



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Feminist Influence of Mary Wollstonecraft on Jane
Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

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2015

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Abstract

This dissertation will explore the influence of the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft's views about women, education and marriage on Jane Austen's first novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). In addition to Wollstonecraft's influence, I will deal with some other remarkable authors such as Mary Astell and see how their feminist ideas are dealt with and reflected in the novel.

For this purpose, I will analyze the two heroines of the novel, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, as the embodiment of "sense" and "sensibility" respectively, to study how they subvert the traditional roles associated to women of the 18th and 19th centuries. I will examine, on the one hand, the two protagonists' personal evolution through the novel regarding the issues of marriage and happiness, taste, and education and how they are influenced by the feminist ideas postulated by those mentioned authors. On the other hand, I will draw a comparison between the attitude of the two sisters and the one shown by Lucy Steele, the antagonist of the novel, in order to portray the roles associated to women in the society of that time and the code of morals they were supposed to follow, very different from the male sex.

Wollstonecraft was a pioneer in the fight for the equality among sexes, encouraging women to rebel against an unequal society and to struggle for finding the place they deserve in society and stop being regarded as the inferior and weakest sex. I will show how these ideas were taken and used by Jane Austen to depict the so well-known heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*.

1. Introduction

This essay focuses on one of the most important novels of the English Literature in the early 19th century, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), written by Jane Austen. The aim of this dissertation is to analyze and describe the two heroines of the novel, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, and the antagonist Lucy Steele, taking into account the values and ideas that Mary Wollstonecraft claimed as a supporter of the incipient feminist movement during the last decades of the 18th century and early 19th century. In what follows I will explore how these ideals and beliefs are reflected in the two heroines so as to understand the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft in Jane Austen's novel and how it is reflected in her work.

The main reason why I have chosen *Sense and Sensibility* is because it is the first novel of Jane Austen's literary legacy. As far as I am concerned, it is the most worthy text to work on, since the rest of her writings could be considered as an extension of this new feminist approach on behalf of the author, following the steps of Mary Wollstonecraft and other literary circles which influenced Jane Austen. *Sense and Sensibility* could be considered a pioneering text in this sense, opening a literary legacy in which female characters take prominence, something unthinkable until that moment.

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was born at Stevenson (near Basingstoke), being the seventh child of the rector of the parish. She lived with her family there until they moved to Bath when her father retired in 1801. She was a prolific writer, and published four novels in her lifetime – after much revision – and two more posthumously in 1818. Jane Austen was always modest regarding her own genius, and she considered herself the latest novelist in the tradition of the “Enlightenment feminist” fiction. Since then, Austen has been considered as a woman-centered writer, which is the most remarkable

feature of her fiction. She chose the genre of satire in order to criticize the abusers of women and other underdogs, as well as the very patriarchal system that granted men absolute legal and social power over women. In this sense, she is close to Mary Wollstonecraft's intention, satirizing male privileges and female disempowerment. Austen is often placed in the 1790s battle of sexes, and she and her fictional predecessors, such as Burney and Edgeworth, were shaped eventually by the French Revolution and the feminist revolt of the 1790s. There are many works that constitute fresh evidence of a woman's movement – its passions, its satire – and the predictable backlash against it. One of this literary evidence is considered to be Mary Wollstonecraft's writings, which had a clear influence on Jane Austen's novels, especially her concern for conduct books and education for women.

2. Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist legacy

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is regarded as one of the pioneers in the so-called feminist movement of the mid 18th century in England, associating feminism firmly with radicalism and an anger directed at the social living conditions of women and assumptions on their behavior; however, she avoided a vengeful approach to the male sex. One of the feminists' obsessions was trying to account for the tyranny of man, masculine violence and the subjection of women to men. This is clearly noticeable in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, as I will explain later. Wollstonecraft condemned the "ride and sensuality of man, the masculine pride of power, the arrogant pride of man, the prejudices of men induced by their sensual reveries of conquering debilitated women" (Sullivan 1989, p. 67). The victims of this masculine pride were always women. All these ideas and beliefs were influenced by the developing Industrial

Revolution and the British Enlightenment which were taking place at the time. This illustrated and radical thinking was really widespread in Britain and it echoed John Locke's beliefs of the human mind and its working, as he considered the human mind as a *tabula rasa* on which experience was inscribed, acquiring knowledge only from the information provided by the five senses. For him, there were no 'innate ideas' known from birth and common ideas of morality, and reason arose because people shared the same basic natural characteristics and so they reached essentially the same conclusions from similar experiences. Locke also wrote in favor of an equal education for both young boys and girls and, though he believed in women's rationality, he defended that strict authority and reason must fall on the man, as the strongest and the ablest, thus advocating for men's supremacy.

