawford is a person of reprehensible character. Sir Thomas, Fanny's guardian, notes that Crawford apparently embodies all the necessary attributes for a good match—wealth, character, and “agreeableness” in temperament (*Mansfield Park* 255). Subconsciously, Sir Thomas lists wealth before “agreeableness”—an indicator of his value system. Wealth is of paramount importance and “agreeableness” relegated to trivial importance. With Fanny well married, Sir Thomas will no longer be financially responsible for her. Sir Thomas receives the added benefit of Fanny marrying slightly above her rank—a plus for both his ego and finesse as a guardian. Sir Thomas fears Fanny will never receive another suitable proposal; therefore it is imperative that she accept Henry's offer now.

Sir Thomas views the proposal strictly as a business matter in which Fanny receives every advantage. From his perspective, refusal only seals her demise. Fanny lacks the advantages of wealth, and a poor spinster is a social pariah. The ethical consequences of this union fail to register with Sir Thomas because he hasn't observed Mr. Crawford's true nature. Superficially, Henry Crawford behaves acceptably. Sir Thomas is a decent man, but he doesn't actively hone his moral perception. He berates Fanny for refusing the proposal, when in fact he should monitor his own understanding. His culpability is his inability to look deeply into a person's character, including his own. Austen biographer Park Honan comments, “Sir Thomas, so coldly reserved with three of his children, Tom, Maria and Julia, that he has never encouraged them to be open, and

since he does not understand their feelings he has totally failed to train their moral natures” (338). He raises his daughters with every material advantage but fails to instill generosity or encourage self-knowledge, which yields dire results in the future. His fault will become the fault of his daughters.

His faults do not become the faults of Fanny because she has always had acute feelings and an urgent sense to do what is right. Fanny is a shy and sensitive child when she comes to live with him, and it is Sir Thomas’s responsibility to ensure that she develops into a proper young lady. Sir Thomas accepts Fanny into his family even though, according to his perspective, he subjects his children to Fanny’s crude ways—because Fanny is poor, they expect the worst from her. Sir Thomas says: “We shall probably see much to wish altered in her, and must prepare ourselves for gross ignorance, some meanness of opinions, and very distressing vulgarity of manner; but these are not incurable faults; nor, I trust, can they be dangerous for her associates” (*Mansfield Park* 24). Sir Thomas expects Fanny to be ill bred but thinks that his family’s superior breeding will not suffer from its effects.

Ironically, what Sir Thomas prophesies is truer for his children than it is for Fanny. His daughters, especially Maria, are incredibly naive in their opinions, and Maria ultimately has an adulterous affair which yields unfortunate consequences for her entire family. Immorality is dangerous, and with Fanny’s piously moral beliefs she poses no threat to the reputation of Sir Thomas’s family. Fanny always behaves appropriately and is well aware of societal boundaries and proper behavior. Family members selfishly think about how the arrangement of taking Fanny in as a ward affects them; meanwhile

they neglect to consider how it affects Fanny. Even the interests of Lady Bertram's pug rank before Fanny's; she fears that Fanny will pester and tease her dog.

Fanny comes to live with the Bertrams after Mrs. Norris, Lady Bertram's sister, persuades Sir Thomas that Fanny will be better off living within Mansfield Park proper than staying with an aunt and her sickly husband. Fanny's inclusion with the family teeters as convenience to the needs of "The Bertrams" dictates. They look at Fanny as an object rather than as a person. Fanny lives in an attic without the comfort of a fire, but she finds solace in her studies and the companionship of her favorite cousin, Edmund.

Fanny never lets the selfish and vulgar behaviors of the remaining family members bias her nature. Her temperament is consistently sweet and true. When Fanny reaches a conviction after long and serious contemplation, she holds it dearly. Fanny firmly believes in her assessment of Mr. Crawford, and she will not be swayed to believe otherwise, even when her trusted cousin Edmund's opinion concurs with his father's. The financial aspects of a marriage with Crawford do not remotely interest Fanny.

