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STORY AND SORORITY:  
HOW SISTERS SHAPE THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

By  
Morgan Elizabeth Reid

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS  
May 2021

Approved By

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Advisor: Professor Erin Drew

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To my Mother for the gift of Jane Austen

To my Father whose love of reading is infectious

To my own lovely sisters, Rachel and Maggie

## ABSTRACT

MORGAN E. REID: *Story and Sorority: How Sisters Shape the Novels of Jane Austen*

(Under the direction of Erin Drew)

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the impact and use of sisters and sorority in the novels of Jane Austen, answering the question of how they are shaping the narratives of the stories. Focusing in particular on *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, I highlight the ways that Austen's writing crafts plots that rely upon sisters to function. Austen also uses sister figures to reveal the characteristics of her main protagonists and to express the themes she is most concerned about within each story. I also show Austen's pattern of affirming the value and importance of sisterhood through the descriptions of the happiness each of her heroines finds after marriage, all of which include an emphasis on sustained sorority. I argue that Austen's novels are so dominated by sisters that these integral characters are the most important figures within these novels.

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## Introduction

Christmas morning 2010 when I was twelve years old, I unwrapped a rather unexpected gift from my mother; this was a little set that included a paperback copy of *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen paired with a DVD of the Emma Thompson adaptation from the 90s. At first, I was not exactly what one would describe as interested. Gobbling up chapter books throughout my elementary school days, I certainly loved to read, but I can be needlessly stubborn about books suggested to me, often resisting recommendations I later end up adoring. As I was only just starting to transition into adult novels, a seemingly serious book with a field of wildflowers on the cover sounded boring to me, a big fan of adventure series such as Harry Potter and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. However, Mama knew me better than I did, as mothers so often do, and encouraged me to give it a chance. By February, I relented and watched the film – I *loved* it, just as she suspected I would. The story, the language, the characters, the humor, all of it. Within the week, I had devoured the novel which more than lived up to my expectations set by the film, and before the end of 2011, I had read the other five of Austen’s full-length novels. I became one of those strange creatures known as a “Janeite.” Over time, I watched every film adaptation that I could get my hands on, researched the culture and history of the Regency era, read some of her juvenilia and novellas, and acquired – often as gifts – some of the Austen merchandise that litters bookstores today, though I am rather pleased to say I have never donned a bonnet. Austen became the gateway to classical literature for me, and after I ran out of her works, I found so

many authors I love including Dickens, Gaskell, Forster, Hardy, and Alcott. To that early introduction, I attribute the fact that the bulk of my personal reading still to this day was written prior to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, almost a full decade later when the time came to choose a topic to study for my senior thesis, it was a foregone conclusion in my mind that I would look deeper into Austen's work. Never tiring of the subject, I always felt like there were more things to learn and more angles to examine. Which of my many questions to ask? I finally narrowed down the field to one of the biggest elements I love about her novels – sisters. I myself have two younger sisters, Rachel and Maggie, who jokingly requested I refer to her as “Lady Margaret of Laurel Hill”; they have always been my best friends, and as a result, I adore stories about sisterhood. It is well documented that Austen herself was very close with her only sister, Cassandra. In the first written biography of the author, their nephew wrote, “Dearest of all to the heart of Jane was her sister Cassandra, about three years her senior. Their sisterly affection for each other could scarcely be exceeded. ... she would have been miserable without her sister; her mother observing that ‘if Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate’” (Austen-Leigh 18). I sympathize, Jane, and I felt like my topic would have been sanctioned by her, or at least that she must have been deliberate about her choice to incorporate sisters into her fiction. This thesis is a product of my love for my sisters and these novels so infused with sorority.

More specifically about sisters, I wanted to explore how sisters are used narratively. How do the presence of sisters and the existence of sister relationships change these stories? What would be lost if these sisters were erased from the novels? How much does Austen rely on sisters to create a natural flow of cause and effect? How often are characters' motivations shaped by the

existence of the sororal tie? Through analysis with these questions in mind, I found much more than I had expected. The basis of the plots rests upon sisters interacting, loving, and communicating with one another; each story uses sisters to express themes and morals, and the characters of the principal figures, which are so crucial to understanding Austen's stories, are expressed naturally through relation to their siblings. I argue that sisters in these novels are so intrinsically linked with the essence of each story, as Austen chose to tell them, that their role, particularly in the novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, surpasses that of any other character type; without sorority which is clearly so highly prized by the author, these novels and their iconic romances would fall apart.

Who qualifies as a sister? Each of the selected novels features families of all daughters, the Bennet family famously having five girls with no sons, all of whom count of course; I have also looked at the sisters of the parents and romantic heroes. Moreover, in my discussion I have made little distinction between full-blooded sisters, half-siblings, and sisters-in-law, following the example of Leila S. May:

The most obvious dramatic figurative extension of siblingship employed by Austen is ... the deletion of the term "in-law" from the phrases "sister-in-law" and "brother-in-law." This occurs literally scores of times in Austen's novels, and is the rule rather than the exception. ... it is no doubt both habitual ... and intentional (it was a kind of invitation and a gesture of familial solidarity) (May 348).

Thus, it is not unwarranted to discuss figures such as Fanny Dashwood, Mrs. Gardiner, and the new sisters gained by the heroines through their nuptials in the end of these stories. Austen expects the reader to consider them as a real part of the family.

As with so many areas within Austen studies, much scholarship has already been done on sisters in her work. One piece I consulted was John Mullan's article "Sisterly Chat," also retitled as "Do Sisters Sleep Together?" in his 2012 publication *What Matters in Jane Austen?*, in which he gives an overview of the conversations born out of the unique intimacy sisters are afforded in the world of Jane Austen compared to the limited access that the lovers had to the heroines. He ties this phenomenon back to Austen's own acquaintance with the closeness of sisters through her relationship with Cassandra Austen. Mullan argues that "only where a sisterly relationship is at the very heart of the novel do sisters sleep in the same room," which leads him to single out *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* first where the main sibling pairs share a bedroom at least for portions of the novel (Mullan 60). He points to the Dashwood sisters' shared room in Mrs. Jennings' London home, though I do wonder if he has overlooked the existence of a guest bedroom in Barton Cottage which would mean they are two of the sisters are always sharing. These shared spaces for the Dashwoods and Bennets become a "sisterly sanctum" that allow for unfettered communication if the sisters feel free to share, though this is not always a good thing as he shows in the case of the Bertram, Bingley, Steele, and youngest Bennet sisters, which are each destructive in different ways that affect the plot (Mullan 61). He argues that the excellent communication between the eldest two Bennet sisters is unusual compared to Austen's other novels. Mullan concludes with *Persuasion*, which, he argues, is the "end of sisterhood" as "sisterly chat holds no allure for Anne" (Mullan 68). Mullan's emphasis on sisterly communication as a way to understand these relationships was quite helpful, and his analysis of the Steele sisters in particular was quite pertinent to my own research. With respect to *Persuasion*, I must contradict Mullan to point out that the end of Anne's story, which contains her longing for sisterly affection, sees her finding sorority elsewhere. Moreover, he conveniently

omits the break in the flow of communication between Elizabeth and Jane, once Elizabeth begins to harbor secrets from her sister, which I have discussed in my own analysis of their relationship.

Deborah J. Knuth Klenck, in her essay “‘You Must be a Great Comfort to Your Sister, Sir’: Why Good Brothers Make Good Husbands,” argues that a hero’s relationship with a sister can provide good training for how to relate to women, and thus, how to become a good candidate for marriage in the eyes of women. She highlights that men like Colonel Brandon, Henry Tilney, and Captain Wentworth fair so well generally because they have learned from sisterly relationships how to speak the language of women and how to care for them, even as they also have played a role in shaping the characters of their developing sisters as Darcy has done for Georgiana by taking an interest in her reading life. These sisters have another effect on them, as she writes, “Brothers’ experience of their sisters’ mistakes can teach another kind of sympathy,” relating back to Darcy, Colonel Brandon, and Captain Wentworth’s capacity for pity towards the errors of young women (“You Must be”). For her, this relationship also includes room for teasing as Tilney and Ferrars especially show. Affirming the power of a relationship with a sister, this author points out that “Darcy ascribes his deficiencies in part to his having been ‘unfortunately an only son, (for many years an only child),’ suggesting that if his sister had been closer to him in age, his personality might have been different” (“You Must be”). I have taken her point that these different aspects of good brothers can become good husbands and used this to show how this bond with a sister allows for elements of the romantic plot in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* to happen by rendering the heroes more attractive and/or more likely to choose the women they do.

In “The City of Sisterly Love: Jane Austen’s Community as Sorority,” Laura S. Dabundo explores how communities in Austen’s fiction are mostly female-based, though they are not

always harmonious ones. She writes, “For the family is the basic unit of society in Jane Austen’s world, a group of individuals, generally related, who live together, seeking, ultimately, harmony and peace. So we must look at these relatives, the sisters, to discover the community of the novels” (Dabundo). She argues that “the moral center of *Pride and Prejudice* ... is located within the friendship of Jane and Elizabeth,” and that the morality declines from there in the sister order (Dabundo). In *Sense and Sensibility*, she argues that these sisters, “emotionally close, though also temperamentally different,” show that “these sororities are exclusive, not inclusive, communities” by the way Margaret is so often excluded from the action in the novel (Dabundo). She points out how Austen uses counter examples to highlight the nature of the sibling relationships at play, both with the Bennets and the Bingleys as well as the Dashwoods and the Steeles. In *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, the author finds examples of “negative sorority” which cause suffering to the heroines of these stories. She concludes by illustrating that *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* end with the heroines being settled within communities of sisterly love which she argues “might well have been inspired by the Biblical model of community and aspiring toward it,” tying this back to Austen’s personal life and faith (Dabundo). Leaving aside the commentary on Austen’s own life, this communal perspective, particularly when looking at the conclusions of the books, supports my own thesis that the sisters take precedence over the romances in these stories, and I have attempted to address the areas of sisterly influence she leaves untouched.

In his article “Sororadelphia, or ‘even the conjugal tie is beneath the fraternal’”, James Thompson argues that sisters take precedence over romance in *Sense and Sensibility*. He writes, “the pleasures of the narrative are all invested in the connection between Elinor and Marianne, a connection that is tried and threatened, but eventually restored and strengthened across the

narrative,” which accounts for the oft-considered lackluster characters of Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon; the focus is not meant to be on those lovers (Thompson). He reads the book as “a romance about maintaining and repairing the family into which her protagonists are born,” and he sees a similar phenomenon at play in *Mansfield Park* (Thompson). Highlight the emphasis the Ang Lee film gives to the relationship between Elinor and Marianne, he gives a brilliant analysis of the key turning points within Elinor and Marianne’s relationship, concluding that Marianne learning her lesson enhances their love. Thompson’s reading of this novel aligned with my own, and I have used his work as a starting place to discuss the other sister relationships that are so influential within the book that he overlooks which supplement the thesis that this novel is so concerned with that type of relationship and its inherent value.

In the chapter subtitled “Sisters are Supreme”, I delve into *Pride and Prejudice* as the first example of a novel that ceases to function without the sisterly bond. A novel that involves faulty impressions of character and temperament, Austen utilizes the relationships that her iconic couple Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have with their respective sisters to reveal to both the characters themselves and the readers who these individuals truly are even as they grow and change. From start to finish, Elizabeth and Darcy’s romantic arc requires sisters to work; nearly every major plot point happens either because of sisters acting, moving, and communicating, or because of sisters, especially Jane and Elizabeth, loving each other. At the same, a sister arc for the Bennet girls mirroring some of the same themes as the romantic arc runs through the novel as well, giving that bond its own resolution as well. The blissful marriages at the end affirm the sororal tie since Jane and Elizabeth wed men that will allow their relationship to continue and flourish, as Elizabeth also gains another loving sister in Georgiana Darcy who contributes to the sisterly haven that Pemberley becomes.

