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## The Conflict Between Financial Status and Love

In the novel *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen employs various thematic elements in order to educate the reader on the nature of higher British society in the 19th century. One of the most impactful motifs in the book is the notion that class drives one's decisions and becomes somewhat of a higher power that dictates marriages, familial ties, and living arrangements. People are accepted or exiled based on their social standing, and marriages "for love" are a rarity among the semi-noble. Throughout the novel, Austen makes a unique commentary on the values of society while simultaneously telling an interesting story of a very particular case of a family (the Dashwoods) who are somewhat stuck in the middle. Austen examines the varying importance of the roles that class and love play in society through her juxtaposition of various romantic situations in the novel.

Primarily, Austen sheds light on the cold and selfish requirements of society in order to examine how society's pressures have imposed on the Dashwood family. Willoughby and Marianne, for example, are "in love" but cannot be married. While this might seem ridiculous to the modern reader, Austen clarifies the seemingly ludicrous nature of society through Willoughby's dismissal of and later revisit to Marianne, in which he explains why he has left her for the wealthier Ms. Grey. Although Willoughby realizes he can never be happy with her, he can at least come to coexist with Ms. Grey with a sense of financial stability. He rebuffs Marianne not because he was not in love with her, but because he was raised in a class system where high society is taught to preserve their family name rather than to be socially unstable and banished to the dregs of England's multi-tiered class system. So, even though "[he] felt that she was infinitely dearer to me than any other woman in the world," Willoughby can never be with Marianne because of the limitations that he feels override any sense of true love (Austen 274). But while even the spiteful Willoughby comes to accept his superficiality, Marianne deludes herself with unrealistic perceptions of love and wealth. When Elinor practically claims that "wealth has much to do with" happiness, Marianne rebuffs this notion, claiming that "beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction" (Austen 152). But when the sisters compared actual figures, Marianne's romantic idealism is flattened, as her idea of a "competence" is two thousand pounds a year, which doubles Elinor's notion of wealth. Austen uses irony in order to communicate that the importance of money does not diminish among those who claim to be above it.

Elinor's relationship with Edward is also one defined by the strict limitations of society at the time. Although Edward would love to pursue his own lifestyle, he is consistently restrained by his concerned mother. In order to live comfortably and inherit his rightful fortune (according to primogeniture), he is forced to marry a woman of desirable status and Elinor, being the practical

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voice of the Dashwood family, forces herself to accept this. The secret engagement of Edward and the lower class Lucy Steele is a shock to everyone, as without his family inheritance or any semblance of a dowry from Lucy's side, the two could not possibly live comfortably. Lucy realizes that Edward is no longer the heir to any fortune, and she refocuses her affections to his younger brother. Austen utilizes the character of Lucy Steele to represent the ideals of society as a whole, succumbing to greedy impulse rather than consulting more than just the state of their wallets. "Her constant endeavor to appear to advantage" is seen as being in poor taste (Austen 198). The contrast between *needing* money versus *wanting* money is compared very uniquely by Austen, who seems to be telling her readers that some money is necessary, although the actual desire of this money is tawdry. The eventual union of Edward and Elinor is seemingly impossible until the honorable Colonel Brandon sweeps in with a free property for them to stay on and unrealistically kind financial support. While Austen seems to be arguing for the steadfastness of true love, she subtly suggests that the economic insurance of a romantic partner is of similar or the same importance.

Towards the final stages of the book, both Elinor and Marianne are left financially comfortable *and* in love, which is truly an ideal situation when considering all of the odds working against them. While some may see her characters' love-based relationships as a proclamation of rejection of social norms, under a closer examination it appears that nobody had to make any tangible sacrifices to achieve their harmonious marriages. While some of the people featured in *Sense and Sensibility* may be a little more outspoken than your typical young lady of the time, there is no real social commentary being made. Marianne, the supposed anomaly to typical British society, eventually conforms, marrying a well-established gentleman. She realizes the error of her ways with Willoughby, saying that she has nothing to regret but "[her] own folly" in blinding herself with the concept of a realistic marriage with a man who lacks wealth (Austen 331). Elinor also is bestowed with both a reunion with Edward and somewhat of financial stability thanks to Colonel Brandon. With her relatively middle-class standings, her effort to maintain her practical outlook results in various comments on the state of class from in an almost degrading manner. In her attempt to avoid going to London, she states that, "[she] think[s] very well of Mrs. Jennings' heart, she is not a woman whose society can afford us pleasure, or whose protection will give us consequence" (Austen 258). Elinor, despite her intentions of kindness, always feels the need to uphold her family's comfort.

Austen definitely advocates for the existence of true love through the characters of Elinor and Marianne, but it seems that she is making a separate claim - that the presence of wealth is nearly or equally as vital to one's happiness. While seemingly making a plea for the importance of love in a marriage, Austen understatedly suggests that staying within social guidelines and marrying someone of an appropriate financial standing is still crucial to prosperity as a whole.

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