Throughout the novel, Fanny is a model for consistent, deeply rooted belief. Fanny believes a person's character is of paramount importance to his or her reputation. She finds rectitude in her belief in God, and she hones her convictions through intense study. Fanny's position as an outsider—she is a niece living with cousins and just recently "out" in society—allows for Fanny to remain detached and to independently observe people's behavior. While Sir Thomas is away in Antigua, Fanny watches Henry flirt with her engaged cousin, Maria. But Maria's candid affections are not enough for Henry's insatiable ego; he makes amorous advances towards Maria's younger sister, Julia, as well:

The Miss Bertrams were worth pleasing, and were ready to be pleased; and he began with no object but of making them like him. He did not want them to die of love; but with sense and temper which ought to have made him judge and feel better, he allowed himself great latitude on such points (*Mansfield Park* 51).

Henry enjoys toying with ladies' emotions to gratify his ego. He isn't satisfied unless all women within an appropriate age and rank swoon and blush at his mere presence. Most do because his charm is powerfully magnetic. Most alarmingly, Henry knows what he is doing is wrong, yet he continues doing it anyway.

When Henry begins to notice the blush of Fanny's cheeks, he sees a new avenue for conquest. Fanny, with her modesty and strict sense of decorum, proves to be a challenge. If he can sway Fanny, no woman can resist the power of his charm. Henry chooses the least successful method he possibly could use to vie for Fanny's affections. He circuitously gives her a chain for her beloved brother's amber cross. He secures a naval appointment for her brother, William; Henry tries to make Fanny happy by making her brother happy and by giving her material goods. Henry plays on Fanny's emotions, and he pretends he endeavors selflessly for her. In all actuality, nothing is more selfish than to attempt to sway someone's opinion for personal gain.

Fanny isn't pliant to Henry's superficial ploy for her affections. Fanny observes Henry's real nature; she sees him for the cad he is. Only a true and sensitive gentleman could persuade Fanny to marriage. Fanny wants the entire package—intelligence, kindness, and virtue—all wrapped up neatly and tied with an impenetrably moral knot. Securing a suitor isn't the desired result of her every action. Fanny is not an artful,

deceiving person. She only wants the comfort of an enriching relationship without pretense or disguise. She absolutely will settle for nothing less.

While Fanny holds fast to her beliefs, other young ladies are not so firm with their convictions. Mary Crawford, Henry's sister, will do anything to secure the affections of Fanny's cousin, Edmund Bertram. She shares the faults of her brother—a large ego and no sense of moral obligation, and concerns herself chiefly with a person's rank and fortune. Honan comments, "Mary Crawford has no keen sense of place, no inward life and no support, but sees life as a foray in a glittering jungle in which nothing is of much worth and conquest and amusement are the only aims" (345). Mary finds life to be trivial because she pursues the trivial: wealth, status, and ephemeral amusement. Edmund's commitment to the clergy discourages her, for she would rather him choose a profession of higher income and social status. If only Edmund had the financial wealth of his older brother, she thinks. Then, in Mary's mind, they would make the perfect couple; except for the fact that she is unaccustomed to introspection, they share opposing viewpoints on the importance of religion, and she has no firm beliefs or principles to guide her. Mary is a selfish, flippant person. She isn't attracted to his beliefs and views his moral integrity as a disadvantage. She likes Edmund, but she can't picture herself contently living a quiet and poor country life.

But a simple life is all that Edmund desires, despite his internal infatuation with the sparkling personality and charm of Mary Crawford. Her behavior proves to be a riddle to him. "She does not *think* evil, but she speaks it, speaks it in playfulness; and though I know it to be playfulness, it grieves me to the soul," he comments (*Mansfield Park* 221). Mary Crawford does not act as a morally upright person should, and Edmund

makes excuses for her behavior. He desperately wants to believe Mary does not know the consequences of her behavior, and surely her true temperament must be sweet and good.

