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# Loss, Reckless Behavior, and Jane Austen's Realism in Sense and Sensibility and Persuasion

Lindsey Downs
*Mississippi State University*

# Loss, Reckless Behavior, and Jane Austen's Realism in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*

By

Lindsey Downs

Kelly Marsh

Professor

(Director of Thesis)

Shalyn Claggett

Associate Professor

(Committee Member)

Thomas Anderson

Professor & Associate Dean

(Shackouls Honors College Representative)

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## Introduction

Jane Austen's novels are centered on young women who are navigating changes in their lives with the help, and sometimes the interference, of their parents. Because of the ages of these protagonists, Austen's parental figures often play an important role in the plots of the novels and the lives of the characters. Parental influence can work for or against Austen's protagonists, but three of Austen's novels depict heroines who must deal with the death of one of her parents. The Dashwood sisters and their brother John in *Sense and Sensibility* lose their father, and Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* and the Elliot sisters in *Persuasion* lose their mothers. While Austen's other protagonists must contend with the complications of the presence of their parents, the characters in these three novels must learn to navigate the events of their lives without one of their parents.

Only two of these novels, however, focus on characters who not only lose a parent but also lose that parental relationship. Emma's loss of her mother occurred during her infancy, meaning that she has no memory of her mother or her relationship with her. In contrast, in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*, the characters do not lose their parent until later in life and, therefore, must process the loss of that relationship as well. The death of Mr. Henry Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* and of Lady Elizabeth Elliot in *Persuasion* each has a profound impact on the lives and behaviors of the family members they leave behind, and it is here that I begin my argument.

Scholars have not noticed how these deaths impact the behavior of the characters left behind. Despite the fact that the characters in each novel have a deceased parent, there has been very little written on the topic of death and mourning in conjunction with these works. With *Sense and Sensibility,* scholars often stop with the observation that the death of Mr. Dashwood

serves as a catalyst for the novel's plot by placing his family in immediate financial trouble.[1] In fact, Mr. Dashwood is typically hardly considered at all. In her discussion of the faults of the fathers in Austen's novels, Christine Gibbs gives Mr. Dashwood no real attention other than to say, "[Mr. Dashwood's] only fault, mild in comparison, has been to die at the wrong time" (46). The lack of consideration given to Mr. Dashwood and his death has led to little scholarship on the topic of grief in *Sense and Sensibility.* Something similar has occurred with *Persuasion.* On the rare occasion that critics examine the topic of grief and mourning in the novel, their focus is typically on Anne Elliot's grief over the loss of her relationship with Captain Wentworth, not the loss of her mother. Some scholars demonstrate an interest in the tradition of the absent mother as it relates to *Persuasion*, but the interest seems to be in the fact that Lady Elliot is absent rather than in the effects of the loss itself. I will argue that these deaths, which otherwise have garnered very little attention, actually have an intense and prolonged impact on the behavior of not just the novels' protagonists, but the minor characters as well.

It is possible that this topic has been overlooked because the novels themselves seem to gloss over it. Neither *Sense and Sensibility* nor *Persuasion* discusses the grief of its characters explicitly, outside of one brief mention of Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood mourning that appears be satirical. The absence of this overt discussion of grief and mourning causes scholars to direct their attentions elsewhere when considering the two works. Additionally, the amount of time that has passed since each death has an impact on the lack of scholarship centered on them. Mr. Dashwood dies within the first few pages of *Sense and Sensibility*, and the events of the novel

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[1] Some critics have argued that the economic situation of the novel is far more complicated than this. In "John Willoughby, Luxury Good: *Sense and Sensibility*'s Economic Curriculum," Shannon Chamberlain argues that the novel functions as a "self-contained economy" (158) and focuses on Marianne and Elinor Dashwood's conversations about financial competence. Additionally, Joyce Kerr Tarpley argues the effects of primogeniture in *Sense and Sensibility* not from the perspective of the daughters as scholars often do, but rather from the perspective of the younger sons (specifically, Colonel Brandon and Robert Ferrars).

take place in the immediate aftermath of his death. Nevertheless, the novel itself mentions him so few times that scholars tend to skip over him in their discussions of the novel. In contrast, *Persuasion* takes place thirteen years after Lady Elliot's death, and she, therefore, is never actually introduced into the novel's action. So much time has passed since her death, though, that no one considers the impact that her loss might have on the characters of the novel.

In addition to the remarkably little written on grief in each of the novels, there has been shockingly little said on any topic about these two novels together. Peter L. De Rose's "*Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*: Variations on a Theme" examines the theme of balancing reason and emotion, which he argues in common between the two novels. Ultimately, De Rose concludes that Anne Elliot's representation of such a balance in *Persuasion* is more realistic than Elinor or Marianne's in *Sense and Sensibility* (42). On an entirely different note, Ana Mitrić discusses the change in Austen's ideas on civility that occurs from *Sense and Sensibility* to *Persuasion*. In the first, she argues, politeness and manners are connected to morality and righteousness, as we see in Elinor's character, but in *Persuasion*, Mr. Elliot demonstrates that the two concepts have no real connection at all (Mitrić 199). Additionally, the little that has been written on the two works together often considers a third of Austen's novels, as well. Margaret Watkins Tate, for example, argues in "Resources for Solitude: Proper Self-Sufficiency in Jane Austen" that Marianne and Elinor Dashwood, Anne Elliot, as well as Emma Woodhouse, all demonstrate the virtue of self-sufficiency, which allows each of them to endure and even appreciate the forms of isolation they experience (333). Unlike most existing scholarship, this thesis examines the connections between *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*, analyzing both their similarities and the ways that death impacts the characters in each of them.

In the first chapter, I examine the behaviors of Mrs. Dashwood, John Dashwood, Marianne Dashwood, and Elinor Dashwood. By demonstrating the ways in which the characters usually behave in contrast to the manner in which they behave following the death of Mr. Dashwood, I argue that each of these characters acts recklessly and in ways that are out of character in response to Mr. Dashwood's death. In the second chapter, I demonstrate the similarities between the behavior of the characters in *Persuasion* and the behaviors of those in *Sense and Sensibility.* By closely analyzing the behaviors of each character, I argue that Sir Walter Elliot, Elizabeth Elliot, Mary Elliot Musgrove, and Anne Elliot all behave in a manner that is reckless and unusual following the death of Lady Elliot.