My second chapter examines sisters in *Persuasion*, a novel that similarly relies on the sister bond to function as a narrative. Anne's loneliness is partially caused by her cold sisterly relationships, and this theme is underscored by the contrast of the warmth found in other sister relationships in the novel. Austen also uses sisters as a vehicle for critiquing the aristocracy and affirming the burgeoning middle class. Through relationships with and situations caused by their sisters, the future Captain and Mrs. Wentworth's complementary personalities are shown, compelling the reader to cheer on this long-separated couple. Like *Pride and Prejudice*, the romance, or reconciliation, of Anne and Frederick happens on account of the influence of sister characters and the love of sisters bringing them back together as they attempt to figure out how each feels after all this time. Unable to find a truly affectionate and worthy sibling relationship in the family she was born in, Anne does find worthy sisters upon joining the Wentworth family, attesting to the importance of that relationship similar to the happy sororal conclusion of Elizabeth Bennet's story.

My final chapter turns back chronologically to *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen's first published novel and one of the earliest drafted. This novel's heroines, who are identified so often with the title of the book, are sisters, and the plot of the novel follows their relationship in the period after their father's death up to the dawn of their marriages. This story is chiefly interested in their relationship, and their lives are shaped by the influence of other sisters in the network of characters, such as Fanny Dashwood and Lucy Steele, which kickstarts the romantic plots used to highlight the wrinkles in Elinor and Marianne's own relationship. Austen once again uses sister relationships to illustrate her protagonists' characters which is integral to the themes of the novel. Moreover, the bond between the primary sisters, as it is contrasted with the unharmonious

ones found between sisters of shallower moral fiber, is shown to be the most affectionate and worthy one in the novel, which Austen uses to endorse the value of sisterhood within her novels.

## Chapter I – *Pride and Prejudice*: Sisters are Supreme

In the popular conception of Austen's most famous novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship garners the most attention, taking precedence over all other relationships and aspects of the novel. However, this novel's sister bonds deserve a greater share of that attention as the novel as it is written would cease to function properly without them. Certainly, sisters are peppered throughout the network of characters in this novel, as Ruth Perry points out, "The entire social fabric of *Pride and Prejudice* is constructed out of sister relationships, from the five Bennet sisters and Mr. Bingley's two sisters – Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst – to Mrs. Bennet's sister Mrs. Philips and her sister-in-law Mrs. Gardiner. ... The social world of this novel could not exist if it were not for the sister tie" (Perry 118-9). Sisterly connections are used not only to express the character traits of the main couple, but also, they support and drive the romantic arc of Elizabeth and Darcy. Their sisters, whose importance in their lives are affirmed by the concluding marriages, are weaved throughout to the extent that this celebrated couple would arguably never have happened without them. Mirroring her evolution in the romantic storyline, an arc in Elizabeth's sisterly relationships cements that, beyond being crucial to the unfolding of the romance, sisters are just as narratively significant by their own right. Without sisters, the entire story collapses.

Who exactly are these sisters? Before looking into the use of sister relationships, a study of the broad types of these relationships would be profitable. Jane and Elizabeth's bond is a

perfect example of the first type – a warm and loving friendship. These elder sisters of the Bennet family, who share a bedroom that serves almost as a sisterly sanctum, find in one another a friend and advisor who can give wisdom where their deficient mother cannot. Eddleman writes, “They check and balance each other. ... Jane and Elizabeth are confidantes and companions, not because they are both beautiful or perfect, but because they deeply love and value each other” (Eddleman). Repeatedly throughout the novel, they stop and discuss privately between them the matters at hand; there are twelve private recorded conversations according to one scholar’s count, far outstripping even Elinor and Marianne Dashwood’s five (Mullan 66). The two youngest and frivolous Bennet daughters, Kitty and Lydia who more closely resemble their mother are very close, though they hardly have a mutually edifying dynamic the way that their oldest sisters do. Poor Mary is the “pathetic reject in the middle” (Souter 183). As much as they seem to look down upon the Bennet girls, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst do also seem to be quite the united pair, working together to advance their aims throughout the novel.

Another type of sister relationship can be seen in the interactions between the eldest pair and the youngest pair of the Bennet sisters. Given the social norms of Regency England, the reputation of an entire family rose or fell together, and this meant that if one Bennet sister crossed the line, all of the others would be tarnished as well. Even before Lydia’s scandalous elopement, the elder sisters saw the disturbing trend her character was taking and feared this possibility both for their own sakes and Lydia’s. They are “exasperated and humiliated by their younger sisters, but they do not hate them” (Souter 185). Thus, the relationship was one mainly of Elizabeth and Jane attempting and failing “to extend the same correcting influence to their youngest siblings that they practice between themselves” (Eddleman). Explaining some of the plot significances of Lydia’s elopement, this connection between family reputation and

individual behavior is discernable in Lady Catherine's diatribe against Elizabeth's potential marriage to her nephew when she famously begs, "are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" in reference to Lydia's "patched-up" marriage (*P&P* 338). Indeed, Mr. Darcy blunders by admitting that the general imprudence of Elizabeth's younger sisters along with her parents were a great obstacle for him in proposing to her the first time.

By virtue of their unique intimacy with each other, sisters allow principal characters' traits to be expressed through their interactions in order for readers to better understand the people they are following; for example, Austen uses Elizabeth's relationship with her sisters to illuminate her opinionated character. From her dialogues with her sisters, we see that Elizabeth, though capable of deep sincerity, is fond of witty banter. The relationship between Elizabeth and Jane specifically helps communicate the moral of the story. Dabundo writes, "The moral center of *Pride and Prejudice* ... is located within the friendship of Jane and Elizabeth" (Dabundo). Elizabeth's tendency to be rather judgmental, an important element in her character arc and the novel's overall didactic lesson, is perhaps best expressed in her private conversations with Jane. When they are discussing the new people in town, Elizabeth rather disdainfully tells her older sister, "you are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in any body. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes," a sentiment she obviously does not share (*P&P* 16). After her disappointment in both Charlotte and Mr. Bingley, Lizzy takes her criticisms a step further in another tête-à-tête with Jane:

There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense. (*P&P* 133)

Primed for her opinion of her own sense to fall in the latter half of the novel, Elizabeth's pessimism and prejudice is on full display. Even her lack of real intimacy with the three younger Bennet siblings shows just how selective her personality can be, which explains her own romantic plotline quite well.

Mr. Darcy's relationship with his much younger sister, Georgiana Darcy, too serves as a way for Darcy to show his true character to both Elizabeth and the reader, supplanting the negative impression created by Darcy's relatively poor social skills and Wickham's manipulative lies. One scholar argues, "Throughout the novels, we can see, to adapt another phrase from *Northanger Abbey*, that a companionate relationship with his sister is good "training for a hero" ("You Must be"). Darcy's relationship with Georgiana gave him the opportunity to learn how to properly treat a woman in his care. Early on, Darcy is shown to be an attentive brother through his habit of writing long letters to his much younger sister back home. Before Elizabeth ever even meets Georgiana, she hears a report concerning this young sister that greatly reshapes the way she views Mr. Darcy. While giving them a tour of Pemberley house, Mrs. Reynolds the housekeeper relates,

They were shewn into a very pretty sitting-room, lately fitted up with greater elegance and lightness than the apartments below; and were informed that it was but just done to give pleasure to Miss Darcy, who had taken a liking to the room when last at Pemberley.

"He is certainly a good brother," said Elizabeth ...

"And this is always the way with him," [Mrs. Reynolds] added. – "Whatever can give his sister any pleasure is sure to be done in a moment. There is nothing he would not do for her." (P&P 239).

This report of Darcy's kind attention and generosity towards his sister does not fail to make an impression on Elizabeth, coupled with the housekeeper's own longstanding good opinion of him as a good-hearted boy and master. Glenda A. Hudson puts it, "Darcy is an ideal brother and, therefore, should make an ideal husband" (Hudson 3). Elizabeth's own strong affection for Jane makes it all the more natural that she would admire someone for loving their own sibling so much, especially when the sibling in question is under the guardianship of Mr. Darcy. The novel relies upon Darcy's status as a beloved brother to communicate his worthy character and his appeal as a prospective husband to Elizabeth; how many readers have swooned right along with her because of this?

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, the romantic arcs of the two eldest Bennet sisters entirely rely upon the connections created by or to siblings in order to even function as it is written. For example, the presence of the Bingley sisters in the story plays an important narrative role in kickstarting the intrigues. Shortly after making the acquaintance of the Bennet sisters at the Meryton assembly, Bingley is clearly quite taken with Jane. However, Jane's invitation to dine with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst while the men are out of the house leads to an opportunity for romance as she, at the behest of her scheming mother, rides to Netherfield on horseback in the rain. The most beautiful Bennet daughter is thus trapped in the home of the new eligible bachelor in town, and even though she spends most of the that time trapped in bed, her presence in his home no doubt encouraged Mr. Bingley to dwell upon her in his thoughts as he is anxious to know how she fares (*P&P* 35). This illness, however, forwards not only Jane and Bingley's attachment but also Darcy and Elizabeth's love story once Elizabeth is drawn by her affection for her elder sister to Netherfield to look after Jane as she recovers, an early example of what Hudson points out which is that "the sororal relationship between Elizabeth and Jane

affects the dramatic structure of the novel” (Hudson 3). Darcy and Elizabeth’s provocative conversations about the nature of an accomplished woman and poetry as the “food” of love take place in this section of the novel. His attraction to Elizabeth grows to the point that he naively thinks to himself that he “had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger” (*P&P* 51). Simultaneously, Mrs. Bennet, in her visit to check in on her daughter, confirms for both Darcy and Caroline Bingley that this would be a poor connection either for Darcy himself or Bingley as she shows her silly, rather lowbred nature to Elizabeth’s blushing embarrassment (*P&P* 43). This proved to be a very damaging influence upon Darcy’s initial failed proposal attempt. Thus, one dinner invitation from the Bingley sisters as well as Elizabeth’s strong attachment to her own sister led these characters down the path that led to both of the final happy matches.

The sisters of Mrs. Bennet also support the romantic plotline; Mrs. Philips, who lives in the town of Meryton adjacent to Longbourn, seems to equal her sister in terms of frivolity. This woman provides the two youngest Bennet girls with an excuse to run to Meryton any time they wish to ogle the officers in the militia under Colonel Forster that had been stationed there for the winter season. Austen writes, “Their visits to Mrs. Philips were now productive of the most interesting intelligence. Every day added something to their knowledge of the officers' names and connections” (*P&P* 29). By enabling Kitty and Lydia’s obsession with the soldiers, Mrs. Philips, in conjunction with their own mother, was sowing the seeds of disaster while forwarding the Bennet family’s acquaintance with Mr. Wickham, as she “promised to make her husband call on Mr. Wickham, and give him an invitation also, if the family from Longbourn would come in the evening” (*P&P* 73). It was during this very party in her home that Mr. Wickham regaled

Elizabeth with his duplicitous tale of woe and injury, cementing her ill first impression of Darcy that the entire second half of the novel works to undo. Lydia's elopement can partially be traced back to this unfortunate party which radically changes the lives of both the Bennet and Darcy families.

Another sister of Mrs. Bennet, her brother's wife Mrs. Gardiner, influences the plot considerably. Following her disappointment in Charlotte's character upon her marriage, Elizabeth turns for female friendship and guidance towards both Jane and her Aunt Gardiner since neither her own mother nor Aunt Philips could be a sage enough advisor and companion. "Elizabeth substitutes for Charlotte her Aunt Gardiner and her sister," and one of the earliest examples of this can be seen in Mrs. Gardiner's advice to Elizabeth regarding her flirtation with George Wickham ("Sisterhood and Friendship"). By pointing out all the imprudence of a match made without the funds to support it and the disappointment this would cause for her father, Mrs. Gardiner warns her niece about such an unwise engagement, and Austen writes, "Elizabeth having thanked her for the kindness of her hints, they parted; a wonderful instance of advice being given on such a point, without being resented" (*P&P* 143). Later on in the same chapter, after Elizabeth has had time to implement her advice and seen its effect upon Wickham who know is chasing after a woman recently rendered an heiress, she writes to Mrs. Gardiner, "I am now convinced, my dear aunt, that I have never been much in love; for had I really experienced that pure and elevating passion, I should at present detest his very name, and wish him all manner of evil. But my feelings are not only cordial towards him; they are even impartial towards Miss King" (*P&P* 147). Clearly, Elizabeth's feelings towards Wickham at this stage are not quite impartial since she brings up his "plight" in her refusal of Darcy's hand, but long before his true character was revealed to her through Darcy's letter and Lydia's elopement, Mrs.