Written some decades after Locke's death, *A Vindication of the Rights Of Women* (1792) is Wollstonecraft's best-known and most celebrated work, becoming a cornerstone of feminist thought and considered to be the first feminist manifesto. It was radical and polemical since it was written in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Many of the arguments that Wollstonecraft expressed in her masterpiece – like the debate on the equality of the sexes – were put forward by previous writers, such as Mary Astell (1666-1731). Astell's most notable book was *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) where she insisted that women "had a right to a life of the mind" (Devine Jump 1994, p.68), and she suggested that all female colleges should be founded to further enhance women's opportunities for education. Like Wollstonecraft, Astell believed that the main reason why women were placed in a secondary place in society was the lack of intellectual training. Astell encourages her feminine audience to take themselves more seriously and try to learn to trust their own judgment. Other remarkable female authors regarding this field and to whom Mary Wollstonecraft

admired are Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), a French playwright and feminist activist, who was executed by means of the guillotine after claiming for the rights of women and slaves in the *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen* (1791), and Catherine Macaulay. Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790) can be considered a direct influence upon *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, since many of Macaulay's ideas on the education of boys and girls are anticipating Wollstonecraft's thoughts stated in her masterpiece – though she added a political dimension that Macaulay lacked. She even praised Macaulay as “a valuable role model, an example of intellectual acquirements supposed to be incompatible with the weakness of her sex, her judgment, the matured fruit of profound thinking, was a proof that a woman can acquire judgment in the full extent of the world” (Devine Jump 1994, p.71). Both authors share the view that boys and girls should be educated together, parents must cultivate the minds of their daughters and allow children to be brought up together, not suppressing girls' natural vivacity.

Apart from the above mentioned female writers, it is also worth considering the writings of some male authors throughout the 18th century that wrote in favor of greater equality of education and opportunity for women, like Francis Hutcheson and John Miller. There were only two pamphlets by the pseudonym “Sophia”, *Woman Not Inferior to Man* (1739) and *Woman's Superior Excellence to Man* (1740) considered the only prose works written by male writers which offered an identifiably feminist argument, while a survey of *Eighteen Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (ed. Roger Lonsdale, 1989) reveals a noticeable reduction in this polemic issue throughout the century. This must be linked to the shift in emphasis from reason to feeling, or sensibility; and to the women of the “Blue Stockings Society” of the second half of the 18th century who, though moved in male dominated circles, never argued in favor of

more than improved educational opportunities for women. This Blue Stockings Society was a revolutionary literary group in which women were given the opportunity of participating in cultural and intellectual activities, something traditionally unthinkable for the female sex until that moment. It emerged around 1750 becoming very popular at the end of the 18th century. Women who belonged to this society had received more education and had fewer children in comparison with the rest of the English women of that time. Many historians and authors – such as Jeanine Dobbs (1976) – have referred to the group as preserver and advancer of feminism, due to the encouragement of women's education and their social complaints of the status, acknowledgement, and lifestyle expected of the women in their society (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Encyclopedia Wikipedia*).