The marked differences between the novels and among the characters in each make the similarity in the characters' response to death in these two novels remarkable. That similarity appears to be entirely unrelated to the age of the characters. Elinor and Marianne are in their late teens when their father dies, and John is even older than that. Elizabeth, Anne, and Mary, on their other hand, are children or in their younger teen years when their mother dies, and yet they have the same response to death that the Dashwoods do. Additionally, the similarity does not seem related to time. *Sense and Sensibility* takes place in the immediate aftermath of Mr. Dashwood's death, while *Persuasion* takes place thirteen years after the death of Lady Elliot. This difference between the two novels is rather drastic, and yet the characters' reactions to death in each is the same. Lastly, and somewhat surprisingly, this similarity does not seem related to gender. In each novel, the same reaction to death occurs in both men—John Dashwood and Sir Walter—and women. It also seems unrelated to the gender of the person who dies, as it is a man in *Sense and Sensibility* and a woman in *Persuasion.*

The characters' common response to the death of a parent and spouse seems surprising, particularly given the financial plights of both the Dashwood and the Elliot families. In circumstances in which we might expect them to behave in a manner that is careful and prudent, the characters instead demonstrate recklessness, seeming to act without careful consideration of the consequences of their actions. Much like the death of Mr. Dashwood, the death of Lady Elliot places a financial strain on her family. Lady Elliot was the best manager of her family's money, and her death both makes it more important and more difficult for her daughters to marry well, just as Mr. Dashwood's death does in *Sense and Sensibility.* The fact, then, that these characters behave recklessly following the death of their parent indicates that the consequences of these deaths go beyond the immediate financial ramifications. While the deaths of Mr. Dashwood and Lady Elliot do place financial pressure on their families, they also cause their families' futures to become uncertain. A parent and spouse—particularly in Austen's world—are expected to be a constant presence, and when that expectation is thwarted by their death, it throws the vision of the future into turmoil for their families. The spouse and children they leave behind cannot imagine a future without them in it, and, thus, the characters' behaviors become strange, confused, and even reckless, and it impacts their decision-making as well as the relationships that they do and do not pursue. While this recklessness looks different for each of the characters, they all respond to death by behaving in a reckless and irregular manner.

The similarity among the characters in the two novels also suggests something about the way that Austen creates characters. *Sense and Sensibility* was the first of her novels to be published, and *Persuasion* was the last. The fact that the characters in these two novels share such a quality suggests a consistency in the creation of her characters across her novels. In these two novels, as well as many others, Austen creates characters that are remarkably different from

one another in notable ways. There is little argument about the differences between Marianne and Elinor Dashwood or about the differences between Anne Elliot and the rest of her family. In fact, those differences are often central to the scholarship on the novels and their titular themes. Despite these intense differences, however, Austen has given her characters an underlying core similarity—their reactions to death—in order to humanize her protagonists and make her minor characters more sympathetic.

This common quality in her characters provides insight into how Austen balances satire and realism. Critics often consider satire as one of Austen's tools as a novelist, both in the way she satirizes elements of real life and in the way she creates satirical characters who judge the world in which they reside. While some think of it in terms of her satirization of social structures, customs, etc., others focus their attention on the specific historical figures Austen satirizes in order to create some of her characters. In *Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen,* Jocelyn Harris argues that Austen is "lacerating" in her satire of real historical figures in *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* (xix).[2] Peter Sabor finds the same impulse in Austen's juvenilia, particularly in her own version of Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England.*[3]

Ronald Paulson, rather than focusing on the real-world objects of Austen's satire, focuses on satire within Austen's fictional world, along with Austen's balance of satire and realism. In *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth Century England*, Paulson argues that there are three variations in the way the novel absorbed satire, and the "most pervasive type is the novel in which satire supports a realism that is nearly parallel to life itself" (309). He compares Austen's

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[2] Harris argues that Austen was fascinated by the rising world of celebrity that came about as a result of print culture. She points specifically to Austen's interest in the royal family and even argues that John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* is a satirized version of Prince George (xix).

[3] In "Jane Austen: Satirical Historian," Sabor argues that Austen wrote her own version of the historical account with the goal to "feminize conventional versions of English history, deflecting attention away from powerful male monarchs while drawing a large number of women into her narrative" (227).

work to that of Henry Fielding, claiming that Fielding creates "a more complex conception of human character" than Austen (Paulson 305). He argues that Austen's novels contain one character—Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price, Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot—who is morally and intellectually above all the others, while the remaining characters in these novels are so far below the protagonist that she remains entirely isolated (306). Here, Paulson claims, lies Austen's balance of satire with realism.

Paulson's definition of realism, and the one I employ in this thesis, is clearly presented by M.H. Abrams as that which "represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader" (260). Abrams's definition is rooted in Erich Auerbach's ideas and implied definitions included in his book *Mimesis.* Auerbach considers mimesis to be "the interpretation of reality through literary representation or 'imitation'" (554). His book acknowledges that as reality changes, so does the form that realism takes, but that, although some literary movements have eschewed realism as not suited for "serious" subject matter, realism appears and reappears throughout literary history. While Paulson and I are both working from the same definition of realism, we disagree on precisely what view of reality Austen's realism offers. He points to D. W. Harding's idea of "regulated hatred" and argues that the continued existence of those that Harding calls "detestable people" in the protagonists' social circles at the ends of Austen's novels creates Austen's idea of life itself and is thus characteristic of her version of realism (304).

In contrast, I argue that Austen balances satire with realism so as to emphasize her characters' common humanity. Whereas Paulson claims that Austen's characters "seldom suffer from a confusion of motives" (Paulson 305), I argue that Austen's characters—both the likeable and unlikeable—are more complex than his reading allows, and that her characters' responses to

death demonstrates their complexity in a way that tempers her satire. Thus, a close examination of the characters in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* will demonstrate that even the most decorous of the characters behave in ways that are reckless and out of character following the death of a parent. By creating this underlying similarity among characters who are distinctly different from each other, Austen humanizes her protagonists and makes her minor, often unlikeable characters, more sympathetic. Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot, who are typically considered examples of near-perfect morality, and Marianne Dashwood, whose carefree and larger-than-life personality make her reality seem unattainable for others, are made to be more like irresponsible characters like Mrs. Dashwood and even unlikeable characters like Sir Walter Elliot through this similarity in their reactions to death.

## Chapter 1 – "Eagerness of mind…which must generally have led to imprudence": Uncharacteristic and Reckless Behavior in *Sense and Sensibility*

Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* opens with a series of deaths, including that of the protagonists' father, Mr. Henry Dashwood. These deaths, however, are usually not considered beyond their function as the initial financial catalyst for the novel. Scholars often point to the economic pressures placed on the Dashwood sisters as a result of their father's death and do not consider him as playing any further role in the novel's events. Mr. Dashwood's death, however, has a much larger effect on the characters and their behaviors than such a perspective indicates. This impact, though, is not limited to Marianne and Elinor. Mrs. Dashwood, John, Marianne, and Elinor all act in very strange ways following Mr. Dashwood's death. Their behaviors are inconsistent with each of their characters, often to the point of complete recklessness.