Gardiner was able to help Elizabeth clearly see the situation she would find herself in if she continued indulging Mr. Wickham, both preventing her from a regrettable match as well as opening the door for Lydia to make her most unfortunate choice.

Sisterly connections are weaved all through the opportunity for and the disastrous outcome of Mr. Darcy's first proposal. First, Elizabeth, even though she was Charlotte's best friend before she was married, would more than likely have had a more difficult time journeying to the Parsonage in Hunsford if Charlotte's own sister Maria Lucas accompanied by their father Sir William been going. While Maria and Elizabeth were never close friends, she does provide an appropriate companion for such a trip. Secondly, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is the sister of the late Lady Anne Darcy, Fitzwilliam and Georgiana's mother. This connection leads Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam to make a visit to their noble aunt at Rosings Park in the same neighborhood as Mr. Collins's home at the same time that Elizabeth is residing there. These circumstances conspire to throw Elizabeth and Darcy together after he had made an effort to withdraw himself from that enticing young woman's sphere due to the "danger" he felt by his immense attraction to her. This inadvertent meeting culminates in his less-than-ideal proposal to Lizzy as the immediacy of her embarrassing family is removed from before his eyes. Elizabeth's response was also motivated by her love for Jane. As she is still reeling from the revelation from Colonel Fitzwilliam that Darcy was responsible for removing Bingley from Jane's influence after the Netherfield ball, an action he co-authored with Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, Elizabeth cannot possibly imagine accepting this proud man who is actively insulting her family to her face, though Darcy hardly says anything that Elizabeth herself does not see. The close bond between Elizabeth and Jane made it even harder for Elizabeth to imagine forgiving Mr. Darcy for "ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister" (*P&P* 186). In the heat of the

moment, this is the first point that she angrily brings up against him and which seems to take precedence in her mind over Wickham's tale against him; first and foremost, Darcy injured Jane, and she tosses in Wickham's story just to bash his character more. Had Elizabeth not been so acquainted with how much Jane felt for Bingley, and had she not loved her as devotedly as she does, the knowledge of Darcy's meddling might have stung a bit less. This pivotal moment in Elizabeth and Darcy's history is inseparable from Elizabeth's love for Jane.

Just as sisters are at the heart of Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy, they are also bound up in his redemption as he seeks her good opinion. Contained in his letter to Elizabeth which was written in response to the accusations she made concerning his character in the fiery aftermath of his proposal, Darcy's attempt to justify himself to Elizabeth, which also kickstarts the process of her own humbling, centers around both her sister and his. Though she is initially reluctant to see his side in the matter of Jane and Bingley, Elizabeth ultimately does justice to his explanation that he believed her sister to be at the core indifferent towards Bingley, feelings which he acknowledges her to be the superior judge of. If he had not been so clear that he acted on the belief that Jane's feelings were not entangled and out of desire to shield his best friend from a loveless match that would not have its proper compensations, then Elizabeth might never have been brought around to forgive him. When the letter turns towards her accusation concerning Mr. Wickham, Darcy then unfolds the whole shameful history concerning Mr. Wickham's profligacy and subsequent attempted seduction of his then fifteen-year-old sister and heiress, Georgiana Darcy. The longer Elizabeth thinks upon it and is convinced by his account, the more shocked and horrified she is, convicted of her own blunders. She laments:

How despicably have I acted! ... I, who have prided myself on my discernment! – I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of

my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust. ... Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. – Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself. (*P&P* 201-2).

Here, Austen is not only laying the groundwork for Elizabeth's future affection for Darcy, but she is also forcing her heroine to undergo a sense of brokenness as she acknowledges and eventually grows from her mistakes. Just as earlier Elizabeth's pride and prejudice were highlighted through her conversations with Jane, it is now humbled by the story of another sister, and an unhumbled Lizzy would never marry Darcy. This letter leads Elizabeth to ultimately esteem Mr. Darcy's character, though her opinion of his general temperament would require the aforementioned evidence of his good brotherliness with Georgiana for it to be reformed.

Returning to the narrative influence of Mrs. Bennet's sisters, not only was Mrs. Gardiner instrumental in cooling Elizabeth's interest in Wickham, but she also helped bring about her ultimate marriage with Darcy as well. Once their original plan of a tour of the Lakes must be curtailed due to Mr. Gardiner's business, it is chiefly due to Mrs. Gardiner's previous residence in the neighborhood of Lambton in Derbyshire that they travel in that direction since Elizabeth herself was hesitant to venture anywhere near Darcy's own county. More horrifying to her instincts, Elizabeth soon finds that her aunt has even more ideas concerning that neighborhood, "Within five miles of Lambton, Elizabeth found from her aunt that Pemberley was situated. It was not in their direct road, nor more than a mile or two out of it. In talking over their route the evening before, Mrs. Gardiner expressed an inclination to see the place again" (*P&P* 231-2).

Unknowingly, this kind woman is conspiring to take her niece directly to the home of a man she had rejected quite brutally not that long ago. Of course, in order to further Darcy's redemption plotline which began with his letter, Austen throws her heroine and hero into a rather awkward meeting as they run into each other as Elizabeth is touring the grounds with her aunt and uncle. Even in this exchange, Mrs. Gardiner furthers her niece's relationship in a more subtle way, "After walking some time in this way, the two ladies in front, the two gentlemen behind, ... there chanced to be a little alteration. It originated in Mrs. Gardiner, who, fatigued by the exercise of the morning, found Elizabeth's arm inadequate to her support, and consequently preferred her husband's. Mr. Darcy took her place by her niece, and they walked on together" (*P&P* 244-5). By inciting the rearrangement of their walk around the gardens, Mrs. Gardiner provides the opportunity for Elizabeth to discuss what led to her presence in his home and to be invited by Darcy to meet his sister before she leaves the neighborhood, a request that speaks volumes to her concerning his current opinion of her. Austen tells us that after this meeting Elizabeth "could do nothing but think, and think with wonder, of Mr. Darcy's civility, and above all, of his wishing her to be acquainted with his sister," (*P&P* 247). Her thoughts of Darcy are already taking on a different form thanks to the actions of Mrs. Gardiner.

Ultimately, the final steps of Elizabeth and Darcy's romantic plotline can also be attributed to her sisters to whom so much vital communication is owed; Darcy's transition from "the last man in the world whom [she] could ever be prevailed upon to marry" to being thought of as "exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her" largely rests upon his humble righting of his wrongs (*P&P* 188; 295). Darcy's letter concerning Jane and Georgiana coupled with his great kindness during their time at Pemberley was enough to begin warming Elizabeth's heart towards him, but his heroic actions surrounding the Bennet sisters in

the final portion of the novel truly cement her esteem and regard for him, and even his ability to do those things was because of Jane's letter to Elizabeth. Since the flow of critical information in the novel is dependent upon sisters communicating, the only way that Darcy knew of Lydia's escape was because he came upon Elizabeth shortly after she received the dreadful correspondence from her elder sister that informed her of the ill-advised "elopement." In turn, Lizzy learned of Darcy's valiant choice to hunt down the couple at large through Lydia's slip of the tongue and her own further correspondence with her Aunt Gardiner, who cannot resist the opportunity of praising the gentleman whom she and her husband had coordinated with for Lydia's marriage. But, to make things even more perfect in Lizzy's eyes, Darcy then goes out of his way to mend the relationship between Jane and Bingley by admitting to his friend that he, along with his society-conscious sisters, withheld the knowledge that she was in London and by giving his blessing to the match as it were by accompanying Bingley to Longbourn to see the eldest Miss Bennet in order to rekindle any possible feelings. This he only does out of assurance from Lizzy that Jane really did care for Bingley, so that their marriage also can be tied back to the bond between those sisters. Elizabeth feels immense gratitude and love for him on account of all of these things that prove his pride has been knocked down to the point of sullyng his hands for the sake of saving her family's reputation while also helping to bring about her beloved sister's happiness. Elizabeth's strong bond to Jane only makes these actions all the more romantic in her eyes, and where before she felt an anger strong enough to reject him, she now loves him enough to marry him which certainly is quite a lot given how particular she has proven herself to be about any potential spouse.

One further sisterly character, Lady Catherine de Bourgh's own latent status as a sister influences the plot. While Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh were "in their cradles" according to

her testimony, Lady Catherine with Lady Anne Darcy intended for these first cousins to marry and unite the two families further (*P&P* 336). All these years later after the death of his mother, Darcy himself seems to have little intention whatsoever of fulfilling Lady Catherine's cherished wish. This does not stop this woman, who is very accustomed to having her way, from harassing Darcy's rumored bride, Elizabeth, once the report reaches her. Lady Catherine's impertinent and scathing dialogue aimed at insulting both the Bennet family and Elizabeth's own character ultimately provokes her into making this reply to de Bourgh's threat that her life as Darcy's spouse would be marred by the family's opposition, "These are heavy misfortunes, ... But the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation, that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine" (*P&P* 336). This banter coupled with Lizzy's vehement refusal to promise that she will never engage herself to her nephew leaves Lady Catherine "most seriously displeased" enough to rush to confront Darcy himself about the matter offstage, relating to him every detail of Miss Elizabeth's "perverseness." Later, in the aftermath of the second and successful proposal, Elizabeth soon learns from Darcy himself exactly what the outcome of this interference on him was:

It taught me to hope ... as I had scarcely ever allowed myself to hope before. I knew enough of your disposition to be certain that, had you been absolutely, irrevocably decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to Lady Catherine, frankly and openly. (*P&P* 347).

Thus, Lady Catherine's uncontrolled temper leads to the fulfillment of the very thing she was seeking to quell. Darcy, languishing in uncertainty, might not have had the courage to propose a second time had he not heard of this exchange that clearly denotes Elizabeth's change of heart.

Indeed, this final sister supplied the last motivator in wrapping up the romantic arc these two characters spent the entire novel progressing through.

While this romance has been stealing the spotlight, a sister arc no less important has been unfolding. Just as she must learn to respect and love Fitzwilliam Darcy, Elizabeth must learn to be a better sister which requires her to subdue her own opinion of her discernment and cleverness. As the biggest wrinkle in her relationship with the eldest Miss Bennet, Elizabeth, though she loves Jane as much as she loves anyone in the world, belittles her elder sister's judgement and candor from the beginning, though Jane is sometimes more accurate in her assessment of people. Jane even warns Lizzy not to discredit Bingley's assurance that Darcy had not been at fault in the matter of Wickham, a warning, echoed by Charlotte Lucas's monetarily minded advice, she did not heed at the time. However, where Lizzy and Jane have an open and warm relationship, Elizabeth does not invest the same time and effort into her relationships with the youngest three Bennet sisters; rather, she mostly worries and frets about them alongside Jane, yet she neither seems to realize the extent of the problem nor does she even really have the power to prevent Lydia and Kitty from behaving so foolishly if Mr. Bennet will not intervene. She even chooses to warn her father, rather than Lydia herself, about the proposed trip to Brighton under the care of the Forsters, but as he would not be provoked into action, Elizabeth cannot stop this train in its tracks. Yet, before the news of Lydia's elopement, this breach of sisterly affection does not seem to disturb Lizzy too greatly beyond the fact that it is an embarrassment to the family. Unlike Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, she never expresses a desire for a closer relationship with Lydia or Kitty, and she does not seem to feel personally responsible for their folly; to reflect the novel's goal of humbling Elizabeth, this must change ere the story concludes.