Furthermore, such vindications constituted the best testimony of Wollstonecraft's own view about the inequality among the sexes. She claimed that women are not naturally inferior to men, but what makes the former appear like that is the lack of education. She proposes that both sexes should be treated as equal rational beings – being the rights of men and of women the same thing – and suggested a society founded on reason. In relation to this idea, Wollstonecraft states: "I may be allowed to infer that reason is undoubtedly necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and I must again repeat, that sensibility is not reason" (Wollstonecraft 1742, p.67) She is making a clear distinction between reason, associated with virtue or morality (sense) and sensibility, a division which the two protagonists of *Sense and Sensibility* clearly embody, as will be analyzed later. The soundest emphasis of Wollstonecraft's writing was on female education and the values of marriage and motherhood. Education for the author constitutes the main tool for the development of individuals and she claims for an equal education for both sexes. She sees male

prejudice and male-dominated education as responsible for the inferior and oppressed condition of women, subordinated to men, and she comes to the conclusion that “the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore” (Wollstonecraft 1742, p.6). Wollstonecraft defended the fact that if girls were encouraged from their childhood to develop their minds, feed ambitions and exercise their bodies in the same way as boys were, they would develop the same capacities and talents. What the educational situation of that time was creating were ignorant women waiting for being offered in the marriage market. She did not trust in women’s capacities of timidity, docility and so on. Young girls were taught music, drawing, geography, dancing, and social manners; that is, manners which can never replace a solid moral structure. Women were able to read and buy books for instance, though they were not allowed to enter any trustworthy educational institution. Wollstonecraft praised reading as the most rational employment of the mind, and also music and painting, and other ingenious arts. She also dealt with the notions of taste, the beauty of nature and sensibility, terms which appear frequently in *Sense and Sensibility* and I will explain in detail afterwards.

As I have stated before, Enlightenment writers were influenced by thinkers such as Locke, and so Wollstonecraft’s educational theory lies on the Lockean model of the association of ideas, referring to what she called the “habitual slavery” (Wollstonecraft 1742, p.122) of first impressions which can take hold of a mind that is not able to temper those associations by means of the intellect. Wollstonecraft praised an educational system in which order and system reign so as to acquire habits of exactitude and method and generalize on matters of fact. She supported an education which fosters independence of thought. This system just described is what women were deprived of and what Wollstonecraft tried to fight for them. It is also closely linked to the issue of

motherhood and society, since society will also benefit from the improvement of female education: by being a proper educated woman one can be able to raise children who will later become useful members of society. Wollstonecraft stated that both men and women must be educated by the opinions and manners of the society they live in, and although women were presented as the inferior ones, her critique is not addressed only to the masculine sex. She claims that women should be aware of the ways in which they are perpetrating the stereotype which has been imposed on them by men with their supremacy and male control over them. As regards to the matter of gender previously mentioned, Wollstonecraft claimed that gender is a socially constructed view of the “feminine” as opposed to a biological difference of sex. She referred to this issue with the following words:

So far as the ability to reason is concerned, there is no innate difference between the sexes (...) the fact that is reason which separates mankind from the rest of the animal kingdom; that mankind's highest attachment is virtue; that acknowledge is to be gained through a struggle with the passions. (In Harriet Devine Jump 1994, p.73-74)

Moreover, Wollstonecraft talks about the different roles that have been assigned to men and women since the remotest antiquity, being the former regarded as convenient to exert their strength to subjugate companion and women as being kept in a state of artificial ignorance and virtue simply in obedience to the dictate of men, and not as the outcome of their own reasoned perception of the value of virtue. In addition to that, the author criticized the fact that for most women of that time, marriage was the only viable alternative to escape from poverty and from the shame of being regarded as a spinster. She encouraged women neither be always subservient to love nor sacrifice the strength of the body and the mind to the notions of beauty. Passions should not

annul judgment, and rationality, sense, goodness and virtuosity must be the main characteristics to have in mind when looking for a partner. The author reminds women of paying attention to their actions and think about the consequences of losing their reason for a man – especially young girls whose minds have not been enough cultivated or educated. They are said to be the weakest sex and these weaknesses often bring them miseries. Wollstonecraft did not believe in romantic love as illusory and full of fantasy – since it leads to an unhappy marriage – but in a relation to friendship, full of confidence and respect. Only in this case, women would be considered as the rational beings they deserve – stopping being attracted to men for superior qualities like gallantry – and men would no longer look for just beauty and docility. Marriage was also strictly linked to money and fortune. Many women, despite having been well educated, were left without a fortune and so they had to frequently remain single. For them, marriage was seen as the only and easiest way to reach a higher position in society; whereas few men seriously thought of marrying a woman who belonged to an inferior position. This male behavior is explained by Wollstonecraft with the following words: “if they have honor enough not to take advantage of the artless tenderness of a woman who loves, and thinks not of the difference of ranks, they do not undeceive her until she has anticipated happiness, which, contrasting with her dependent situation, appears delightful” (In Harriet Devine Jump 1994, p.7).