Scholars interested in *Sense and Sensibility* most often focus on the theme of sense and sensibility. Typically, scholars read Elinor as the embodiment of sense and Marianne as that of sensibility. A few scholars, though, have looked beyond this idea. In "Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer: The Path to Female Self-Determination in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility,*" Kathleen Anderson and Jordan Kidd argue that Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer are the only true examples of a balance between sense and sensibility (136). In fact, Anderson and Kidd go on to argue, unlike most scholars, that Marianne and Elinor are actually both examples of sensibility, but Elinor's emotions are simply more controlled. By the end of the novel, they state, both Marianne and Elinor grow to be more like the other (Anderson and Kidd 137). According to them, Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer do not rely on other people for their happiness in the way Marianne and Elinor do, nor do they rely on material things as Lucy Steele, Fanny, and Lady Middleton are prone to do. This makes them the novel's example of balance between sense and sensibility. In

another perspective on the novel's titular theme, Kathryn Davis argues in "Exonerating Mrs. Dashwood" that Mrs. Dashwood, though she begins the novel as a character overcome by her sensibility, actually develops wisdom by the novel's end (73). Mrs. Dashwood, she argues, begins the novel in a state similar to Marianne's, but by the end has become more like Elinor (74), all while acknowledging that this development of wisdom is highly unusual in Austen's parental figures (Davis 61).

In addition to the theme of sense and sensibility, scholars are also interested in the themes of virtue and moral rightness in the novel. In "On Being Tough-Minded: *Sense and Sensibility* and the Moral Psychology of 'Helping,'" Valerie Wainwright argues that, despite the extent to which Elinor is considered the picture of propriety and virtue, she also promotes an idea of reservation of that help and consideration (200). Wainwright points out that Elinor does not invest her energy into people she deems unworthy of those efforts, like Robert Ferrars (201). Ultimately, though, Wainwright does acknowledge that even the most tough-minded characters cannot hide their extreme pain forever, which Elinor demonstrates when she believes Edward has married Lucy Steele (208). While scholars like Wainwright focus on morality as it concerns Elinor, others focus on moral uprightness in connection with characters like Edward Ferrars and John Willoughby. In "Idleness and Melancholy in *Sense and Sensibility*," Márta Pellérdi argues that both Edward and Willoughby were idle and suffered as a result of that idleness—Willoughby cannot marry the woman he loves, and Edward must suffer before he can marry Elinor (par. 3). Each of them pursued their respective relationships—Edward with Lucy Steele and Willoughby with Marianne—out of boredom and idleness (Pellérdi par. 4). The difference between the two men, however, is that Edward is morally superior to Willoughby, which he demonstrates in his decision to stand by his word and marry Lucy Steele, even though it does not

make him happy to do so (par. 4). This, Pellérdi argues, is why Edward is eventually allowed to marry Elinor while Willoughby's selfishness keeps him from being with Marianne (par. 4). Unlike these other scholars, Edward Joseph Shoben, Jr. focuses on virtue as it relates to Marianne and her impulsive nature. In "Impulse and Virtue in Jane Austen: *Sense and Sensibility* in Two Centuries," he examines the manner in which "Marianne makes Willoughby into an extension of herself" (531) and impulsively disregards society and tradition in her relationship with Willoughby. Ultimately, he argues, Marianne's extreme loneliness shows the consequences of such impulsivity and disregard for her reputation (Shoben 533).

In addition to the theme of sense and sensibility and the theme of virtue and moral rightness, some scholars have briefly considered the topic of death in *Sense and Sensibility*. While most scholars center their attention on the economic impact Mr. Dashwood's death causes, a few have considered other elements of Mr. Dashwood's death. In "Deaths and Entrances: The Opening of *Sense and Sensibility*," Nora Bartlett examines the manner in which the Elinor and Marianne, in particular, deal with their father's death. Bartlett describes the opening of *Sense and Sensibility* as a "catalogue of deaths" (par. 4), and she goes on to discuss the way in which Elinor and Marianne seem to suffer in silence as a result of their lack of connection and true community (par. 10). There is, however, no real scholarship on the long-term effects of Mr. Dashwood's death on his family.

Although most scholars tend to stop at the immediate financial concerns his death creates, I argue that the often subtle changes in the behaviors of the characters—specifically, Mrs. Dashwood, John, Marianne, and Elinor—are also caused by his death. The family members Mr. Dashwood leaves behind all behave in ways that are entirely out of character for them following his death, and this behavior often crosses over into recklessness. Though most scholars consider

Marianne and Elinor to be drastically different from one another, and few scholars consider Mrs. Dashwood or John in any capacity, this similarity in their reactions to Mr. Dashwood's death demonstrates that these characters are far more similar than they first appear. By giving her characters who are otherwise quite different from one another a quality that connects them all together, Austen balances satire with realism. She humanizes Marianne, whose greatness of spirit often appears to come without consequences, and Elinor, who is often set up on a pedestal and perceived as the perfect example of morality. Additionally, this similarity makes Mrs. Dashwood, whose neglectful behavior often makes her disappointing, and John, whose selfishness makes him rather unlikeable, more sympathetic. Austen thus generates a kind of realism in which individuals share a common humanity, and there is less separation between her protagonists and her minor characters than scholars often assume.

People often think of Mrs. Dashwood as being irresponsible and unwise. She lacks control over her emotions and possesses an "eagerness of mind…which must generally have led to imprudence" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 8). At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains that Elinor has always acted as her mother's advisor, and this role does not change upon Mr. Dashwood's death. Rather than acting like the parent her children need her to be in the wake of their father's death, Mrs. Dashwood acts more like one of their peers. In fact, Mrs. Dashwood, who was so offended by her daughter-in-law Fanny's inconsiderate behavior following Mr. Dashwood's death, "would have quitted the house forever, had not the entreaty of the eldest girl induced her first to reflect on the propriety of going" (8). Despite the fact that she and her daughters would have had nowhere to go, her emotions prompt her to make impulsive and unwise decisions that are only tempered by her eldest daughter's counsel.

Fortunately, Mrs. Dashwood is guided by Elinor's wisdom in that case; however, she goes on to recklessly encourage her daughters' relationships, even when there are signs that she ought to be concerned. As soon as Edward Ferrars starts to pay any kind of attention to Elinor, Mrs. Dashwood is convinced of their affinity for one another and uses their relationship as a reason for her family to remain at Norland: "a particular circumstance occurred to give greater eligibility, according to the opinions of Mrs. Dashwood, to her daughter's continuance at Norland. This circumstance was the growing attachment between her eldest girl and the brother of Mrs. John Dashwood…It was enough for her that he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality" (17). Given Mrs. Dashwood's familiarity with Fanny and her mother and their rather snobbish attitudes, Mrs. Dashwood should have expected that Edward and Elinor's relationship would not be that simple. Instead of practicing this motherly caution, however, Mrs. Dashwood recklessly assumes that Edward intends to marry Elinor and seems unconcerned by any indication to the contrary. Her encouragement and certainty further prove to be unfounded and reckless when Edward announces his engagement to Lucy Steele later in the novel.