With untoward or disastrous results, over the course of the novel communication between the sisters breaks down to varying degrees. Despite their otherwise easy intimacy, Elizabeth withholds from Jane the information she gained from Darcy's letter that Bingley never knew she was in London, and she does not confide in her that she has fallen in love with him. A blockade made of delicacy for Jane's feelings and her pride – for she must admit Jane was right – has been erected that stops Elizabeth from telling all to her closest confidante in the world. Moreover, Elizabeth and Jane's decision to keep what they learned regarding Wickham's treacherous character from their younger sisters leads to Lydia's foolish choice to run off with that rake. Elizabeth, keenly regretting this choice to leave the rest of her family ignorant, laments to her aunt,

That is the worst of all ... neither Jane, to whom I related the whole, nor I, thought it necessary to make our knowledge public ... And even when it was settled that Lydia should go with Mrs. Forster, the necessity of opening her eyes to his character never occurred to me. That she could be in any danger from the deception never entered my head. That such a consequence as this should ensue, you may easily believe was far enough from my thoughts. (*P&P* 270-1).

Clearly blaming herself, Elizabeth is realizing she could have used her status as sister to prevent Lydia from making such a blind, "thoughtless" decision, further humbling Lizzy's own pride. If she had been a kinder, more communicative sister, treating Lydia less like a business associate, perhaps this crisis could have been averted. Even Kitty, to whom the elopement did not seem "wholly unexpected," perhaps could have prevented the blunder if she had also communicated more openly with her sisters and the rest of the family about what she expected might be Lydia's

intentions, a fact she “has anger” from presumably Mr. Bennet for even though Jane chooses to pardon her (*P&P* 260; 262).

Perfecting and repairing both the romantic and sororal arcs, the final chapters of this novel drive home the point that the dream life for Elizabeth would be incomplete without the continued presence of her sister in her life. Freed by her newly affianced state, Elizabeth finally finds the moment to reopen her heart fully to Jane, which requires her acknowledging her own previous faults. One scholar explains it thus, “The whole scene in which Elizabeth reveals her engagement to Darcy underlines and then dissipates what has been slightly awry in Jane and Elizabeth’s otherwise strong intimacy. Elizabeth’s pride in her own judgment, which has made her disdainful of her sister’s candor, is humbled, as is her wit.” (Fergus 86-7). Even in marrying Darcy, Elizabeth is affirming Jane’s judgment since she had supposed rightly that Darcy was not as infamous as Wickham had described, a fact Jane herself reminded Lizzy of when the true story reached her ears when she says, “I never thought Mr. Darcy so deficient in the *appearance* of [goodness] as you used to do” (*P&P* 217). Renewed in their own sisterly intimacy, the two sisters wed their sweethearts on the same day, symbolically embarking into married life at the same time. If these sisters must marry for survival, then they marry men who will allow them to maintain their own friendship; Jane and Mr. Bingley settle down within thirty miles of Pemberley, an “easy distance” which both families will happily have the means to traverse often (*P&P* 364). Added to this picture of sororal attachment is the growing bond between the new Mrs. Darcy and her new sister, Georgiana. Austen writes, “Pemberley was now Georgiana’s home; and the attachment of the sisters was exactly what Darcy had hoped to see. They were able to love each other, even as well as they intended. Georgiana had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth” (*P&P* 366). At least until her own marriage, Georgiana contributes to

making Pemberley a sororal haven just as Jane protects it by shielding the less-desirable Wickhams from the Darcys as much as possible. Meanwhile, thought it is too late to rescue Lydia from her fate, another sister also benefits from these marriages:

Kitty, to her very material advantage, spent the chief of her time with her two elder sisters. In society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great. She was not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia; and, removed from the influence of Lydia's example, she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid. (*P&P* 364-5).

Between the two of them, Mrs. Darcy and Mrs. Bingley do everything they can to preempt Kitty from following in Lydia's footsteps whom they were unable to stop. Mary, too, does not seem to mind being left at home most of the time, according to Mr. Bennet's suspicions anyway (*P&P* 365). In the finale, Pemberley in the end "becomes a sisterly Eden," supporting the preservation and promotion of those sisterly ties (Dabundo).

As a novel, *Pride and Prejudice* cannot tell its story without sisters whether they be sisters tied by affection or by reputational affiliation; socially, they are the backbone of nearly every event. Rather than simply telling us what these characters are like, which would have been a stereotypical sign of poor writing, Austen uses these siblings as the vehicles through which the principal characters are rightly understood as they truly are. Morally, just as Elizabeth is humbled through her relationship with Darcy, she also is not allowed to linger in her pride where Jane and her other sisters are concerned either. If the sisters were removed from this story, the dramatic structure would be nearly unrecognizable. Both the events and the motivations behind the romantic plot points are carried along by sisters to the exclusion of wedding bells without their presence, and the romance dovetailing into the sisterly growth that Elizabeth undergoes

ensures that the sister relationships are bolstered rather than impeded by these awaited marriages. If the romantic plotline cannot even function without the support of the sisters, and if they have their own arc with its own evolutions as well, then surely the sororal tie should be granted the supremacy it deserves within the novel.

## Chapter II – *Persuasion*: Sister in Shadow

Unlike Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot, is not a part of a close sisterly relationship; rather, she is emotionally estranged from both of her sisters, and this causes so many hardships for Anne to bear as her life is so bound up with theirs. As seen in the Bennet family, a lack of sisterly warmth is devastating in Austen's world, or as one scholar writes, "Austen treats divisions between sisters as catastrophic, since these disunions destroy the harmony of family life, which is analogous to the stability and peace of society" (Hudson 2). The loneliness caused by this and another theme of the novel, a strong mentality against aristocratic frivolity and entitlement, are explored through comparisons with sisters. Just "as sister-influenced a novel as *Pride and Prejudice*", the entire plot of *Persuasion* is dependent upon Anne being shuffled around by her sisters, despite this emotional detachment, and the actions of other sister figures such as the Musgrove sisters, Mrs. Croft, and Fanny Harville (Mullan 68). Indeed, Anne and Captain Wentworth are able to reconnect through the movements of their sisters. Plot point for point, nothing in Austen's final completed novel could have ever happened as it did without the presence of sisters in the story, nor could the themes and main characters' traits be so well-developed; ultimately, escaping her frigid family while affirming the sisterly bond, Anne finds the sororal ties she lacked through her marriage to Wentworth.

Austen uses Anne Elliot's relationship with her sisters to communicate important themes and criticisms she wishes to make within her story; one such prominent theme throughout

*Persuasion* is Anne's loneliness, and much of this can be blamed on her sister's total lack of real affection or concern for Anne's wellbeing. Preferring the widow Mrs. Clay for a companion, Elizabeth overlooks her to the fury of family friend Lady Russell, and her younger and married sister Mary Musgrove, though "not so repulsive and unsisterly as Elizabeth, nor so inaccessible to all influence of hers," uses Anne to serve her own hypochondriac and self-pitying needs and never seems to care about what might be best for Anne of whom she is often jealous (*Per.* 41). This lack of sisterly harmony, coupled with an unloving father, devastates Anne's homelife and her prospect for the future, and Austen does not shy away from the ramifications of this for Anne. It is very telling that throughout the story Anne dreads returning to her rightful place in her father's house with Elizabeth in Bath. Even earlier in her life before the timeline of the novel, this brokenness affected Anne. Following their mother's death when Anne was only fourteen, she had no one who truly valued her other than Lady Russell; Elizabeth who was sixteen seems to have become obsessed with her new role as mistress of the house. After Anne returned from her school in Bath where she had become friends with the Miss Hamilton – later the Mrs. Smith who gives Anne an understanding of her insidious cousin's real character – her elder sister's coldness while Mary was away at school seems to have exaggerated her isolation; this probably made her more disposed to fall in love with the "remarkably fine" brother of a local curate, Captain Wentworth, when she originally did as "she had hardly anybody to love" (*Per.* 26). The cheery Musgrove sisters, Louisa and Henrietta, serve as counterbalance to the Elliot sisters' coldness. Indeed, this pair of sisters offers the "one hint [in Austen] of sisterly talk that excludes the heroine but is neither conspiratorial nor rivalrous" (Mullan 65). The fact that these altogether harmonious sisters are found in the Austen novel where the heroine is most divided from her own siblings emphasizes to both the reader and Anne herself how lacking her family life is.

When confronted with their warm relationship, Anne cannot but think that she “envied them nothing but that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters” (*Per.* 39). That kind of relationship with both or even just one of her sisters undoubtedly would have raised Anne’s lonely spirits considerably, but that would have erased this theme’s prominence from the book.

Another striking theme of *Persuasion* is its quite harsh view of the aristocracy with its attitudes and spheres, and this too is expressed through sisterly relationships. While much of this criticism is lobbied against Anne’s vain and spendthrift father, Sir Walter Elliot, much can also be seen through Anne’s relationships with her sisters as well as the marriages made by sisters in this novel. Elizabeth, the most similar Sir Walter of the three Elliot girls, is arguably the novel’s worst offender when it comes to undervaluing Anne’s merits in favor of inflating the importance of their family’s aristocratic ties to those such as the Dalrymples; Mary too suffers from being far too concerned with the “Elliot pride” as Louisa admits to Wentworth (*Per.* 82). Instead of privileging these characters who are most concerned with social rank, the novel elevates those with true merit who largely do not belong to that class. One scholar writes of this principle:

The plot of *Persuasion* works to suggest that in her day middle-class figures may be acting more "nobly" than aristocrats. Or rather, because Austen supports aristocratic principles, and not just anyone who happens to be an aristocrat by birth, she is capable of conceiving the transfer of traditional aristocratic ideals and functions from a dying aristocracy to a rising middle class. (Cantor 133).

An excellent example of this is Wentworth’s sister and her husband. Anne herself affirms that, given her high opinion of the amiable Crofts whom she no doubt esteems higher than her own

sisters, “she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch Hall had passed into better hands than its owners” (*Per.* 117). Indeed, this couple is the novel’s favored model of marital bliss rather than any of the more aristocratic marriages, such as that of Anne’s parents or Mary and Charles Musgrove who never seem to be unified upon any point. No, it is the Crofts that Austen wants the readers to see as the truly superior people despite their less than illustrious background. Upon meeting Wentworth’s naval friends, and beholding their true hospitality and attachment to him, Anne, in remembering forlornly that “these would have been all my friends” had she married Wentworth when she had the chance, longs for a circle of true friendship and warmth that is missing from her family’s party (*Per.* 92). What a strong contrast this picture of affection and warmth makes to later in the novel when her father and elder sister “whose entrance seemed to give a general chill,” come to invite the Musgroves and Wentworth to an evening party (*Per.* 211). Affirming the anti-aristocratic bent of the book, both Anne, who avoids the more traditional option in Mr. Elliot, and Louisa Musgrove ultimately do marry outside of the idle aristocracy in choosing naval captains, and to a lesser degree so does Henrietta as she marries a man who at least has a profession, yet the most aristocratic-minded Elliot sister Elizabeth is left without any foreseeable marriage prospects as she is dangerously close to aging out of that possibility altogether, stunting the growth of the aristocracy. Anne’s sisters only serve to underscore the undesirability of the valueless aristocracy in its decline.

An important aspect of storytelling, the traits of the main characters are communicated to the reader through their relationships with sisters. Austen uses Anne’s relationship with her sister and the family she married into to establish some of her heroine’s finest characteristics, showing her to her best advantage. From Lady Russell’s choice to consult Anne about the family’s

financial affairs, the reader is given to understand that Anne has wisdom that her family in general lacks, but it is not until she is received into her married sister's family life that her wisdom and tact can really be seen. Upon first arriving at Uppercross, Anne swiftly soothes Mary into complacency about the state of her health which shifts from near-death to ready for a walk in no time. Moreover, it is clear that the entire Musgrove family all respect her judgment as little as they may ultimately attend to it. Where Miss Elliot totally neglects her advice, as demonstrated by her rebuff to Anne's farewell warning about placing the alluring and artful widow Mrs. Clay so close to their eligible father, the Musgroves accost her with appeals about the difficulties of their domestic life and disagreements between all sides. From questions on how to manage Mary and Charles's children or for her opinions of servants, Austen tells how she handles this position of being caught in the crossfire, "How was Anne to set all these matters to rights? She could do little more than listen patiently, soften every grievance, and excuse each to the other; give them all hints of the forbearance necessary between such near neighbours, and make those hints broadest which were meant for her sister's benefit" (Per. 44). Here, Anne Elliot is shown exercising an admirable level of discretion as she seeks to create harmony in Mary's family circle despite being put in a position where she could easily make matters worse by joining in the complaints or by adding her own. By simply paying more attention to her than either Elizabeth or Sir Walter, Mary and the rest of the Musgroves give Anne an opportunity to show and exercise a neglected element of her merits.