3. Elinor and Marianne as the Embodiment of “Sense” and “Sensibility”

As mentioned above, Jane Austen wrote this novel in 1811 and, though it constitutes a fine satire on the excesses of sense and sensibility, she depicts the existent patriarchal system and sex differences of the early 19th century society. Although the

privilege of writing satire had traditionally belonged to men, Austen's satire – among other women satirists – is worthy of analysis and praise because female satirists were regarded as rejected and devalued members of society. Regarding Austen's style and satire, she perceived the struggle of the satirist to rise out of the battles of the sexes:

women satirists then had to pay other women the compliment of assuming that the female sex is as various as the male in its sensibilities, values, talents, and achievements, and therefore as varied as the male sex in its indictable sins and follies, which women satirists do not consider to be innate in their sex.
(Sullivan 1989, p.xv)

Austen is considered a woman-centered novelist and she was highly influenced by some of the feminist ideas previously explained. Through the analysis of the two protagonists of the novel and their actions, I will try to show this feminist influence in Austen's thought. The two protagonists of *Sense and Sensibility* are Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, two young sisters who live with their mother, after the loss of the male figure of the family. Their mother has tried to rule them as fathers rule daughters, though the absence of the patriarchal figure is quite evident. Elinor and Marianne are the two heroines created by the author, a common feature in Austen's works, becoming the focus of the writing. They attempt to be "active makers of their fate" (Sullivan, 1989, p.79), in contrast with the lack of education of most women, who could not act with self-respecting autonomy, and were seen as subordinated and dependent on men. Austen believed in women's reasoning power and in their potential for learning, which was necessary to break free from unreasonable external limitations and to move from ignorance to knowledge. Despite their limited intellectual resources and privileges, heroines must make the richest use of them, and they are forced to create the tools for their own understanding through a rather twisting attention to everyday life details and

distressing experience (Sullivan 1989). Elinor and Marianne, as well as the rest of Austen's heroines, are survivors surrounded by exploitative men, and they are made to feel almost guilty, apologizing as often, whether they are guilty or not. They also feel the same excessive gratitude to any person who treats them in a kind way, especially showing a profound gratitude to the man who finally has chosen them, placing them on trial after trial. Yasmine Gooneratne refers to Austen's heroines with the following words: "Her heroines marry men who appreciate their virtues and their moral (and sometimes their intellectual) superiority to their immediate world, but never does it even wish them well" (In Sullivan 1989, p.83).

In what follows I will concentrate on Elinor, the oldest daughter of the Dashwood. Elinor is just nineteen years old and the word which best defines her is "sense". As it is inferred from the title, each of the two sisters represent or is linked to sense and sensibility, two concepts that stem from the Enlightenment and Romantic movements respectively.¹ Elinor possesses "a strength of understanding" (Austen 2006, p.6) which forced her to become the moral tutor of her mother and her sister. Apart from that, she has a wonderful heart, an affectionate disposition, and good feelings. However, her rationality, coolness of judgment, and sane wisdom to analyze cause and effect sometimes force her to govern and hide her real feelings and to take care of the others rather than of herself, all of which is illustrated by the following examples:

"Elinor is mortified, shocked, confounded; however a composure of voice, under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond anything she had

¹ Since the aim of this essay is not analyse the literary influences of the Enlightenment and Romanticism in the portrayal of both sisters, suffice it to say here that the two writers that inspired Austen were Samuel Johnson and William Cowper. Whereas the former defended the values of reason and propriety to achieve happiness, the latter emphasised feelings and sincerity as positive principles of the human condition.

ever felt before [...] Elinor was mourning in secret over obstacles which must divide her for ever from the object of her love. " (Austen 2006, p.143, 149)