In light of her reaction to Elinor and Edward's perceived relationship, her encouragement of Marianne's relationship with Willoughby despite Elinor's concerns demonstrates a pattern of recklessness in Mrs. Dashwood's behavior. When Elinor attempts to explain to her mother why she is unsure of Willoughby's intentions toward Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood refuses to consider the possibility of Willoughby being anything but well-intentioned. She even tells Elinor, "Willoughby certainly does not deserve to be suspected" (82). While this blind approval of Marianne's suitor is certainly reckless, it is also incredibly out of character for Mrs. Dashwood to disregard Elinor's opinion so completely. Elinor is normally her mother's most trusted advisor,

and yet Mrs. Dashwood strangely dismisses Elinor's opinion on something as important as Marianne's reputation and relationship. In fact, Mrs. Dashwood refuses to even ask Marianne about her relationship: "I would not ask such a question for the world…I should never deserve her confidence again, after forcing from her a confession which is meant at present to be unacknowledged to any one" (84). Mrs. Dashwood is more interested in being Marianne's friend and confidante than in acting like a concerned parent, and she recklessly leaves Elinor to do the damage-control on Marianne's behalf. As Marianne's mother, Mrs. Dashwood should have been the one stepping in and reprimanding Marianne for her disregard of propriety, yet that responsibility falls to Elinor as a result of Mrs. Dashwood's reckless behavior.

Somewhat surprisingly, though, Mrs. Dashwood does eventually recognize the damage that her behavior has caused. She realizes just how reckless she has been, and she even realizes that she had inadvertently neglected one child as a result of her attentions toward the other: "She now found that she had erred in relying on Elinor's representation of herself…she feared that under this persuasion she had been unjust, inattentive, nay almost unkind to her Elinor" (331). Because her focus had been solely and recklessly on Marianne's relationship and subsequent heartbreak, Mrs. Dashwood had no understanding of the pain that Elinor was experiencing, yet we recognize that she is not to blame for her daughters' suffering. Her eventual recognition of the danger of her behavior is unique among the characters. That combined with the similarity to the other characters' reactions to Mr. Dashwood's death creates a deeper sense of sympathy for her that the novel would otherwise lack.

Like Mrs. Dashwood, John Dashwood is often overlooked in scholarship on the novel. He is often written off as a plot-progressing figure who fails to uphold his promise to his father and thus worsens the financial plights of his sisters. His character, however, is more complex

than that. John is described early on in the novel as "a steady, respectable young man" (5). His character seems fairly consistent, and "he was, in general, well respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties (7). Despite this consistency and dedication to his responsibilities, John does not follow through on his promise to his father to care for his half-sisters and their mother. At the time he makes the promise, he fully intends to keep it: "He thought of it all day long, and for many days successively, and he did not repent" (7). Yet, his wife Fanny easily persuades him that his father never truly intended for him to give the women any money at all. As a man known for doing his duty and staying true to his responsibilities, the ease with which he is convinced to break that promise is extremely out of character. Though Fanny is the one who persuades him to do so, her character has not changed. She is described as being "narrow-minded and selfish," and she has never really gotten along well with her husband's family (7-8). Fanny's influence on John is nothing new; the only thing that has changed for John is the death of his father, which indicates that that loss is directly related to John's sudden departure from his normal character.

In a manner somewhat similar to Mrs. Dashwood, John seems to recognize that he has done something out of character and perhaps even something wrong. Unlike Mrs. Dashwood, though, he does nothing to right that wrong and instead tries to act as though his wife has not persuaded him to break a promise. He often does so by downplaying the wealth he and Fanny hold: "He so frequently talked of the increasing expenses of housekeeping, and of the perpetual demands on his purse…that he seemed rather to stand in need of more money himself than to have any design of giving money away" (29). This behavior continues throughout the novel, and he even describes his family as being "very far…from being rich" (213). Such attempts to make himself sound less wealthy are John's attempts to justify his behavior in denying his sisters any

financial help and seem to indicate his guilty conscience for breaking his promise. He attempts to further justify his behavior by trying to make Elinor feel guilty for expecting anything by pointing out that they do not lack anything: "And so you are most comfortably settled in your little cottage and want for nothing!" (210). John also attempts to push his responsibility off on other people: "He had just compunction enough for having done nothing for his sisters himself, to be exceedingly anxious that everybody else should do a great deal" (215). He encourages Elinor's friendship with Mrs. Jennings and even tells Elinor that he thinks Mrs. Jennings will leave them money in her will (214). Despite this apparent guilt, however, John does nothing to rectify this wrong. There is no reason that John cannot change his mind and live up to his promise at any point throughout the novel, yet he does not. As a man who otherwise fulfills his responsibilities and duties, this behavior is out of character for John. While his lack of action at first makes it seem that John is unaffected by his father's death, the similarity of his reaction to that of the rest of his family shows just how deeply he has been affected by this event. Realizing this makes this otherwise somewhat unlikeable character more sympathetic.

Unlike Mrs. Dashwood and John, many scholars have examined Marianne Dashwood as a character. Most often, she is considered to be the embodiment of the theme of sensibility, and, as she prides herself on acting in response to and sharing her emotions, many would not hesitate to call her behavior reckless. However, closer examination demonstrates that Marianne's recklessness is precisely the behavior that is out of character for her. At the beginning of the novel, Marianne is described as being just as intelligent as Elinor: "Marianne's abilities were, in many respects quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever…generous, amiable, interesting" (8). The first word used to describe her is "sensible," and yet her behavior, particularly in regard to Colonel Brandon and Willoughby, is remarkably unsensible. Colonel

Brandon—who is described as being sensible himself—is a sensible match for Marianne, and yet she stubbornly refuses to consider him nearly from the moment she meets him. She writes him off as an "old bachelor" (36), and she even claims that it is impossible for him to feel any sort of attachment to or passion for a woman anymore (39-40). Instead of focusing her attention on the sensible Colonel Brandon, Marianne becomes attached to Willoughby, who is the exact opposite of sensible. Willoughby, who seems to have no regard for Marianne's family or their financial worries, attempts to give Marianne a horse that her family cannot afford to care for (59). Additionally, Willoughby takes Marianne to see Allenham unchaperoned, completely disregarding propriety and Marianne's reputation (68-70). Marianne's attachment to such an unwise suitor is typically described as reckless and irresponsible, but, based on the descriptions of her character, this complete reckless abandon of her sense—and her rejection of the sensible match in Colonel Brandon—is actually out of character for Marianne.