Beyond Anne's amiable disposition and judgment, a sad dichotomy in her personality is established at Uppercross as she is compared to Mary and the two Musgrove maidens; her position as an unmarried woman past youthful bloom – a spinster – is also taken for granted by the family and seemingly Anne herself, despite the manifold evidence that she would suit

marriage and domesticity so well. With the arrival in the neighborhood of Captain Wentworth, an eligible bachelor, everyone automatically assumes this news will mostly be interesting to the Musgrove girls, never even seeming to imagine that he might be interested in Anne despite her being more suited to his age. In their eyes, she will remain unwed forever, and Anne does little to counteract this assumption. Austen's oldest heroine at twenty-seven when the novel starts, Anne prefers to play country dances on the piano in order to facilitate dancing for young couples of the Musgroves and Hayters at Uppercross rather than to dance herself. Quite famously, "To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love" was the opinion of the scheming mothers in *Pride and Prejudice*, yet Anne has removed herself from this opportunity for flirtation and courtship that weaved into all of Austen's other novels (*P&P* 11). She seems largely disinterested in the attentions of any man besides Wentworth, a position she expresses later as "Their union ... could not divide her more from other men, than their final separation" (Per. 181). Even the ill-judging Lady Russell picked up on this several years prior when Anne turned down the man who became her brother-in-law; she then "began now to have the anxiety which borders on hopelessness for Anne's being tempted, by some man of talents and independence, to enter a state for which she held her to be peculiarly fitted by her warm affections and domestic habits" (Per. 28-9). Lady Russell is also clearly correct that Anne is well-suited to fulfill the demands of married life. When her nephew injures his collarbone, Anne takes charge, displaying how well she could run a household:

It was an afternoon of distress, and Anne had every thing to do at once –the apothecary to send for –the father to have pursued and informed –the mother to support and keep from hysterics –the servants to control –the youngest child to banish, and the poor suffering one to attend and soothe; –besides sending, as soon as she recollected it, proper notice to

the other house, which brought her an accession rather of frightened, enquiring companions, than of very useful assistants (*Per.* 50-1)

Here, she is acting as the surrogate mother of the house in the place of her sister who cannot cope with the crisis. Mary's ineptitude for her role as wife, mother, and house manager only highlights Anne's own aptitude for it, despite the fact that she believes – and acts – as if that domestic life is out of her reach.

Not only are Anne's personality features shown through her relationship with her sister, but also an opportunity for Captain Wentworth's finest traits to be seen arises because of the sister of his friend, Captain Harville's sister Fanny, even though she died before the events of this novel take place. She was engaged to Harville and Wentworth's friend, Captain James Benwick, and to satisfy her parents, they were waiting for his fortune to be made before they could wed when she died. During their stay in Lyme Regis, Captain Harville's continued mourning for Fanny's death also causes him to relate to Anne a story that affirms Captain Wentworth's character to her all over again, while providing an outsider's perspective on the heroine's love interest whose judgment will inevitably tend to be a little rose-tinted where he is concerned. When the Harvilles knew that Benwick had to be told of his fiancée's untimely death, news which they expected to crush him, Wentworth stepped in, risked trouble with the navy, and set out to reach Benwick in time to stay with him for a week after the initial blow came. Harville declares, "That's what he did, and nobody else could have saved poor James. You may think, Miss Elliot, whether he is dear to us!" (*Per.* 101). Anne speaks as much in agreement as either of them could bear in the poignant moment, but this anecdote, relayed out of grief and love for a departed sister, gives the readers an insight into just how loyal and considerate Wentworth is

without being affected by Anne; this is simply a good man, and Austen wants the reader to know that Anne's eight years of pining have not clouded her judgement to any dangerous extent.

Just as in *Pride and Prejudice*, the romantic arc of *Persuasion* is forwarded by the sister ties. To begin with, as she is so often thought of as "only Anne," this selfless heroine rarely has her own way, and her physical locations throughout the story reflect this (*Per.* 7). Nearly every one of Anne's moves is dictated in one way or another by her sisters. Her sister Elizabeth and her father's lavish spending is the impetus for the family's removal to Bath; even before she can depart for Bath, however, Mary writes pleading for Anne's presence in order to nurse her at her home in Uppercross, three miles from their family home of Kellynch, and Elizabeth is only to plain that "nobody will want her in Bath" (*Per.* 32). This sets in motion the entire plot, for if Anne had not been a resident of Uppercross Cottage, she would not have been thrust back into Captain Wentworth's life, who also was drawn back to the neighborhood by his own relationship with his sister Mrs. Croft and her husband. At a key turning point in the book, Anne is included in the party to Lyme Regis on account of her status as Mary's sister and indispensable companion, and she is sent away again on account of Mary's jealousy. Even earlier in her life, Anne never went to London because her sister deliberately excluded her from her traveling plans, which prevented her from becoming acquainted with Mr. Elliot in his youth which undoubtedly would have helped to form her opinion of his duplicitous character much sooner, preventing some of the misunderstandings with Wentworth in the runup to his proposal. If it were not for Mary's hypochondriac need for a sisterly companion, Anne might have spent the rest of her life being passed around the family, ever pining for the love of her youth.

Once he is back in town, Captain Wentworth's interest in marriage, and the type of person he would prefer, is established through a recorded private conversation with Mrs. Croft

who is clearly trying to pry into her younger brother's affairs. He jokes with her, "Yes, here I am, Sophia, quite ready to make a foolish match," but then the narratorial voice sneakily tells us, "Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts, when he more seriously described the woman he should wish to meet with. "A strong mind, with sweetness of manner," made the first and last of his description" (*Per.* 58). Outside of Anne Elliot's own purview, Austen is establishing the fact that Wentworth indeed is intending to settle down soon, and she simultaneously gives the readers the hint that the possibility of him renewing his attentions to Anne is not quite as hopeless as Anne herself had been led to believe by both his rather cold greeting upon their reunion and the unflattering report which Mary brought to her that he had said something along the lines of "You were so altered he should not have known you again" (*Per.* 57). Indeed, in the beginning of the very next chapter after this scene, returning to Anne's thoughts, the reader gets her sorrowful opinion that they were "worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement" (*Per.* 60). Yet, from this unusual glimpse into his private life in his sister's home, it is clear that the neglected Miss Elliot might still have more power over him than even he is aware of, whatever his own thoughts of her lost power may be. Moreover, his preference for a strong, sensible woman may even be attributed to the example that his sister makes; Mrs. Croft is quite honestly the only woman in the novel other than Anne that also fits the pithy description of Wentworth's ideal woman. Similar to how Fitzwilliam Darcy learns from his sister how to take care of women, Wentworth presumably learned from Mrs. Croft, who seems to be the elder of the two siblings, how to value a truly capable woman such as Anne Elliot. Thus, Mrs. Croft shapes the romantic plot by communicating to the reader Wentworth's intentions and by influencing to some degree the ultimate choice Wentworth makes.

Beyond augmenting and highlighting Anne's sisterly estrangement, the Musgrove girls drastically affect the plot of the novel. Wentworth seems to be repeatedly drawn to Uppercross – and back into Anne's circle – largely by the gaiety of Louisa and Henrietta. Feeding off of each other's energy, their youthful enthusiasm for all things bright and beautiful provides a cover for Anne and Wentworth to slowly become acquainted again without the attention of the entire group, even as the scorned man, out of "angry pride," attempts to attach himself to Louisa, despite much unfounded speculation on Mary's part that he prefers Henrietta (*Per.* 226). Louisa is distinctly marked out for him, especially after Henrietta's relationship with her mother's sister's son resurfaces, and an early example of Louisa's peculiar plot influence can be seen in how she inadvertently facilitates Anne's understanding of the newly returned Wentworth. The residents of Uppercross and Captain Wentworth were out for a long walk with the unexpressed purpose of visiting Charles Hayter, Henrietta's intended, at Winthrop; when the party split up, Henrietta and her brother headed for Winthrop, Louisa and Wentworth walked about in conversation, and Anne and Mary sat down to rest. Soon, Anne, by this time left alone by a restless Mary, could overhear the unseen Louisa and Wentworth discussing some rather revealing subjects; in this conversation, Wentworth delivers a speech with "very painful import" to Anne:

Your sister is an amiable creature; but *yours* is the character of decision and firmness, I see. If you value her conduct or happiness, infuse as much of your own spirit into her as you can. But this, no doubt, you have been always doing. 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. Every body may sway it; let those who would be happy be firm. (*Per.* 81-2).

From this, Anne painfully believes she can see in full how Wentworth now views her character – weak and far too amenable. She also recognizes that he may not be entirely indifferent to her based on his seeming interest in Louisa’s report that Anne had refused to marry her brother Charles before he had married Mary. This conversation brought about by Louisa’s flirtations reveals so much to Anne’s sensitive heart at this stage in her romance.

In the same chapter, another crucial moment in the evolving romance of Wentworth and Anne involves his sister again. On the walking party’s return home from Winthrop, they bump into Admiral and Mrs. Croft out for a pleasure drive through the country. As they were heading home through Uppercross, the Crofts kindly offer a seat in their gig to any of the ladies who wished to ride the rest of the way. Characteristically, the Miss Musgroves are “not at all tired”, and the reader is given to understand that Mary’s pride gets in the way of her own comfort; no one, including Mary, seems to be paying the least bit of attention to the fatigued Anne until, after Wentworth himself says something unrecorded to his sister, Mrs. Croft entreats Anne in particular to join them. As they will not be satisfied until she joins them after what was no doubt a hint from Wentworth, Anne very shortly finds herself deposited in the carriage by Wentworth’s “will and his hands,” a delightful little zeugma (*Per.* 84). Coupled with the conversation she overheard earlier between Wentworth and Louisa, Anne contemplates his actions with a sense of sorrowful conviction:

She understood him. He could not forgive her, – but he could not be unfeeling. Though condemning her for the past, and considering it with high and unjust resentment, though perfectly careless of her, and though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief. It was a remainder of former sentiment; it was an impulse of pure, though unacknowledged friendship; it was a proof of his own

warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed. (*Per.* 84-5).

Here, Anne believes herself to still be divided from him by her past refusal, yet without any reason to glory in this. In her eyes, Wentworth has shown his caring nature despite resenting her previous reversal and lack of firmness. Her own sister's complete neglect of her care, along with the rest of the party's self-absorption, and his easy relationship with his sister created this opportunity for Wentworth to intervene on her behalf, communicating so much to the wounded heart of the heroine.