This reality can be perfectly seen after knowing the truth about Edward Ferrars and his engagement to Lucy Steele. Nobody really knows how Elinor feels, because she always tries to hide her feelings and problems. Even her own sister, Marianne, does not know anything about her love for Edward. Marianne even reproaches Elinor that she is unable to understand her feelings towards Willoughby – after the revelation of the truth and the huge disappointment it causes to her – simply because she is happy and she has Edward, when it is in fact the opposite, since Elinor does not have Edward, but she prefers to keep it in secret. Elinor is so kind that she cares more about her sister and the others than about herself. The goodness of Elinor has no limits, she always worries about the others' happiness, especially Marianne's: "their longer stay would therefore militate against her own happiness, it would be better for Marianne" (Austen 2006, p.227)

In terms of occupying gender roles, Elinor Dashwood's gender traits are usually marked as masculine; she is a woman whose emotional life is regulated by rationality. Even in the most crucial moments of the novel, she does not lose her mind, she is tempered and in control of her emotions: "She stood firm in incredulity and felt in no danger of a hysterical fit, or a swoon" (Austen 2006, p.137). This heroine combines both the "affectionate heart" so dear to the traditional moralists, and the analytical "understanding" that feminist literature remarked as a must for women's survival. As previously mentioned, Elinor embodies sense and rationality, cautiousness, calmness and distrustfulness: "She was stronger, and her own good sense so well supported her, that her firmness was as unshaken [...] Elinor, who love to doubt where you can" (p.83, 149). In addition to that, she shows a special taste with respect to music and painting.

When dealing with Marianne, it is important to point out that she represents the other side of the coin, since “sensibility” is the most suitable term to describe her, in opposition to the sense and rationality of her oldest sister. She is sensible and clever, generous and amiable. She is depicted as a passionate person in everything, who shows openly her sorrows and joys – which could have no moderation – and she is not prudent, as she does not conceal any information. She has an especial taste for music, and she pays a lot of attention to this matter. The notion of taste is revealing here because this category was traditionally considered to be masculine or intrinsically linked to men, since taste is connected to the intellect, reason and wisdom. However, Jane Austen subverts this idea in the novel by describing the two heroines as women who have taste, that is, intellectual capacities. Elinor is praised for her ability to paint and draw, while Marianne is fond of the writings of the pre-romantic poet Cowper and she also plays the piano. For Marianne taste is essential, as we can infer from her words to her mother referring to Edward Ferrars:

And besides all this, I am afraid, mama, he has no real taste [...] How spiritless, how tame was Edward’s manner in reading to us last night! [...] To hear those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild, pronounced with such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference!” (Austen 2006, p. 17, p.18)

Austen subverts the notion of taste and defines it from a feminist perspective, since it is Marianne rather than Edward, the one having more taste. Marianne is a specialist in the art of feminine sensibility and that is the reason why she continuously confuses the female heart with human understanding, or the inexperienced burstings of the emotions with integrity. Willoughby, the man she loves, takes advantage of that and makes her suffer. Marianne has undergone the suffering of experience even before she can learn a

lesson in the art of human understanding. This heroine embodies the grief of the moderate feminists, especially in the passage of the novel when she is in London and she is forced to face Willoughby's betrayal. She can only cry, scream, and rock herself back and forth in her agony: "She sat in an agony of impatience which affected every creature [...]. Marianne, now looking dreadfully white, and unable to stand, sank into her chair and Elinor, expecting every moment to see her faint, tried to screen her from the observation of others" (Austen 2006, p.187).

Furthermore, she is praised by everyone by her beauty: "Marianne was still handsomer (...) her face was so lovely, that when in the common cant of praise she was called a beautiful girl, truth was less violently outrageous than usually happens. Her skin was very brown (...) her smile was sweet and attractive" (Austen 2006, p.49). It is worth pointing out this fact, since the narrator has chosen to highlight her physical aspect as the source of the future love disappointments she will suffer. In some occasions throughout the novel, readers may think that Marianne is only valued or praised because of her appearance, forgetting her thoughts or judgment regarding rational matters, echoing some of Wollstonecraft's views previously mentioned about love and marriage. Men were supposed to be the ones in charge of pleasing women since they were the weakest ones, and women had to show their softness, delicacy and even devotion towards them. Marianne only has good words for Willoughby, she has him in high regard and she praises him in many occasions ("everything he did, was right; everything he said, was clever", Austen 2006, p.57) while Willoughby does not show his personality to like her, but rather, he 'buys her love' in a way, as we can see for instance in the horse he gives her as a present.