In addition to the description of her as sensible, Marianne also proves herself throughout the novel to be extremely perceptive. From very early on, Marianne notices the coolness and strange nature of Elinor's relationship with Edward. She even says, "How cold, how composed were their last adieus! How languid their conversation the last evening of their being together! In Edward's farewell there was no distinction between Elinor and me; it was the good wishes of an affectionate brother to both" (41). Even as Mrs. Dashwood is entirely convinced of Edward and Elinor's passion for one another, Marianne picks up on the subtleties of their interactions that lead her to doubt that closeness. This close observation continues when Edward arrives at Barton: "To Marianne, indeed, the meeting between Edward and her sister was but a continuation of the unaccountable coldness which she had observed at Norland" (86). Marianne's perception of these small details demonstrates just how clever and intuitive she is,

which makes her complete misinterpretation of Willoughby's attitude toward Colonel Brandon very out of character for her. Marianne strangely assumes that Willoughby's intense dislike of Colonel Brandon stems from his jealousy over her when it actually results from Willoughby's previous relationship with Eliza. Even if Willoughby did not know who Colonel Brandon was at first, he finds out very quickly when the other women begin talking about Eliza in front of him, and it influences his behavior toward Colonel Brandon (67). Elinor notices how unfounded Willoughby's attitude seems and even asks him, "But why should you dislike him?" (53). Marianne, though, misinterprets the situation entirely, which is unusual for her otherwise perceptive character. In fact, Marianne's distress over her misjudgment of his character demonstrates just how out of character that behavior is for her: "She felt the loss of Willoughby's character yet more heavily than she had felt the loss of his heart" (200). While certainly heartbroken over his betrayal, Marianne is accustomed to being perceptive, and her out-of-character and complete misjudgment of Willoughby is even harder for her to process.

Before this discovery, though, Marianne acts in other ways that are unusual following her father's death. She is described as being very clever and opinionated throughout the novel, and yet, oddly, she agrees with nearly everything Willoughby says. This is particularly true when he passes judgment on Colonel Brandon. When Willoughby essentially says that Colonel Brandon is uninteresting and forgettable, Marianne responds with, "That is exactly what I think of him!" (52). Then, later, when Willoughby accuses Brandon of having written a letter to himself in order to give himself an excuse to leave, Marianne responds to the unfounded accusation by saying, "I have no doubt of it" (66). These thoughtless responses are completely out of character for Marianne, who is otherwise quite clever and capable of forming her own opinions and often prides herself on doing so. Through these various unusual and reckless behaviors, though,

Austen humanizes Marianne. Marianne is a larger-than-life character who often does exactly what she wants with little to no consequences. Her reaction to her father's death, however, in the form of her acting completely out of character, connects her to the rest of her family and makes her character an indication of Austen's kind of realism—one that emphasizes the common humanity among people and the reactions to tragedy to which they are all susceptible.

Often thought to be Marianne's exact opposite, Elinor is typically considered to be a consistent example of sense all through the novel. She controls her emotions in ways that her mother and Marianne seem incapable of doing, and she acts as Mrs. Dashwood's wise advisor for much of her life. Despite this general perception of her, close analysis of Elinor's behavior following Mr. Dashwood's death demonstrates that she, too, acts in ways that are out of character and even reckless in response to that loss. From very early in the novel, it is clear that Elinor is calm, intelligent, and generally steadfast in her character. The narrator says that she "possessed a strength of understanding, and a coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen to be the counsellor of her mother" (8). Though Elinor tells Edward that she has made mistakes in her judgment of people's characters (92), she proves to be a very good judge of character throughout the novel. When Marianne first meets Willoughby, for example, Elinor remains somewhat suspicious of him and even thinks that his behavior is reckless: "he displayed a want to caution which Elinor could not approve" (50). Despite Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood's certainty of his intentions, Elinor remains uncertain and watches "his behaviour to her sister with zealous attention, as to ascertain what he was and what he meant" (152). Ultimately, Elinor's "suspicions of Willoughby's inconstancy" (163) prove to be well-founded and correct, which Marianne unfortunately does not discover until she is hurt by his betrayal.

In addition to her intuitive judgment of Willoughby, Elinor also displays her good judgment of character with many of the other people she and her sister encounter throughout the novel. For example, she immediately dislikes the Miss Steeles upon meeting them: "The vulgar freedom and folly of the eldest left her no recommendation, and as Elinor was not blinded by the beauty, or the shrewd look of the youngest, to her want of real elegance and artlessness, she left the house without any wish of knowing them any better" (119). Elinor is also not fooled by Robert Ferrars's "emptiness and conceit" (235), and she does not invest any real energy into conversing with him as "she did not think he deserved the compliment of rational opposition" (237).[4] Elinor is also intuitive when it comes to judging people of good character, as well. She quickly develops respect for Colonel Brandon and spends time talking with him: "he came to look at Marianne and talk to Elinor, who often derived more satisfaction from conversing with him than from any other daily occurrence" (160).

Elinor's consistency and intuitiveness in her judgment of people's character makes her complete misjudgment of Edward Ferrars surprising and out of character. This is particularly true when considered alongside the fact that the narrator does not credit Edward with being particularly confident or able to fool her: "Edward Ferrars was not recommended to their good opinion by any peculiar graces of person or address…He was too diffident to do justice to himself" (17). Edward is not overly confident or persuasive, and yet Elinor misjudges his intentions toward her in a way that is very out of character. This seems to be connected to the fact the Elinor meets Edward almost immediately after her father's death (17), when her grief seems to make her reckless.

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[4] Valerie Wainwright makes this observation in "On Being Tough-Minded: *Sense and Sensibility* and the Moral Psychology of 'Helping'" (201).

Not only does Elinor make unusual misjudgments of Edward's character and intentions, but she also makes highly illogical assumptions that seem to contradict her otherwise rational and controlled behavior. Despite Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood's certainty of Edward's affinity for her, Elinor outwardly maintains some sense of hesitancy when it comes to her relationship with Edward: "She believed the regard to be mutual; but she required greater certainty of it to make Marianne's conviction of their attachment agreeable to her" (23). She even tells Marianne, "I am by no means assured of his regard for me" (23). Her caution is logical and even responsible, particularly considering the doubt that she experiences over Edward's inconsistency in his treatment of her: "She was far from depending on that result of his preference for her…Nay, the longer they were together the more doubtful seemed the nature of his regard; and sometimes, for a few painful minutes, she believed it to be no more than friendship" (24). Despite her clear hesitations and sense of doubt, Elinor makes a strange and reckless assumption upon seeing the lock of hair in Edward's ring: "That the hair was her own, she instantaneously felt as well satisfied as Marianne…[it] must have been procured by some theft or contrivance unknown to herself" (96). Not only is this conclusion odd because Elinor knows that she did not give him a lock of her hair, it is also odd in that it comes just two pages after Elinor doubts Edward's feelings for her: "hitherto the continuance of his preference seemed very uncertain; and the reservedness of his manner towards her contradicted one moment what a more animated look had intimated the preceding one" (94). While Elinor's general misjudgment of Edward is out of character, this conclusion actually requires her to disregard the logic and sense for which she is known, which leads her to recklessly make assumptions about Edward's intentions toward her that only result in her heartbreak upon learning that the lock of hair actually belonged to Lucy Steele (129). However, this unusually reckless behavior serves to humanize Elinor. As a

character that is often painted as the picture of morality and good sense, her reckless and strange behavior connects her with the novel's other characters to whom scholars tend to set her in contrast. Elinor's recklessness demonstrates that she is actually more like these other characters than she is generally credited to be, and she thus serves as an example of the way that Austen envisions reality—a view of reality based in the similarities between people, between both those considered to be good and those considered to be bad. The loss these characters experience highlight those similarities and thus the way that Austen portrays the world.