Sisters govern the ending of the romantic arc as the novel moves with Anne to Bath. Once he is fortunately freed from any obligation to Louisa, caused by the extent of a courtship motivated by resentment, by the announcement of her engagement to Captain Benwick, Captain Wentworth is determined to end this romantic intrigue one way or another after his feelings are reawakened in the aftermath of Louisa's injury. He is supplied with an excuse to pursue after Anne in Bath, where she was greeted only tolerably by Elizabeth and her father after so many months of separation, by the removal of his sister and her husband to that tourist hub. In this concluding portion of the book, the late Miss Harville is at the center of two critical conversations. The first takes place between Anne and Captain Wentworth, freshly embarrassed by his feelings, at the concert in Bath when, to address the elephant in the room, Wentworth brings up the news of the engagement of Louisa Musgrove and Captain Benwick. In offering most freely his opinion of the match, Wentworth admits, "I regard Louisa Musgrove as a very amiable, sweet-tempered girl, and not deficient in understanding; but Benwick is something more. ... Fanny Harville was a very superior creature; and his attachment to her was indeed attachment. A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman! – He

ought not – he does not" (*Per.* 172-3). The effect of this speech upon Anne is clear. Once their conversation is interrupted by the stir her snobbish relations make upon the arrival of her noble yet worthless cousins, the Dalrymples, Anne is free to rejoice inwardly:

His choice of subjects, his expressions, and still more his manner and look, had been such as she could see in only one light. His opinion of Louisa Musgrove's inferiority, an opinion which he had seemed solicitous to give, his wonder at Captain Benwick, his feelings as to a first, strong attachment ... all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least ... She could not contemplate the change as implying less. – He must love her.

(*Per.* 175)

Anne, after spending the entire novel evaluating his feelings towards her as laced with resentment and anger, is finally given a glimmer of real hope that they may be reconciled after all they have suffered, eight years of separation, resentment, and misunderstandings. Caused by the news of one sister figure taking the former fiancé of another, this conversation changes everything for Anne, though Wentworth's spirits are dampened by the false threat of a rival in the figure of her weaselly cousin, Mr. Elliot.

A few chapters later, the second conversation revolving around Fanny Harville between Anne again and Captain Harville completes the romantic arc in the most climactic moment of the novel. Harville, clearly still mourning the loss of his sister, unburdens his heart to Anne concerning a miniature of Benwick originally painted at Miss Harville's request that he has now been commissioned to have framed for Benwick's new fiancé. Sorrowing, he says, "Poor Fanny! She would not have forgotten him so soon!" (*Per.* 218). Anne, most feelingly, agrees, and ventures to add that no woman who "truly loved" would have either. This precipitates a friendly debate over whether men or women love with more strength and constancy. Emotional, Harville,

despite originating on the side of his sister's constancy, cannot help but defend his own gender's ability to love as he himself is a most devoted husband, father, brother, and even friend. Kind, generous-hearted Anne is quick to affirm this with only one amendment:

I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as – if I may be allowed the expression, so long as you have an object. I mean, while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it), is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone. (*Per.* 221).

All the while they were having this conversation, a most conflicted Wentworth, positioned nearby at a desk undertaking for his friend's sake the task concerning the portrait of Benwick for Louisa, has been eavesdropping. How important must it be to him how highly Anne esteems the capacity of men to love? This is a man who clearly loves his own sister, and no doubt he is moved greatly by Harville's affection and esteem for his lost sister. A sensitive man, he cannot but see the implications Anne's words promoting the constancy of women in hopeless cases might have for their own relationship. This all culminates in him proposing again, overcoming his jealousies and doubts, in undoubtedly Austen's most overtly romantic passage. Affirming the love of sisters, this entire interlude, and indeed possibly their blissful marriage, would not have happened were it not for the strong bond between these naval men and their sisters.

Even after her marriage, sisters still have a role to play for the new Mrs. Wentworth, validating how family is yet an important tie for Anne despite their consistently neglectful treatment of her. Upon hearing the news of her engagement, Elizabeth, who had hardly deigned to speak to Wentworth, predictably reacted with cold apathy while Mary gloried in the ego-boost

the match gave her without really celebrating for her as Anne finally can step into the role she suits so well. These unnatural sisters coupled with her father's conceit and total want of sense cause Anne's only real lament about her match:

Anne ... had no other alloy to the happiness of her prospects than what arose from the consciousness of having no relations to bestow on him which a man of sense could value. There she felt her own inferiority very keenly. ... to have no family to receive and estimate him properly, nothing of respectability, of harmony, of good will to offer in return for all the worth and all the prompt welcome which met her in his brothers and sisters, was a source of as lively pain as her mind could well be sensible of under circumstances of otherwise strong felicity (*Per.* 235).

Anne ranks the value of family high enough to recognize the deficiency in her own in the way they will be likely to treat her husband throughout their married life. Yet, in escaping her position of reliance upon those sisters for her comforts and happiness, she must feel a "melancholy relief" as John Mullan puts it; "Anne Elliot, finds happiness *despite* the sororal ties" (Mullan 68; May 344). Neither Elizabeth or Mary ever did anything to consciously forward Anne's relationship with the Captain, and for so long, Anne had been deprived of the warmth a sisterly relationship can hold. However, as in the cases of Elizabeth Bennet and Georgiana Darcy or Catherine Morland and the older and wiser Eleanor Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, Anne upon her marriage gains a genuinely loving and sensible sister in Mrs. Croft, of whom Anne believed herself to be a favorite over the Musgrove girls long before her engagement (*Per.* 117; Dabundo). Mrs. Croft will certainly become the sister that Anne never had. Presumably, Mr. Wentworth's wife was also sweet to Anne as well as evidenced by the plurality of "sisters" in the quote above. In the face of the uncertainty that comes with her husband's profession, Anne will

hopefully be able to find a worthy sororal community for support with these sisters-in-law, alongside old friends such as Lady Russell and Mrs. Smith, even as she is able to distance herself from her own toxic relations. Thus, her marriage creates a stronger sororal tie for her than she had ever known prior, cementing that type of relationship's importance and value.

In much the same that *Pride and Prejudice* operates, *Persuasion* relies on the sister tie to function as a narrative. Themes of loneliness are exaggerated and expressed by the sisters in Anne's life, while criticisms lobbed at the mindset of the aristocracy can be seen by how the novel treats the Elliot sisters compared with the ever amiable Crofts as well as in the marriages that are sanctioned by the end. Both Anne and Wentworth's finer qualities are shown in their interactions with their respective siblings, establishing their worthy natures that suit one another so well. From start to finish, the entire romance is orchestrated by the movements, actions, and emotions of sisters to reunite the divided couple both geographically and emotionally. Fulfilling the ache that observing the intimacy of the Musgrove sisters caused, Anne gains worthy sisters upon her nuptials, affirming the sisterly relationship in the same manner as the Bingley-Darcy double wedding. This novel, in which Anne affirms the great potential strength of women's feelings, certainly supports the claim that sisters are so crucial to its unfolding and the emotional well-being of its heroine (Dabundo).

### Chapter III – *Sense & Sensibility*: Sterling Sisters

Compared with the first two novels examined, *Sense and Sensibility* is more overtly focused on the relationship between Elinor and Marianne. This can be seen even in the way culture depicts the novel; a simple google search reveals that a vast number of modern book covers feature two girls attired in anything that remotely resembles 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century European fashion. Even the posters for both of the most popular screen adaptations, Ang Lee's 1995 film and the 2008 BBC produced miniseries, display the actresses playing the elder Dashwood sisters together. Originally titled *Elinor and Marianne*, the novel's storyline follows these sisters' trajectory more than any other thread in the novel, as one scholar writes, "the action and the emotional structure of *Sense and Sensibility* ... are plotted along the connection between Elinor and Marianne—their differences and divisions, the threats to their bonds, and their reconciliation" (Thompson). The most climactic moments – Elinor's unburdening of her heart to Marianne upon the news of Lucy's secret engagement, Marianne's illness and subsequent repentant speech to Elinor – involve how those two sisters relate to each other and grow closer ere the novel is completed, bolstered by the plot points created by the romances afoot which are so completely subservient to the sister arc. As for those romances, Edward Ferrars is barely present in most of the story, and Colonel Brandon's affection is not required until the very last chapter; the emphasis is evidently not on these romances. This is manifest to most readers, and the scholarship of the novel reflects this. Yet, more about sisters is at play here. This text is

littered with sisterly characters outside of the central pair – such as Fanny Dashwood and the Steele sisters – that follow the same pattern seen previously; they drive the plot and highlight the amiable qualities of the Dashwoods and their sound sisterly friendship via comparison, while developing one of the central themes of the novel surrounding questions of the proper morality of money. Through its central focus on sisters combined with all the influence of all the supporting cast of sisters, *Sense and Sensibility* unequivocally supports the thesis that sisters are supreme in the novels of Jane Austen as the Dashwoods prove their golden bond.

The plot of *Sense and Sensibility* is set in motion by the actions of the heroines' half-brother and his wife, John and Fanny Dashwood. Unfortunately for the Dashwood sisters, John is the anti-Darcy, and this drastically changes the storyline of the novel. Unlike Mr. Darcy who took care of his sister's needs and wants, John Dashwood, despite inheriting nearly everything from their father to whom he promised to aid his sisters, cannot spare any funds for his sisters' support or dowries. Motivated by greed and social consciousness at every turn, Dashwood's failure with respect to his sisters severely dampens their future prospects. He values his sisters only so far as they can puff up his family ego and wealth through the possibility of a good match, a prospect he does nothing to aid in. Thus, he evaluates them purely through a shallow, externally focused lens; in a spectacularly misdirected speech, he says to the wealthy suitor Colonel Brandon:

Poor Marianne! ... she has not such good health as her sister,- she is very nervous,- she has not Elinor's constitution;- and one must allow that there is something very trying to a young woman who has been a beauty in the loss of her personal attractions. You would not think it, perhaps, but Marianne was remarkably handsome a few months ago; quite as handsome as Elinor. Now you see it is all gone. (*S&S* 223).

Here, Dashwood is proving once again to the reader and no doubt to his own future brother-in-law that his character is deficient in true delicacy. One can hardly imagine Mr. Darcy, who only ever spoke with praise of his sister and guarded the world from her private troubles, saying something so calloused to an outsider about Georgiana. Marianne has been heartbroken and sorely used by a man, and all he has to say is a lament for the loss of her marketable bloom. Eddleman argues, “Brothers who value sisters for their integrity, talents, and innate value as humans rarely comment on their sister’s looks. . . . In contrast, John Dashwood, an egotistical, mercenary, and extremely class-conscious brother, comments freely and callously on his sisters’ beauty” (Eddleman). Dashwood fails mightily in the good brother test, and this leaves the Dashwood women to shift for themselves fairly short after the death of their husband and father. Had John Dashwood been the decent brother he ought to have been, these sisters never would have been forced to leave their home at Norland Park in Sussex, or at least he could have supplemented their income enough to afford something more like what they were accustomed to, rather than making the move, unassisted, all the way to a much smaller abode in Devonshire in the estate of a cousin of Mrs. Dashwood.

On his own, John Dashwood might have eventually felt guilty enough to assist his sisters, but Mrs. John Dashwood’s influence barred that from ever happening. In the wake of his father’s death, John truly contemplated giving his three sisters each a £1,000 which would have indeed done much to bolster their finances. Austen sardonically writes, “He then really thought himself equal to it,” highlighting the pain this thought causes him (*S&S* 7). However, as soon as Fanny, whom Austen describes as “a strong caricature of himself; - more narrow-minded and selfish,” (*S&S* 7) began to work upon him, John, “cold-hearted” and self-interested, did not require much persuasion to give this plan up entirely. By expressing outrage that he would rob their only son

of such a large sum, questioning if their father was even in his right mind or had money in mind, and declaring annuities to be tiresome things, she slowly bends her husband towards her perspective. Revealingly, she even has the audacity to denigrate the claim his father's daughters have upon him by arguing that they really are not even siblings, "What brother on earth would do half so much for his sisters, even if *really* his sisters! And as it is – only half blood!" (*S&S* 11). A scholar sums this up by saying "the brother's wife ...defines these sisters as intruders"; Fanny does everything she can to undermine the family connection, prioritizing wealth and position over familial tie and thereby providing one of the novel's clearest indictments on a character with those values (Ford 109). Since her husband appears to be a rather weak man, she certainly could have used her influence for their sake shifting the blame to both of them. Instead, her greedy machinations prevent her sisters-in-law from receiving a healthy boost to their finances, exiling them to Barton Cottage as we have seen. A financial boost to their dowries also would have been very welcome for their romantic prospects since their small fortunes were impediments for both Elinor and Marianne's potential marriages in various ways.

