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Morality and Obligation: Duty in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

In Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility*, duty is not just a recurring theme but a central and significant aspect that is both implicitly and explicitly explored. The author's treatment of duty, though not consistently favorable, is a critical element that weaves its way through the narrative. It acts as a thread, binding or repelling almost every character as their stories unfold. We will delve into the obligations of Elinor Dashwood, Marianne Dashwood, and Edward Ferrars and how Austen deftly incorporates duty into their stories' evolution.

Although the word "duty" first appeared in 1297, its primary meaning evolved in 1385 and is still in use (OED). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), duty is an "Action, or an act, that is due in the way of a moral or legal obligation; that which one ought or is bound to do; an obligation" (OED). While the 18th and 19th-century definitions saw additions like "lookout duty" or "night duty," the uses are primarily military. Throughout Austen's writings, two significant variations on the 14th-century definition appear in *Sense and Sensibility*. The first, from 1578, defines duty as "Moral obligation; the binding force of what is morally right," while the second, from 1602, relays a message of necessity, specifying duty as "Something which cannot possibly or naturally be left undone" (OED). All three convey a sense of obligation, but the latter two emphasize a sense of the inevitability of duty.

Elinor Dashwood, often regarded as one of the more steady and rational characters, serves as a moral compass for the reader. Her sense of duty, particularly to her family and

friends, is a recurring theme in the novel. This is exemplified in her decision to protect Lucy Steele's secret for months. When Marianne questions Elinor about how she managed to keep Lucy and Edward Ferrars' engagement a secret, Elinor replies: "By feeling that I was doing my duty. My promise to Lucy obliged me to be secret" (158). She explains that she felt she 'owed' her discretion to Lucy due to her promise. Elinor's character is defined by her belief that her desires are secondary to her moral obligations, regardless of any misbehavior she may perceive in Lucy Steele.

Marianne Dashwood initially struggles with her duty, often prioritizing her feelings and desires over what others might consider correct or moral. While Elinor sees her duty to be gracious towards the Steeles as they are relatives of Sir John and Lady Middleton, Marianne refuses to extend the same courtesy. Austen writes that for Marianne, "it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell" (75). She behaves without any regard for duty or discretion with Willoughby until, at the end of the novel, she nearly dies from illness brought on by her rashness. This experience leads her to accept that she must change her behavior. She embarks on a new life with Colonel Brandon, and we see her at the end of the story: "submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village" (230). Marianne's duty shifts from self-interested actions to a morally upright conception of obligation for her community and family.

However, it is upon Edward Ferrars that duty weighs most heavily, and his obligation is exploited by his mother, sister, and Lucy Steele. While Elinor's embrace of duty seems to be adulated by Austen, and Marianne's commensurate rejection of duty is portrayed as selfish,

Austen appears to have the most sympathy for Edward's plight. Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny both have designs of Edward entering a profession of repute, and familial obligation prevents him from forging his way. Austen describes this as a burden, the "old, well-established grievance of duty against will, parent against child" (63). In Edward and Elinor's stories, Austen equates executing duty as almost antithetical to happiness. When explaining the anguish of his deceit to Elinor, Edward admits that "I thought it was my duty...independent of my feelings, to give [Lucy] the option of continuing the engagement or not" (223). Elinor even lauds Edward and forgives him of any misconduct before he explains his story. She tells Marianne that she was "so sure of his always doing his duty, that though now he may harbor some regret, in the end, he must become so" (158). When his circumstances unexpectedly change, Edward finds himself free to love Elinor and make a life with her. Duty for Edward is both a curse and freedom.

In reading *Sense and Sensibility*, it isn't easy to truly ascertain Jane Austen's feelings about duty. While she employed the word across all three definitions discussed, each version seems to be met with an equal measure of respect and reproach. The term duty is often used to justify a character's acquiescence to an unhappy choice, and Austen equates duty to the moral obligation that a just and right person must uphold. Those who know their duty and fail to act upon it receive the most significant censure from Austen, while those she sees as victims of their obligation receive sympathy. Ultimately, each character in the book experiences a moral conflict in one way or another. Some triumph and some fail, but duty is at the heart of each critical decision in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Works Cited

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