Though scholars typically assume the only function of Mr. Dashwood's death is to serve as a financial catalyst for the plot, this analysis of the characters' behaviors shows that his death actually has a much greater impact on them than simply a financial one. His death causes the other characters to act in ways that are out of character and often very reckless. While calling Mrs. Dashwood or even Marianne reckless is not unusual, the fact that John and Elinor also display this recklessness, as well as the fact that Marianne's reckless behavior is actually what is out of character, creates an image of the intense impact that death can have on the lives of those they leave behind. These otherwise markedly different characters with this core similarity are indicative of the world represented by Austen's realism—one that highlights their common humanity and shows just how similar those characters are to one another.

## Chapter 2: "With her had died all such right-mindedness": Uncharacteristic and Reckless Behavior in *Persuasion*

Much like *Sense and Sensibility,* Austen's *Persuasion* is centered on characters who are forced to cope with the loss of a parent. The events of *Persuasion* take place thirteen years after the death of Lady Elliot, which causes most scholars to overlook the impact of her loss on the other characters. Though some scholars do point to the tradition of the absent mother, the consequences of her death are more concrete than is often considered. The consequences of Lady Elliot's death are most obvious in Anne, but her death also has consequences for the way that Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and Mary all behave. Like the characters in *Sense and Sensibility,* the characters in *Persuasion* act in ways that are reckless and out of character following the death of Lady Elliot.

Scholars interested in Lady Elliot's role in *Persuasion* tend to focus on the tradition of the absent mother in Victorian literature. Susan Peck MacDonald, for example, argues in "Jane Austen and the Tradition of the Absent Mother," that mothers are often absent not because they are unimportant, but because they are so powerful that they could interrupt the heroine's journey. She points to the example of present mothers, like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, in order to demonstrate the way that present mothers actually contribute to the trials with which their daughters contend. A mother, MacDonald argues, has three crucial tasks: "she must handle her daughter's social contacts; she must insist upon propriety; and she must prevent the wrong suitors from gaining her daughter's affections" (59). MacDonald also states that we are only aware of these tasks because the mothers who are present in Austen's novels fail to uphold these responsibilities. In *Persuasion*, according to MacDonald, Anne embodies the idea that the mother's strength is in her daughter's difference from her. Instead of marrying Mr. Elliot and

literally becoming the next Lady Elliot, Anne avoids that sorrow by marrying Wentworth (MacDonald 67). Anne likely becomes a mother herself, but by making her own choices she does not become a carbon copy of Lady Elliot.

Continuing the conversation of the tradition of the absent mother, Carolyn Dever argues in *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* that the images of the absent mother in literature act as society's way of dealing with the paradoxical issues surrounding mothers. Ultimately, Dever is interested in the fact that the absence of the mother in Victorian literature immediately undermines the Victorian idea of a family that most scholars tend to think the literature upholds (1). She argues that novels with absent mothers have one of three agendas—sentimentality, courtship or sexual desire, or opportunity and emancipation (26). In regard to *Persuasion*, Dever argues that the absent mother makes the heroine vulnerable, and that is often acted out through "a crisis of sexuality"—of which Anne's inability to navigate courtship is an example (25).

In "The Mother's Unnarratable Pleasure and the Submerged Plot of *Persuasion,"* Kelly A. Marsh also discusses the tradition of the absent mother in *Persuasion*, pointing to Susan Stanford Friedman's idea of the narrative as a graph and arguing that *Persuasion* has more than one horizontal axis (77). The submerged plot of that additional horizontal axis, Marsh argues, allows for the communication of ideas that are otherwise considered taboo, including the mother's sexuality. Marsh points out that mothers are not typically allows stories of sexuality because of the threat it would pose to her children's legitimacy, though this tends to matter more for sons than for daughters (80). She points to the way that each of Lady Elliot's daughters pursues her own version of their mother's story. Elizabeth, she says, acts as though time has stopped and moves backward instead of forward in pursuit of her own life, while Mary does the

opposite and rushes through time, constantly acting as though she is dying (Marsh 85-6). Anne, in contrast, experiences her mother's story through Mr. Elliot's pursuit of her and ultimately chooses something different for herself by marrying Wentworth, a man who values and remembers her (Marsh 90). While these scholars vary in their approaches, they all focus on the tradition of the absent mother. However, closer analysis demonstrates that the characters' reaction is one in response to a loss and not specifically to an absent mother. Some consequences of Lady Elliot's loss are not specific to her role as a mother, and I argue that it is therefore the grief of the loss itself that creates the reaction.

Some scholars have examined the themes of grief, mourning, and melancholy in *Persuasion.* In "Mourning and Melancholia in *Persuasion*," Elizabeth Dalton argues that Anne's self-denial of pleasure seems to be out of a sense of guilt. She argues that Anne feels guilty for being happy with Wentworth when her mother is dead, and this is why she breaks off her engagement in the first place (51). Dalton argues that Anne identifies with her dead mother and that Anne herself acts as an embodiment of some sort of myth or legend. Lady Russell is a twisted version of a fairy godmother, but the novel reverses the fairy tale's initial humiliation of the heroine when both of Anne's sisters want men who want Anne first.

In a different approach to the theme of grief, Melinda Graefe focuses on the physical effects of grief in "'Dido in Despair!' Emma Hamilton's Attitudes and the Shape of Mourning in *Persuasion*." She argues that Austen's depiction of grief as a physical manifestation in the body acts as a subtle criticism of the idea that there is only one appropriate way to grieve (par. 27, 1). Anne and Mrs. Musgrove offer two different physical representations of grief in the way that Anne's body is wasting away while Mrs. Musgrove maintains a larger shape (par. 25-6). Graefe connects Mrs. Musgrove to the real-life Emma Hamilton (par. 11), while also arguing that as

Anne processes her grief, her physical appearance changes (par. 34), and she becomes more sympathetic to the mourning habits of others like Mrs. Musgrove (par. 36, 39). Jill Heydt-Stevenson also examines the physicality of grief by relating *Persuasion*'s treatment of grief to art. In "'Unbecoming Conjunctions': Mourning the Loss of Landscape and Love in *Persuasion*," Heydt-Stevenson examines the intertwining of loss and the picturesque aesthetic. She argues that Anne and Captain Wentworth mourn the loss of each other by recreating pictures of each other in their minds—the same way that people mourn the loss of landscape by creating art (54). Heydt-Stevenson points to Freud's idea that "mourning is a kind of 'reality-testing' through which we determine whether the lost object is indeed lost or is something recoverable," arguing that Anne and Wentworth participate in this practice with one another (55). Using René Girard's idea of triangular desire, Heydt-Stevenson states that the presence of a third party—often Louisa, Mrs. Musgrove, or Mr. Elliot—makes it possible for Anne and Wentworth to observe one another throughout the novel (56). Ultimately, it is the presence of a third party in Mr. Elliot and his interest in Anne that instigates the series of events that lead to Anne and Wentworth's reconciliation (59, 69).