Marianne shows grandeur of heart: goodness and kindness could be perfectly used to describe her – another feature criticized by radical feminists, as these traits were

seen as a proof of sentimentalism and weakness. She is unable to think badly about the others and, even when she discovers Willoughby's betrayal, she is no capable of considering him as a cruel person, but she tries to find a possible explanation for that. Her sincerity, sensibility and spontaneity sometimes go against her; and all these features, together with her passionate love, make her even suffer from melancholia: "Marianne, too restless for employment, too anxious for conversation, walked from one window to another, or sat down by the fire in melancholy meditation [...]. Marianne was in a silent agony, too much oppressed even for tears" (Austen 2006, p. 182, 187). She embodies the passionate love and excess of sensibility, deeply criticized by feminist writers since those traits place women in a secondary position and make them weaker. This character "affirms the conventions of romantic sensibility because of the formal certainty they provide, not because she is more passionate than her sister, but because she is less imaginative and less brave" (Morgan, 1976, p.196). The following quote shows Marianne's role and character: "I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank, I have erred against every common place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful" (Austen 2006, p.51).

As mentioned above, Marianne is the embodiment of sensibility, situating her within the Romantic trend of thought. There are many passages in the novel, which describe her sensibility in full detail, such as at the end of chapter five when she leaves Norland and especially in chapter sixteen, when she is having a walk and addresses nature with a nostalgic feeling:

Dear, dear Norland! when shall I cease to regret you! – when learn to feel a home elsewhere! – Oh! happy house, could you know what I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you no more! [...].

Oh! Cried Marianne, with what transporting sensations have I formerly seen them fall! How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind! What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired! Now there is no one to regard them. They are seen only as a nuisance, swept hastily off, and driven as much as possible from the sight. (Austen 2006, p.27, 28, 94)

Marianne seems to be just the opposite of rational thought, since her innate sensibility and affection distance her from the faith in women's rationality praised by the feminists. In relation to that, Wollstonecraft is concerned about women's tendency to become "creatures of sensation" (in Dolan 2010, p. 40); however, the author states that there exists the possibility that women can learn to find a balance between their ardent emotion and rational thought. In Austen's novel, we can see that this is something that eventually Marianne reaches by leaving aside her sensibility and passionate love for Willoughby and marrying Colonel Brandon, thus restoring common sense or rationality and a safe status as a married woman. Elinor, on the contrary, embodies rationality and it clashes with Marianne's attitude in some occasions, asking her to be more cautious and calm. "Pray, pray be composed, and do not betray what you feel to everybody present" (Austen 2006, p.186). They represent two different feminist views, being Elinor the one who echoes moderate feminists: "Marianne's affliction, because more acknowledged, more immediately before her, had too much engrossed her tenderness, and led her away to forget that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much, certainly with less self-provocation, and greater fortitude" (Austen 2006, p.380).

Yet, Marianne's abrupt transformation at the end of the novel situates her closer to rational views on the issue of marriage. During the 18th century, marriage for women appeared intrinsically linked with money and happiness. As a result, any nice young girl

who was looking for wealth and a comfortable life had to get the most convenient and richest man in order to achieve this life. This kind of marriage sounds really far from happiness as its main goal. In fact, one of Austen's most famous quotes asserts that "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (Austen 2012, p.23). With these words, Austen is criticizing women's situations within marriage, showing her worries about this sad but true reality. Along the novel, both sisters evolve in the emotional field until they apparently achieve happiness. As Alessa Johns (2014) claims "Marianne and Elinor's experiences with men teach the passionate sister to rein in her emotions and the grave one to loosen up, but that, self-deceived, they both achieve true freedom and happiness only once they have recognized and moved beyond their own misinterpretations" (p. 454).