Another way that Fanny Dashwood shapes the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* is that she is the initial connection between Edward Ferrars and Elinor. Shortly after they are introduced at Norland, it is clear to everyone that Edward and Elinor have formed an emotional attachment, and Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne even come to expect this match will take place without really considering the financial obstacles to its fulfillment. This love affair becomes a key factor in Elinor and Marianne's storyline; it highlights for Marianne the different attitude that Elinor has towards love and emotionality that is so central to the novel's didactic intent to teach this tempestuous heroine to be more sensible like her elder sister. Essentially, Austen has Elinor fall in love in order for her behavior to become an example to Marianne. Later on, Elinor's advice to

Marianne about exerting her self-control where Willoughby is concerned would seem hollow in comparison if she herself had not demonstrated such will power. Not only does Mrs. John Dashwood bring about this relationship by bringing these characters to live under the same roof, Fanny herself also shares in the responsibility of dividing the couple, leaving Edward's secret and lamented engagement to Lucy Steele aside. In chapter four, once she had become "uneasy" about the relationship between her brother and her sister-in-law, Fanny aggressively took the first opportunity to tell Mrs. Dashwood of "her brother's great expectations, of Mrs. Ferrars's resolution that both her sons should marry well, and of the danger attending any young woman who attempted to *draw him in*" (S&S 24). Her very clear insinuations anger this fragile, recent widow enough to rush the removal of her family from Norland, and Fanny never relents from her opposition to this marriage. In her opinion, Edward is the eldest and must marry money whether he likes it or not, and Elinor does not meet her standards. Thus, Fanny Dashwood was narratively responsible for sending the Dashwood girls into Devonshire with a relatively impoverished financial situation and a thwarted heart in the eldest daughter which forms the basis of the novel's exploration of sense and self-control between the two main sisters.

A sister-like figure in this novel who casts a great shadow over the plot even though she is never actually present – or even alive – during the narrative is Mrs. Eliza Brandon, whom Colonel Brandon refers to as "my unfortunate sister" though she was actually his childhood sweetheart who was forced into marriage with his older brother for financial reasons even as she and the Colonel were on the verge of eloping themselves (S&S 196). The novel strongly implies that the perceived resemblance of Marianne's personality to this woman not only seems to have initially sparked Colonel Brandon's attraction and love for Marianne, but moreover, as Knuth Klenck points out, Brandon is able to fully understand and sympathize with Marianne's jilted

position once she has been heartbroken by Willoughby's abandonment ("You Must be"). Emphasizing the moral theme about money, her life ending prematurely in a sponging-house (a short term debtor's prison) serves as a cautionary tale for those who wish to prioritize wealth over love and virtue. Also, it is her illegitimate daughter and Brandon's subsequent ward, Eliza Williams whom Willoughby had seduced, impregnated, and abandoned all ere he was introduced to the Dashwoods. This transgression and its resulting disinheritance once Mrs. Smith learns of it is the principle wedge that drives Willoughby away from Marianne forever. No doubt, another woman totally unconnected to the principle characters of the novel could have been seduced by Willoughby to the same effect, but because of Colonel Brandon's connection to the situation, the Dashwoods and thus the readers are also given an account of his unprincipled behavior from a source that makes sense. Marianne's life is forever changed because of this, and her relationship with Elinor grows from the lessons she learns in the aftermath of the truth being revealed. Austen uses this tragic sister-in-law's life to change the course of events of the novel while pointing out the potential repercussions of an improper attitude towards money.

A very tangible way that sisters shape the plot of the novel can be seen in the way both Lady Middleton and her sister Mrs. Palmer provide the settings for many of the novel's important events. Much of Marianne's romance with Willoughby, and the foundation of her ultimate relationship with Colonel Brandon, takes place in the bounds of Barton Park due to the endless zeal attributed to Lady Middleton and her husband for company. Allowing them to leave behind the difficult season they weathered in London, Mrs. Palmer's affability and pregnancy provides the easiest escape for Elinor and Marianne after all the Willoughby drama as they are invited to travel with Mrs. Jennings to Cleveland, the home of the Palmers, to visit Charlotte in her confinement. This estate, the home of the Palmers, shelters some of perhaps the most

climactic moments of the novel including Marianne's near-death illness, Willoughby's confession to Elinor, and further proofs of Colonel Brandon's love for the self-punishing Marianne. Indeed, Mrs. Jennings's eager interest in the marital state of the Dashwood sisters can even be traced back to the fact that her own daughters have both been married off. If these sisters were not paired off, quite possibly Elinor and Marianne would not have had the opportunity to visit London where the total severance of the romance between Willoughby and Marianne is cemented as well as the public reveal of Edward's engagement to Lucy Steele accompanied by all its awkward scenes between Edward, Elinor, Colonel Brandon, and Lucy herself. There communication was fully restored between the Dashwood sisters. One could argue that Mrs. Jennings would be a meddling neighbor no matter the state of her own daughters' prospects, but if they hypothetically were yet unmarried, she certainly would be less likely to chaperone other attractive and smart young women in society who could steal suitors from her own daughters who seem either cold or ridiculous in comparison.

Lucy Steele is yet another sister who dramatically affects the narrative structure of *Sense and Sensibility*. Even before the reader is aware of her existence, she already exerts influence over the novel by having a prior claim to Edward's hand that makes it entirely impossible for him to propose to Elinor. A visit he paid to her in Plymouth afforded him the opportunity to visit the transplanted Dashwood family in Devonshire, an unsatisfactory incident that only served to confound all of them about what exactly his intentions and hesitations were, even though no one doubted he truly loved Elinor. Most significantly, Lucy's vindictive choice to reveal to Elinor her engagement depresses this forbearing young woman, robbing her of any hope that they will be wed. This knowledge is significant to Elinor and Marianne's arc once again as it adds to the secrecy that exists between them at this stage in the novel where Marianne is being very

uncommunicative about the status of her relationship with Willoughby. Marianne herself points out “Nay, Elinor this reproach from *you* – you who have confidence in no one!” (S&S 161). This breach was ultimately repaired once the engagement became public, but the tension added greatly strained their relationship. Of course, most happily, Lucy also changes the ending of the story by weaseling her way into marriage with the new heir, Robert, thus freeing Edward and Elinor to be wed after he travels to Barton to propose before she had even heard the news. Her malignant presence forever shapes the future of the Dashwood sisters.

As in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, Austen uses sister characters to better illuminate the traits of her heroines in this novel organically. A clear example of this can be seen early on when Fanny Dashwood first arrives at Norland after the funeral of her father-in-law to take possession of the family estate with great “indelicacy”. Thus, his freshly widowed wife and fatherless daughters have barely had a chance to gain mastery over their grief, and Fanny’s eagerness to parade around as mistress of her new grand home could hardly be palatable to the bereft. Before the end of even one chapter, this selfish woman’s unwelcome intrusion presents the first opportunity in the novel for Elinor to display her position as the prudent advisor in family. Mrs. Dashwood, from whom Marianne reportedly derives a large portion of her characteristic sensibility, was on the verge of instigating a break with their brother John by flying away from Norland in a grief-stricken rage at Fanny, but Elinor wisely shows her the impropriety and impracticalness of quitting their home of eleven years before they have even found a new situation for themselves. This chapter also sows the seeds of the central theme reflected in the title of the novel when Elinor’s handling of grief is compared to her sister’s, “Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could struggle, she could exert herself. She could consult her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with every proper attention;

and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance” (S&S 9). The point here is that these are things Elinor has learned but not Marianne or even their mother. Had Fanny been more considerate or even kind, this early chance for Elinor’s character to shine and to be contrasted with Marianne’s would have been lost.

To highlight their loving relationship even in the midst of their difficulties, the Dashwood sisters as a unit are compared rather implicitly and explicitly against the broken nature of the Steele sisters’s relationship. On the surface, they share some similarities of situation with the Dashwood girls. All of these sisters are unmarried with some sort of claim upon their hearts – whether truly one of love or mere avarice and folly. Both sets are arguably trying to live above their means, or at least in a sphere that requires deeper pockets than either possess, though the Dashwood sisters were raised in the very circle they now frequent with reduced finances while the Steeles were bred in a lower strata of society. These similarities of situation serve to invite the reader to examine the character differences between them, and in their very first meeting with the Dashwoods, an ugly comparison is brought forth. Very quickly, it is apparent that the elder Miss Steele frequently embarrasses the social climbing Lucy with her vulgar manner and topics of conversation. After Miss Steele blabbers at length about suitors and their many fascinating prospects, Lucy cries out, “Lord! Anne ...you can talk of nothing but beaux;- you will make Miss Dashwood believe you think of nothing else” (S&S 119). This unbecoming manner of Lucy’s to berate her older sister in front of people outside of her family does not escape the notice of the perceptive Elinor. No doubt, Elinor has her concerns for Marianne’s behavior, but she is careful to avoid criticizing her publicly. For example, when Elinor learns through Mrs. Jennings’s snooping that Marianne and Willoughby toured alone the house he expects to inherit, Allenham, instead of riding around in his curricule the day of the thwarted trip to Whitwell, she

waits until they have left the dining-room and can talk privately to inquire into the validity of such a report and, upon its confirmation, to censure Marianne for her lack of propriety (S&S 68). This is motivated by the desire not only to shield Marianne from stirring up more of the gossip she creates about herself and Willoughby on account of the public and passionate nature of their courtship but also to spare her feelings from the shame that her sister publicly questioning her would no doubt create. Seemingly more motivated by a desire to avoid embarrassment herself for having such an unpolished sister, Lucy does not display any of Elinor's thoughtful delicacy for her sister's feelings and reputation. This type of interaction between the Steeles occurs so often that later in the novel, Elinor thinks to herself that "Lucy's sharp reprimand, which now, as on many occasions, though it did not give much sweetness to the manners of one sister, was of advantage in governing those of the other" (S&S 207). Neither appear to advantage in these moments. What a clear way to highlight in comparison Elinor's own sweetness of manner towards her sometimes ungovernable sister.

A strong contrast can also be seen between these outbursts of Lucy's and a testy one of Marianne's. At a dinner party given by Fanny Dashwood with the dreaded Mrs. Ferrars in attendance, those two women pointedly praise the work of a supposed and absent rival of Elinor's for Edward's hand in marriage, provoking this reaction in Marianne:

Marianne could not bear this. She was already greatly displeased with Mrs. Ferrars; and such ill-timed praise of another, at Elinor's expense, though she had not any notion of what was principally meant by it, provoked her immediately to say, with warmth,

"This is admiration of a very particular kind! – what is Miss Morton to us? – who knows, or who cares, for her? – it is Elinor of whom *we* think and speak." (S&S 221-2).

Upsetting the rules of civility much like Lucy's reprimanding of Anne, Marianne here is motivated by entirely different feelings to speak out; Lucy was outraged at her sister – Marianne was outraged on *behalf* of her sister. Though she ultimately injures Elinor more by highlighting the intended slight so forcibly for the whole party to see, even Colonel Brandon admires her for it as the narrator informs us, “he noticed only what was amiable in it, the affectionate heart which could not bear to see a sister slighted in the smallest point” (S&S 222). Marianne is displaying her characteristically emotional scheme to social interactions, yet even with her faulty methodology, her heart is in a purer place than Lucy's, cold and scheming, ever could attest to as she truly loves and cares for her sister even when they are not in perfect agreement.