Loraine Fletcher shifts the conversation surrounding grief in *Persuasion* to examine the changing system that surrounds the novel. In "Time and Mourning in *Persuasion*," Fletcher compares *Persuasion* to *The Winter's Tale* through its emphasis on time and movement from loss and mourning to reconciliation and marriage (81). This emphasis, she argues, suggests that the overall system is changing: "There is no great owner of a great house in *Persuasion,* no suggestion of peace or stability in the old order" (87). Fletcher maintains the focus that the death the Elliots must contend with is the death of their social class.

Most scholars who focus on grief in the novel focus on Anne's loss of her relationship to Wentworth, while discussions of the loss of Lady Elliot are primarily focused on her role as a mother. The few scholars who do talk about mourning and Lady Elliot often limit the discussion to Anne's understandable emotional state and overlook the surprising changes in behaviors. Additionally, few scholars talk about any of the characters other than Anne, and even fewer draw comparisons between Anne and the rest of her family. In contrast, I argue that the loss of Lady Elliot has a profound impact on the behaviors of Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mary, and Anne. When Lady Elliot dies, her family loses the ability to envision the future without her, and their behavior then becomes confused and even reckless, which serves to create sympathy for the otherwise unlikeable Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and Mary, while also humanizing the morally superior Anne.

Critics often consider Sir Walter Elliot to be irresponsible with his family's finances. Closer examination, however, demonstrates that Sir Walter is reckless in much of his behavior after Lady Elliot dies, and that much of that recklessness is actually out of character for Sir Walter. Following the death of his wife, Sir Walter makes one or two "very unreasonable" marriage proposals (Austen, *Persuasion* 7). Once it becomes clear that he either cannot or will not marry again, it becomes increasingly important for his daughters to marry and marry well as the family wealth will go to their cousin Mr. William Elliot. Despite this urgency and need for prudence, Sir Walter behaves recklessly in his handling of the family finances. Lady Elliot had been the responsible party when it came to her family's money, and while she ensured that they lived within their means, "with her had died all such right-mindedness, and from that period [Sir Walter] had been constantly exceeding [his income]" (10). After Lady Elliot dies, Sir Walter accrues so much debt that he can no longer hide it from his children, nor can he pay the people around him who have provided goods and services (11). As Christine Gibbs points out, "Sir

Walter Elliot has abandoned all his functions as an authority figure, both as a father and as a landowner" (49). While most critics readily acknowledge the reckless nature of Sir Walter's behavior, none have stopped to examine how unusual that recklessness is for Sir Walter. His behavior, particularly in regard to the family finances, does not reflect well on his family. This disregard for his family's reputation is surprising, given that "vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter Elliot's character" (Austen, *Persuasion* 6). As Sir Walter is described as being almost entirely defined by his pride, his lack of concern for his family's reputation in the surrounding community is both reckless and out of character. Like Mrs. Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility,* Sir Walter also recklessly does not listen to the counsel that his daughter attempts to give him. He refuses to take responsibility for the debt he has put his family in, but he also does not listen to the plan Anne has to get them out of debt, and says that "he would sooner quit Kellynch-hall at once, than remain in it on such disgraceful terms" as reducing their luxurious way of living in order to live within their means (14). Sir Walter cannot imagine living in anything other than excess, and so his recklessness forces his family to leave their home.

In addition to his recklessness with the family finances, Sir Walter is also reckless with his relationships with his children. Much like Mrs. Dashwood, he prioritizes the relationship with one child over the other two: "For one daughter, his eldest, he would really have given up any thing…His two other children were of very inferior value" (7). Unlike Mrs. Dashwood, however, Sir Walter never seems to recognize his favoritism as something detrimental to his other children. In playing favorites, however, he sets a very poor and reckless example for Elizabeth. He raises her to expect excess, and she is spoiled and selfish to the point that her only suggestions for cutting back on expenses are "to cut off some unnecessary charities, and to refrain from new-furnishing the drawing-room" (11). Rather than stepping in as a father should

and getting the spending under control, Sir Walter allows Elizabeth to spend just as recklessly as he does, which ultimately only puts more financial pressure on the family.

Along with his recklessness where is Elizabeth is concerned, Sir Walter also recklessly disregards his relationships with Anne and Mary almost entirely. They were both quite young when their mother died—Anne was around thirteen and Mary around nine—yet Sir Walter does not comfort and console them or attempt to foster close relationships with them as one might expect a parent to do. Instead, he sends Anne away to school almost immediately following her mother's death (143), and there is no real mention of his relationship with Mary at all throughout the novel. Sir Walter's behavior, particularly concerning his favoritism and cruel treatment of Anne, makes him a largely unlikeable character. His recklessness in response to his wife's death—so similar to that of the other members of his family—makes it clear that while his coldness may make him seem unaffected by his wife's death, he has actually been deeply affected, to the point of recklessness with his family's future and his relationships with his children. Connecting his recklessness with his loss may make him more sympathetic. The sympathy that his reaction to his wife's death creates demonstrates Austen's ideas of realism, in that it demonstrates that unlikeable characters like Sir Walter are not completely detestable, as their motives may often be more complex than they first appear.

Similar to John Dashwood, critics rarely examine Elizabeth Elliot as a character beyond her role as lady of the house following her mother's death. Closer analysis of both her role as lady of the house and of her other behaviors, however, demonstrates a complexity in Elizabeth's character with which it is not often credited. When the novel begins, Elizabeth has been running her family's house for the thirteen years since Lady Elliot's death (8). She does not, however, follow in her mother's footsteps as far as how their house ought to be run. Lady Elliot is

described as having been "sensible and amiable" (6), while Elizabeth is described as being much more like Sir Walter—vain and selfish (7). In her role as lady of the house, Elizabeth was largely content to continue in that manner, so she recklessly does not consider any suitors other than Mr. Elliot (10). Now, however, Elizabeth starts to recognize how reckless this behavior has been: "She had the consciousness of being nine-and-twenty, to give her some regrets and some apprehensions" (8). That Elizabeth is unmarried at her age is largely because of the unrealistic expectations Elizabeth places on Mr. Elliot. She plans her entire life around marrying him from a very young age: "She had, while a very young girl, as soon as she had known him to be, in the event of her having no brother, the future baronet, meant to marry him…and in one of their spring excursions to London, when Elizabeth was in her first bloom, Mr. Elliot had been forced into the introduction" (9). Elizabeth first meets Mr. Elliot "soon after Lady Elliot's death" (9), which means that she is only sixteen years old. Despite the fact that Mr. Elliot rebuffs her and Sir Walter's attempts to foster a relationship by not ever coming to visit them at Kellynch, Elizabeth still seems to think that she is going to marry him. This certainty proves to be reckless, as Mr. Elliot marries someone else, and Elizabeth becomes very angry at this outcome. Though now forced to recognize that she will not marry Mr. Elliot, Elizabeth never considers any other suitors her equal: "This very awkward history of Mr. Elliot, was still, after an interval of several years, felt with anger by Elizabeth, who had liked the man for himself, and still more for being her father's heir, and whose strong family pride could only see in *him*, a proper match for Sir Walter Elliot's eldest daughter" (10). Her reckless dismissal of any other suitor, made even more surprising by her calculated consideration of Mr. Elliot from even before her mother died, leaves Elizabeth unmarried at twenty-nine, which the financial plight of her family makes even more unwise.