Austen's heroines are in a way responsible for their destinies and it is their due to fight for their own happiness, despite the patriarchal society they lived in and the traditional and assigned roles to them: "Only after struggling internally, thinking through their situation sometimes in a way complemented by bodily illness; only then they are ready to marry, to assent to proposals of men who themselves have been tested by circumstances" (Johns 2014, p.454). Having in mind the previous quotation on her vision of marriage, it is worth considering that through Austen's fine irony and her special use of language readers may infer that Marianne would not be entirely happy after marrying Colonel Brandon. She marries him guided for what it is supposed to be good for her, though her sensibility at the beginning makes her incline towards Willoughby. In this sense, it is easy to think that the relationship between Marianne and Brandon is closer to the word 'connection' which implies securing a social position for women within a respectable marriage, rather than to the word 'attachment' that suggests loving connotations and passionate feelings. Marianne refers to her real attachment to

Willoughby; however, she is forced in a way to have a second attachment to Brandon. The latter is more related to familiar links, rather than to true love. Regarding Elinor – who embodies sense and rationality – she is the only one whose relationship can be considered a true attachment, by marrying Edward at the end. Both sisters clearly embody the Romantic view regarding this aspect; however, Elinor is ironically the one who achieves the most romantic attachment of the novel by marrying a poor man, despite being Marianne the most sensitive character of the novel and who eventually does not achieve an attachment, but a connection. In contrast to that, the relationships of Lucy Steele, the antagonist of these heroines, are considered just connections based on socio-economic interest, embodying mercantilist and rational views, where the marriage between a man and a woman is seen as a mere means to make a profit, and so equating marriage to business. This last idea was something that Wollstonecraft deeply criticized, supporting the opposite idea as defender of true and happy love, and the must of choosing the husband that would make you happy – not just rich but miserable.

As regards with happiness in connection to money, the sisters offer two different views about it. Marianne denies that “wealth or grandeur” can ever have anything to do with happiness whereas Elinor, who is suffering the classical Austenian fate of the dowerless woman unable to marry the man she very much loves and respects, replies “Grandeur has but little...but wealth has much to do with wit” (Sullivan 1989, p.179, 180). The difference between wealth and grandeur is remarkable, since Elinor merely wants simple wealth, so as to give her independence in her choice of a marriage partner – or whether to marry or not. Marianne, however, wants grandeur. Wealth does indeed have much to do with what Marianne now perceives to be her happiness: Willoughby refuses to marry her because she has no dowry. Another remarkable view as related to money in the novel is the one belonging to John Dashwood, the sisters’ brother. For him

marriage and income are strictly linked. The same happens with beautiful women and the possibility of getting a richer husband, as we can see through his words referring to Marianne:

“She was a handsome girl last September, as any I ever saw; and as likely to attract the men (...) she would marry sooner and better than you did (...). I question whether Marianne *now*, will marry a man worth more than five or six hundred a year, at the utmost, and I am very much deceived if *you* do not do better” (Austen 2006, p.242)

As mentioned above, physical appearance and beauty were another requisite that women had to fulfill if they wanted to get married. This matter is something that feminists deeply criticized. Both radical and moderate feminists condemned traditional attempts to create women with inactive minds and motionless bodies. This can be reflected in Catherine Macaulay’s following words: “No human enjoyment can be great, without a robust habit of the body” (In Solloway 1989, p.192). She, together with other feminist writers, praised the value of the mind and wisdom above the body. When the family of the Dashwoods women is about to be introduced to the Miss Steeles, Sir John Middleton, their host, assures them that these young women are “the sweetest girls in the world” (Austen 2006, p.126). Such commendation as this, however, does not fool Elinor, who knew all too well that marriageable women were customarily required to be “sweet”, and that the sweeter they were, the less genuine “understanding” they were likely to have acquired. As pointed out earlier, these expected values contrast with the heroines’ taste as a quality that provides them with freedom and knowledge. Furthermore, the narrator is deeply ironic when comparing the heroines’ taste with Lucy Steele’s lack of it:

Could he [Edward] ever be tolerably happy with Lucy Steele? 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. Her [Lucy's] defects of education, while the same period of time, spent on her side in inferior society and more frivolous pursuits, had perhaps robbed her of that simplicity, which might once have given an interesting character to her beauty. (p.148)