Edmund Bertram shares the same advanced relationship goals as his cousin, Fanny, and he doesn't want to settle for anything less. His perfect mate radiates virtue. No matter how hard Edmund tries, he cannot reconcile Mary with his preconceived image of how a marriage and a partner should be. Fanny is the only person who possibly satisfies this void. Edmund helps mold Fanny's judgment and acts as companion and confidant to her. In every arena, be it politics or literature, Edmund shapes her consciousness, which makes them a perfect match. He helps refine her tastes so that she can have a finer understanding of life. They share an agreeableness in temperament and taste. Edmund lacks Fanny's detached perspective, however. His motives are true, but his perspective is biased. Edmund's attraction to Mary compromises his judgment. He initially fails to perceive her true nature. Edmund needs Fanny's moral guidance as much as she needs his.

While Edmund and Fanny need each other for advice, Edmund's sister, Maria, has no person to help guide her morally. She is left to make her own decisions, and she bases her decisions on financial greed. Maria Bertram is also the most punished person in the story. She clearly understands what a foolish oaf Mr. Rushworth is, yet she lets the temptation of his financial wealth sway her:

Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty, and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as ensure her the house in town, which

was now a prime object, it became, by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could. (*Mansfield Park* 46)

Maria ranks wealth above moral character. She is wrong to let Mr. Rushworth's financial wealth seduce her into a farcical marriage. Yet she doesn't have firm moral principles to direct her in this decision. Her father sets a precedent for selfish behavior, and her mother is too lazy and apathetic to rectify this pattern. Maria flounders in her morality and lacks the sense to gain firmer grounding in her principles.

Although Maria Bertram is the most punished person in *Mansfield Park*, and makes the worst decisions when it comes to her behavior, she is only following her father's selfish model. As a father, Sir Thomas, his responsibility is to hone Maria's sense of moral duty. He tries to understand Maria's feelings towards the ridiculous Mr. Rushworth, and he also perceives Maria's coldness and carelessness towards Mr. Rushworth. Clearly this is not an engagement of the heart. He resolves to speak to Maria about the situation because he does not want to sacrifice his daughter's happiness (*Mansfield Park* 168). But Sir Thomas rationalizes away all of his fears:

It was an alliance which he could not have relinquished without pain; and thus he reasoned. Mr. Rushworth was young enough to improve. Mr. Rushworth must and would improve in good society...Such and suchlike were the reasonings of Sir Thomas, happy to escape the embarrassing evils of a rupture, the wonder, the reflections, the reproach that must attend it; happy to secure a marriage that would bring him such an addition of respectability and influence. (*Mansfield Park* 169)

Sir Thomas is in denial about the innate absurdity of Mr. Rushworth's character, and he thinks more seriously about how the marriage affects him rather than his daughter. No wonder his daughter makes such foolish, selfish decisions.

Amazingly, Fanny is able to keep her value system intact amid all the trials of morality in the Bertram household. If anything, the behavior of others only strengthens her convictions. They give her proof to the importance of morality and the necessity of maintaining convictions. Fanny has plenty of time for introspection while alone in the attic. She has a firm religious belief which helps her strictly adhere to her doctrine of proper behavior; both socially and morally. Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford lack education in this arena. Neither is accustomed to looking out for the feelings of someone other than herself. Honan writes:

The subject of *Mansfield Park* is education, or the discipline and training of the feelings; and Fanny is not intended to seem worldly, sparkling, clever, or even forgiving, mature and understanding—her talk is minimal and usually gauche; but in her deep feeling and disciplined conduct and simple gentleness she is a measure of the failure of the training the young Bertrams and Crawfords have had. (Honan 338)

Fanny proves to be a model for the necessity of an education both inward and spiritual. She takes time for introspection, looks to religion for moral guidance, and has the tenacious courage to stand firmly with her principles. She does not let her uncle or cousin persuade her into an ill-suited marriage. She does not let the flattery of Henry inflate her ego. She does not rush into an unwise marriage simply because she has the

opportunity to increase and secure her social status. She waits, and hopes beyond hope that someday Edmund will come to her. And he does.