Another comparison that is flattering for the Dashwood sisters can be made in the way these sister pairs handle the privacy of the other. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Elinor is questioned concerning the state of Willoughby and Marianne's relationship by the Middletons, Mrs. Jennings, and even the ever-respectful Colonel Brandon. Before the imagined engagement has even been officially announced, let alone relayed to her own expectant family, Mrs. Jennings goes so far as to ask Elinor, “Pray, when are they to be married?”, and Elinor tells her very directly that “nothing would surprise me more than to hear of their being going to be married” (S&S 172-3). She is attempting to prevent Mrs. Jennings from spreading more rumors about their match and refrains from going into the full details of her fears concerning her sister's feelings and the unsettled existence of such an engagement. Here, she does what she can to shield Marianne herself from much of this painful inquiry. True, Elinor is the more forthright and hopeful for a match with Colonel Brandon; however, this was motivated out of a respect for him and a concern for his affections, which are so obviously engaged with her sister. But, in no situation does either Elinor or Marianne gossip about each other's love lives to greedy ears

outside their family party. In clear contrast, Anne Steele breaks the confidence that Lucy entrusted her with by revealing the secret engagement with Edward to the worst possible subjects, Lucy's snooty prospective in-laws. Not accidentally, as the 2008 BBC adaptation depicts, but intentionally does Anne make this choice, mistakenly believing that "they are all so fond of Lucy, to be sure they will make no difficulty about it" with catastrophic results (*S&S* 242). Breaking faith with Lucy, her loose tongue managed to get them both ejected from Fanny's home and to disinherit Edward as he abides by his word to Lucy. Showing that she also has not yet learned her lesson, Anne still has no qualms about eavesdropping on a very private interview between Lucy and Edward about their future plans now that everything has been unfolded, and she even relays it all to Elinor without a shred of shame. When Elinor shames these actions strongly "how could you behave so unfairly by your sister?", Nancy responds, "Oh, la! there is nothing in that. I only stood at the door, and heard what I could. And I am sure Lucy would have done just the same by me" (*S&S* 257). These sisters indulge in "mutual espionage" as John Mullan puts it which horrifies Elinor (Mullan 62). Elinor and Marianne would never behave in such a faithless way towards each other.

Ultimately, the most significant way the Dashwood sisters are shown in a superior light is seen in the blatant way that the Steele sisters manipulate their social superiors for their own advantage. From their first entrance into the novel, Anne and Lucy are shown to be willing to flatter Lady Middleton excessively about her chief source of pride, her spoiled and rowdy children. Lucy especially, recognizing her precarious position in upper-class society, angles to win the favor of her affable and more affluent cousin Mrs. Jennings, a mission quickly transferred to the Ferrars crew once she has been finally introduced to them. Dabundo summarizes these sisters thus:

Seekers of fashion and societal approval, the wittily named Steele sisters, who have nothing of the stricture and mettle of principle about them. They are the unsteeled sisters ...they are, at least, eminently practical, even if unprincipled. They seek wealth and the security they assume will accompany it, not the happiness the novel's protagonists desire. (Dabundo).

It is money and status alone that motivates them which leads to them brown-nosing Fanny as well. In contrast, the Dashwood sisters, principled and honest, are far from being flatterers, and thus, they have not won a particular share of favor from either Fanny Dashwood or Lady Middleton. To be sure, Elinor, naturally guarded, tries to be polite where she can, but she is not overly excessive in her praise of things she does not truly care for. Marianne is even further from this to the point of being barely civil and letting all the social niceties fall to Elinor. Neither would either of the Dashwood sisters marry for mercenary motives alone even as Elinor is quick to caution Marianne against a total disregard for the necessity of money even as it is proved that Marianne's "competence" is double that of Elinor's (*S&S* 90).

Indeed, this love of money and the social perks that can be obtained with wealth appears to be at the heart of all the other sister relationships in the novel which are all so emotionally strained and estranged, and the Dashwood sisters are the only ones unaffected. The Steeles sisters clearly do not relate to each other based on affection alone, for Lucy is far too concerned with how Anne affect her own future finances. It is even hard to imagine that she will be inviting Nancy to spend a lot of time with her once she marries into the sphere she desired. Fanny and John Dashwood certainly only seem to care about money, never treating any of their sisters with true warmth and affection. Even within her own family, Fanny never seems concerned about what would make her brother truly happy; she sees that Edward is in love with Elinor, but she

steadfastly opposes the match until the bitter end because she wants him to catch an heiress if he can. Once his engagement to Lucy is revealed, her quarrel with it is not that Edward does not love Lucy or that Lucy is unbearable – indeed, Mrs. John Dashwood quite likes Lucy before the secret is out – but that Lucy does not have enough money to satisfy hers and Mrs. Ferrars’s plans for him, plans which evidently would never have suited this man who prefers a quieter life. The other Ferrars sibling, Robert the dandy, also is infected with this lopsided value system and proves quite the traitorous brother by stealing the fiancé of Edward without knowing that this is really doing his elder brother a huge service. Even Mrs. Palmer, who is so generally congenial to everyone, barely seems to have camaraderie with her sister the cold Lady Middleton. None of these relationships seem worth having, and this is where Elinor and Marianne’s true sisterly bond stands apart.

The ending of *Sense and Sensibility* underscores the remarkable nature of Elinor and Marianne’s close bond, rewarding their integrity after they have fully reconciled in the wake of Marianne’s illness. May writes, “Sibling love is a powerful force, but in and of itself an ambiguous one, and finally not a determinant of essences. Essence, for Austen, is moral character, which plays itself out in the tangled web of family relations, but always transcends them” (May 350). As these sisters are the most morally centered and loving pair within the novel, especially once Marianne laments her mistakes since “where Marianne felt that she had injured, no reparation could be too much for her to make,” their future bliss reflects this (*S&S* 248). Unlike the conclusions of the previous two novels, neither Elinor nor Marianne gain a worthy sister-in-law in marriage; Elinor is technically now shackled with Lucy as a sister-in-law as her tie to Fanny is doubled, yet the novel makes it clear that these two will never be hospitable to Elinor. Indeed, they as new sisters can hardly stand each other, as Austen snarkily writes of

their future, “setting aside the jealousies and ill-will continually subsisting between Fanny and Lucy, in which their husbands of course took a part, as well as the frequent domestic disagreements between Robert and Lucy themselves, nothing could exceed the harmony in which they all lived together” (S&S 351). The foundations these connections are built upon are not ones to foster anything like true domestic felicity; this side of the Ferrars family may have the bulk of the money, but they will never be truly happy as they love those things most. So, rather than profiting from a new sister to cherish, Elinor and Marianne’s marriages allow for them to reaffirm their own tie and live harmoniously in close proximity. The final paragraph of the novel makes this clear:

Between Barton and Delaford there was that constant communication which strong family affection would naturally dictate; and among the merits and the happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable, that, though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands (S&S 353)

With so many examples of unloving sisters in this story, it is made evident that it is both a credit, “the merits,” to the Dashwood sisters and its own reward, “the happiness,” that they manage to be so close, staving off a serious fracture; in Austen’s novels, maintaining an affectionate sororal bond is sometimes a challenge but well worth the effort. Delaford is their own “sisterly Eden” in the style of Pemberley, freed from the endless keeping up with the Joneses lifestyle away from their social climbing relatives in London.

Austen’s first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, clearly revolves around the emotional tie between two sisters, and their relationship and the plot of the narrative are affected by the sisterly figures such as Fanny Dashwood, the late Eliza Brandon, and the woman who

would become a sister-in-law as Lucy Ferrars, nee Steele. The entire premise of the story would have changed had Fanny been a generous sister-in-law once she and her husband inherited the estate, which could have easily prevented the Dashwoods from ever needing to move all the way to Barton where they meet such important characters as John Willoughby, Colonel Brandon, Mrs. Jennings, and the Steele sisters, whose marital machinations change the arc of Elinor's relationship with both Edward and Marianne. These sister characters created the opportunities for Austen's heroines' worth to be illustrated as they are contrasted with less than likeable characters. The true value of their relationship is underscored by a comparison with the chilly sibling relationships that exist within the framework of characters as these sterling sisters find lasting peace settled so close to one another in their married lives. For this to be Austen's first published novel shows that sisters always played such a prevalent role in her interests and her storytelling, an effect that spilled over into the writing of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* as we have seen.

## Conclusion

Featuring families of all daughters, these three novels by the great authoress Jane Austen are heavily reliant upon the sister relationship to function. As discussed, the narrative of her most famous work, *Pride and Prejudice*, falls apart without the numerous sister characters, whether they be sisters of affection or mere affiliation. These sisterly bonds form the bedrock that the entire story is based upon. They create opportunities for the character of the main romantic duo, such an integral element of the book, to be illustrated to each other within the story but also to the readers digesting the story. The love story of Jane Bennet and Bingley and the more spotlight-hogging romance between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy only happen because of sisters and sorority; nearly every moment in the development of the future Mr. and Mrs. Darcys' relationship is shaped by the sisters around them moving the heroine about the country and motivating her actions. Elizabeth's humbling relies on the story of Georgiana Darcy to convict her of her own blindness, which begins the process of softening her heart towards the owner of Pemberley, and sisters communicating with one another propels several plot points such as the heroic actions that allow Darcy to redeem himself in Elizabeth's eyes, leading to their marriage. Woven in with this romantic arc is an arc in the Bennet sister relationships that has its own narrative significance. As Lizzy learns to become a better sister herself, she is humbled once again through that relationship. The overriding preeminence of sisters within this novel is shown in how, in detailing the future happiness of her creatures, Austen emphasizes how they have

made matches that do not harm but preserve the sororal bond she has crafted as she compounds it by adding in Georgiana Darcy to her protagonist's circle of sorority.

Following the example set by *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's autumnal novel *Persuasion* uses a framework of sisters to support this story of love lost and regained. Devoid of any truly affectionate and supportive sororal connections which is a disastrous division in Austen's world, Anne Elliot as a result is lonely and rather emotionally isolated, a theme the novel explores in relation to the Musgrove girls. Sisters are at the heart of *Persuasion*'s criticism of the entitled and failing aristocracy as Anne and Wentworth's siblings are contrasted in the capacity of managing Kellynch-hall. The novel highlights Anne's wisdom and suitability for domestic life by placing her within her married sister's circle and comparing her, even as Wentworth's own worth is conveyed through a story related on account of the love of a brother for his sister. Once again, Austen relies on the movement and motivations of sisters to form her romantic arc, bringing the couple back together through their visits to their respective sisters. These siblings also facilitate Anne's reading of Captain Wentworth's changing heart, and the beloved sister figure of Fanny Harville engenders key moments in the resolution of the couple's reconciliation. Rectifying the hole that her estranged sisters created, Anne finds the desired sorority with Wentworth's sister and sister-in-law.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen brings sisters to center-stage as the novel chiefly follows the arc of the relationship between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, and the romances in the story happen in order to place the sisters in similar situations, allowing the moral and titular theme of sense vs. sensibility to be explored through their sisterly dynamic. Furthermore, the plot of the novel is shaped by the other sisters in their lives. Their emotional connection is tested by the actions of their avaricious siblings John and his wife Fanny which kickstarts the plot of the

novel as the Dashwood women are unceremoniously ejected from their home by that couple. Figures such as Eliza Brandon, whose life further develops the novel's warning against greed-based relationships, and the daughters of Mrs. Jennings forward the course of events as well. The rivalrous Steele sisters affect Elinor's romance subplot and thus her strained relationship with Marianne. Along with every other significant set of siblings such as Fanny Dashwood and her brothers, Lucy and Anne serve as foils to Elinor and Marianne, demonstrating that pair's ultimate superiority as they stand apart from other figures in the novel. Traversing the rocky episodes in their relationship, the Dashwood sisters are rewarded for their affectionate connection that, because its foundation is not greed or self-ambition, ends most harmoniously with them living as loving neighbors once they are each married off, using the same pattern of sororal bliss to conclude the story.

Overall, Miss Austen used the ties of sisterhood and the emotional benefit that can be derived from them to drive her novels and their romances. A testament to her own affection for her sister and confidante Cassandra, this relationship clearly interested her, felt familiar, and suited her authorial purposes as she underscored its worth. I will let Austen, writing in *Mansfield Park* about the love of Fanny Price for her brother William, give the last endorsement of the value and importance of these bonds in her fiction:

Even the conjugal tie is beneath the fraternal. Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits, have some means of enjoyment in their power, which no subsequent connections can supply; and it must be by a long and unnatural estrangement, by a divorce which no subsequent connection can justify, if such precious remains of the earliest attachments are ever entirely outlived. (*M.P.* 217)

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