Lucy represents the mental poverty that women's education frequently created in them: "her powers had received no aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate" (Austen 2006, p.135); she is deplorably deficient in the schooling of both the mind and the heart. She lacks any kind of taste. Both Steele sisters, Lucy and Ann, are quite impertinent, manipulative and gossip people whose only concerns are, to use Austen's linguistic pun on their surname, 'stealing' wealthy men to get married. Their interest also lies on the importance of beauty and appearances, their conception of marriage linked to money and a huge interest in the private life of the others, even more than on their selves. Their aim is to create a good impression upon the others to climb in the social scale. As previously mentioned, the relationships that Lucy establishes are based on socio-economic interest rather than on true feelings and disinterested reasons. Lucy Steele is the antagonist of the Dashwood sisters and this is perfectly seen in their different attitudes towards men and marriage, money and the importance given to appearances and the public opinion. Lucy's behavior and actions along the novel denote her lack of taste and the kind of education she has received, very different to the one received by Marianne and Elinor. They have been taught the main values and moral principles which are shown through their actions. They have been able to cultivate their minds and achieve the notions of taste and self-improvement through reading, music

and painting, something which was not common among women in the 18th and 19th centuries. Women like Lucy were not encouraged to improve their own minds since society's perception of women's education at that time was largely negative. Austen states in her novel that "women must mature into their understanding of taste and expression of emotion" (McElligott, p.84). The only way to find happiness and steadiness of character is through the development of taste and control of feelings and emotions. Austen depicts Lucy as a manipulating woman, unable to use intelligence or honesty to secure what she desires. She would never achieve real happiness since, from the author's view, it should be founded in love, family and friendship; and not in manipulating or mere interest, which are the means that Lucy shows to achieve what she wants, being her life ruled by social and economic interests, appearances, exposure to the public opinion and the thirst for ascending in the social ladder no matter what it costs. She embodies what the feminist writers – mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation – strongly opposed to, regarding the education received, feminine taste and sensibility and the attitude towards the opposite sex.

4. Conclusion

As I have attempted to show throughout this dissertation, the feminist legacy of Wollstonecraft constituted the basis for the depiction of Austen's heroines. Her concern for the education of women was key for writers such as Austen, who depicted in her fiction the most outstanding features that defined not only Elinor and Marianne, but also the subsequent heroines of other works. In this sense, I would like to highlight the transformation made by the two heroines of the novel, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, regarding the notions of sense and sensibility, especially remarkable in the case of the youngest sister. Marianne is able to eventually transform her excessive sensibility – so

criticized by Wollstonecraft in her writings – finding a balance and so becoming more rational. In other words, she matures. The novel *Sense and Sensibility* praises for the education of women, as Wollstonecraft claimed for. Education was the only way women had in order to find good men who respected and treated them as they deserved, without trying to subdue them to the patriarchal limitations of marriage and, especially, without depriving them of their freedom. Women should not be regarded as being in an inferior level, subjugated to their husbands, fathers, and men in general. They were capable of finding their place in society as individuals, and that was what Wollstonecraft supported – and Austen followed.

At the end of the novel, both Elinor and Marianne are able to find the adequate partners (Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon, respectively) and make the right choice, since they find an egalitarian relationship within marriage – based on friendship and companionship – as Wollstonecraft so well supported in her writing:

Personal attachment is a very happy foundation for friendship; yet, whenever two virtuous young people marry, it would, perhaps, be happy if some circumstance checked their passion; if the recollection of some prior attachment, or disappointed affection, made it on one side, at least, rather a match founded on esteem. Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time. (1742, p.77)

Both Dashwood sisters manage to find their place in society and subvert the traditional assumptions and roles associated to women. They achieve to leave aside their condition as the weakest sex and be no longer submissive to the dominant male sex. They eventually are able to go beyond all those preconceptions and get into ‘the real world’, making themselves heard, as Wollstonecraft claimed.

Sense and Sensibility constitutes a praised and magnificent testimony of the incipient feminist ideas of that time, pioneered by Mary Wollstonecraft and followed by many other subsequent writers, both male and female, who may have found in the characters of Elinor and Marianne a symbol for the prosperity and happiness of women within a more egalitarian view of marriage.

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