Throughout the last two centuries, Jane Austen's works have remained popular because her themes are relevant and true. Discerning a person's character consistently proves to be a difficult task, regardless of the era. Austen understood the challenge, "she knew that character is elusive and that to observe anyone, however closely, is to be misled, but that we may never learn until we *are* misled" (Honan 248). This pertains not only to a person's own character, but to that of his or her relations, as well. We all make mistakes in judgment, but this should not dissuade us from judgment; it should only illustrate the importance of carefully considering all factors which incite judgment.

Marianne Dashwood's intense suffering in *Sense and Sensibility* proves the necessity of forming a slow and cautious opinion. She irrationally throws all her hopes and expectations onto an undeserving Willoughby. She does not stop to think or reflect on his actions. She lets her emotions carry her away, and she assumes Willoughby shares the same mindset and goals as she. Marianne is devastated when she realizes Willoughby's true nature. If she had only followed Elinor's example, she would have been spared much emotional and physical pain.

Anne Elliot has no example to follow in *Persuasion*. She must learn to forge her own way. Anne mistakenly allows Lady Russell to influence her earlier decisions. Anne does not listen to her heart, but she does what she thinks is best for Captain Wentworth. She never stops loving him and waits for him to come to insight about his own behavior so they can marry. Anne Elliot's story shows the necessity of a dynamic and sound judgment.

Elizabeth Bennet too suffers from the effects of persuasion, but it is her pride which sways her judgment in *Pride and Prejudice*. She initially is free and careless with

her opinion about the haughty Mr. Darcy to Mr. Wickham. Elizabeth fails to form her opinion slowly and to take facts into consideration. She firmly keeps her first impressions of Darcy and Wickham. She reveals her hand to Wickham when she should be calmly detached in her analysis. This allows Wickham to play to Elizabeth's feelings. Elizabeth Bennet illustrates the importance of forming an unbiased, independent opinion.

While Austen heroines get many things wrong; rushing to form judgment, letting emotions, not facts form opinions, and allowing others to influence their decisions; they nevertheless get many things right. The heroines are good persons who try to do well; they like us, make mistakes. What is important is what actions they take after realizing their errors. Austen rewards the heroines for introspection, which leads to better decisions, which leads to a happier life.

Fanny Price sets an example for introspection in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny, with her many hours alone in the attic, constantly examines her own feelings and thoughts. She thinks about her behavior, and how it affects others. Fanny does not tell Sir Thomas her main reason for refusing Henry Crawford's marriage proposal because it would hurt her cousin, Maria, who has not treated her kindly over the years. Yet Fanny has the propriety to behave appropriately. Unlike Anne Elliot, Fanny has the courage and stamina to stick to her decision and to trust her own opinion.

Elinor wisely keeps her opinions to herself during the whole Willoughby-Marianne ordeal. By staying quiet, she can observe how others feel and think through their words and behavior. Elinor stays in control. She lets Willoughby slowly reveal himself to her when she hears his snide comments about Colonel Brandon's personality.

She keenly notices how Willoughby rushes to share the same passions and dislikes as Marianne. Elinor likes Willoughby, but she keeps her distance.

Elinor detaches herself from her own personal situations, as well. She does not allow her affections for Edward to show him in a different light than he is. She realizes he blunders while simultaneously knowing he remains a good person at heart. Lucy Steele desperately wants Elinor to exhibit an intense jealousy over Lucy's relationship with Edward. Nothing would give Lucy greater pleasure. Once again, Elinor stays in control and denies Lucy that satisfaction.

Elinor also looks at how her actions affect others. Elinor emphatically denies any hope of an engagement between her and Edward because she knows her mother and Marianne would place all of their trust and desire on a possibility which may not come to fruition. She tries to spare them undue pain. She keeps Lucy's secret because she knows that exposing it would only hurt the one she loves.

Elizabeth Bennet wants to keep Mr. Wickham's true nature quiet even though he deserves no such gentility. But by restricting this information, the rest of her family is not privy to the fact Wickham is such a cad. If her father and mother were aware of the details of his past, perhaps Lydia would not have eloped with him. One cannot know in the future how the withholding of information affects others. Perhaps if Fanny and Elizabeth had broadcast their information, there would have been different outcomes for Maria and Lydia. One can never foretell exactly how their decisions affect others, or how other's decisions affect them, but they can analyze potential ramifications. At least the Austen women think outside themselves.

Invariably the Austen women are nice and treat all people civilly. Elizabeth politely interacts with Mr. Darcy after he snubs her. Elinor puts up with the vulgar behavior of Fanny Dashwood and Lucy Steele. Anne Elliot tolerates her sister Mary's selfish behavior. Fanny Price courteously deals with Mrs. Norris's rude treatment of her. When Marianne becomes a full-blown Austen heroine, she understands the necessity of civil manners. Edmund Burke said, "manners are of more importance than laws...manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us" (Honan 330). Good manners allow for the heroines to interact with others in a respectful, dignified way.

Austen women apply this policy consciously to everyone, not just to those whose alliance yields benefits. Wealth and popularity hold no favored status. For instance, Anne Elliot maintains her relationship with her fallen friend, Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith lives in a bad neighborhood and has lost contact with all "good" society. But Anne doesn't care about the perceptions of others. She just knows her friend needs her companionship, and Anne benefits from this decision—it is Mrs. Smith who reveals Mr. Elliot's true nature.

When Anne hears this news from Mrs. Smith, she goes home to think about it and to reflect. Austen women take advantage of opportunities to digest information, no matter how shocking the news may be. Several times throughout *Persuasion* Anne Elliot mentions how she needs to stop and think for a moment, to collect her thoughts, to reflect. This trait is universally shared among the Austen women. Fanny Price appears to be in a perpetual state of reflection throughout *Mansfield Park*. Elinor Dashwood

wants to understand her feelings and Edward's after she informs him Colonel Brandon will give him a living. Elizabeth Bennet talks to herself to work out her problems.

Through introspection, the heroines seek to dissect their behavior; they break it up, piece by piece, and look for where they went wrong, and how it can be fixed. The heroines want to be accountable for their actions, and they do not shirk this responsibility. In fact, they find enjoyment in owning up to their mistakes and pursuing a higher path. Elizabeth Bennet scolds herself for letting pride skew her discernment. Marianne Dashwood realizes she should have followed her sister's example of coolness and caution. Anne Elliot, through long contemplation, realizes the difference between persuasion and the adaptation to dynamic circumstances. Fanny Price always behaves responsibly and learns to stand up for her principles.

Fanny Price forms her principles by looking at all the facts, not just those which fall easily into her assessment of how things should be, or what boosts her ego. She can clearly see Edmund's infatuation with Mary; she doesn't close her eyes to it, or let emotions, like jealousy, carry her away. She stays remarkably calm. Elinor Dashwood behaves similarly with respect to Edward.

Most importantly, Austen women realize their happiness is not predicated on others. They continue to love their men when the prospects look bleak, but they do not mope and pine and wail. These women are tough, strong. They move on and try to live up to their potential.

Marriage is only one aspect of life which defines us. But the tools Austen sets out can be applied to every arena in life. Think more about others, and less about the self. Check to see how your decisions affect yourself and those around you. Be accountable

for your actions and behave responsibly. Treat all people civilly. Form opinions slowly, and take facts into consideration. This information is simple and true. Life is an ongoing trial, a test of stamina and patience. The best course of action is not always apparent. But following these guidelines allows for easier navigation and greater chances for happiness.

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