Much like their father, Elizabeth also refuses to heed any warning or advice that Anne attempts to give her, particularly where Mrs. Clay is concerned. When Anne expresses her concern about Mrs. Clay's intentions toward Sir Walter, Elizabeth insists that there is no possibility that Mrs. Clay is interested in marrying their father, nor that Sir Walter would want anything to do with her beyond friendship (33-4). By the end of the novel, we learn that not only does Mrs. Clay want to marry Sir Walter—and thus take Elizabeth's place as the de facto Lady Elliot—but she also eventually runs away with Mr. Elliot as his mistress: "Mrs. Clay's affections had overpowered her interest, and she had sacrificed, for the young man's sake, the possibility of scheming longer for Sir Walter" (234). Elizabeth's reckless dismissal of Anne's warning causes her to put her trust in someone who seeks to replace her in her father's house and ultimately takes the one man that Elizabeth could see herself marrying. Elizabeth recklessly ignores Anne's warning and puts her trust in Mrs. Clay, of which the other woman ultimately takes advantage.

As the new lady of the house, Elizabeth would have been the only real female role model for her younger sister Mary, especially once Anne was sent away to school. Upon their mother's death, Elizabeth's role shifts, yet she does not take the care to set a good example for Mary. Mary grows up to be selfish like Elizabeth, rather than kind and generous like Anne. When the conversation turns to whether or not Henrietta Musgrove ought to marry Charles Hayter, Mary's primary concern is how the match will affect her, not how it would affect Henrietta (71). Even after Louisa's life-threatening fall, Mary attempts to make the situation about her by essentially throwing a tantrum when it is recommended that she return home (107). Later, when the conversation turns to Captain Benwick, Mary childishly acts as though she does not want Anne to know someone she does not know: " Oh! As to being Anne's acquaintance,' said Mary, 'I think he is rather my acquaintance, for I have been seeing him every day this last fortnight"

(123). While the reality of whose friend Captain Benwick is truly does not matter, Mary's behavior indicates a childish selfishness that mimics Elizabeth's behavior. Elizabeth, rather than taking care with the example she set for her younger sister as lady of the house, behaves selfishly and unwisely and is, therefore, careless with the example she sets for her sister. This recklessness, however, connects Elizabeth with the rest of her family. Much like Sir Walter, most readers perceive her as being unaffected by her mother's death, but the changes in her behaviors demonstrate how intensely she has been impacted by her mother's death. This ultimately makes Elizabeth a more sympathetic character and thus contributes to Austen's form of realism.

Like Elizabeth, Mary Elliot Musgrove is rarely given any consideration by critics, and she is often written off as an immature hypochondriac. However, closer analysis demonstrates that Mary's behavior is more complex and more affected by her mother's death than she is usually given credit for. Mary, too, exhibits reckless behavior following Lady Elliot's death. While Elizabeth reckless avoids marriage, Mary does the opposite and rushes into a marriage she is not ready for. Based on the birthdates and wedding dates included in Sir Walter's Baronetage, it can be determine that Mary is only nineteen years old when she marries Charles Musgrove (5). When the novel begins, Mary is roughly twenty-two, and she Charles already have two children who are old enough to be talking and running around. This makes Mary a very young wife and mother, particularly when she is compared to her sisters, who are unmarried at twenty-seven and twenty-nine. Later in the novel, it is also revealed that Charles Musgrove had proposed to Anne "about a year before he married Mary" (82), which only serves to make Mary's choice to marry Charles seem even more rushed, as he had only proposed to her sister less than a year before he proposed to her. Her behavior makes it clear that she was ill-prepared for marriage and motherhood. She cannot bear to be alone for any real period of time, and she resents Charles for

leaving her alone, even when he is just going hunting for the morning. She tells Anne that Charles has gone out despite the fact that she was "very unfit to be left alone" and repeatedly bemoans the fact that she "[had] not seen a creature the whole morning" (36). Mary also demonstrates her immaturity through her description and treatment of her children. When Anne points out that Mary has not been alone because her children have been with her, Mary says, "Yes, as long as I could bear their noise; but they are so unmanageable that they do me more harm than good" (36). The narrator even acknowledges that "the children…respected [Anne] a great deal more than their mother" (41), something that Mary herself admits later (54). Mary's husband Charles also considers her to be the problem when it comes to their children, and he tells Anne, "I could manage them very well if it were not for Mary's interference" (42). Mary further demonstrates her immaturity by selfishly putting the care of her children as the responsibility of those around her. When she learns that her husband is going to be introduced to Captain Wentworth, she gets upset at the thought that she must care for her children instead: "So here he is to go away and enjoy himself, and because I am the poor mother, I am not to be allowed to stir;--and yet, I am sure, I am more unfit than any body else to be about the child" (53). Despite the fact that her young son has just fallen and broken his collar bone, Mary is quick to pass his care onto Anne, so that she can go on social calls. Her lack of willingness to care for her own children shows her recklessness in rushing into marriage at such a young age.

In a manner similar to Marianne Dashwood, Mary is also reckless with her reputation. She does not seem to notice or care that other people have taken notice of her hysterics. Her behavior is even referred to as "her unreasonableness" (41). Many of the people around them confide in Anne about how much Mary spoils the children and how much better behaved they are with Anne than with their own mother, yet Mary is either unaware that this is her reputation

with her extended family or does not care. Her sister-in-law Louisa is particularly vocal about her lack of respect for Mary. She tells Captain Wentworth, “she does sometimes provoke me excessively, by her nonsense and her pride; the Elliot pride” (82). She even goes on to say that she and some of the other Musgroves wish that Charles would have married Anne because she is easier to like and get along with (82). Mary is constantly concerned with who her family is connected with, and yet she seems to not consider her reputation within her own family. She behaves childishly and recklessly to the point that she is often the problem in social circles, particularly with the way that she complains that she is “always out of the way when anything desirable is going on; always the last of [her] family to be noticed” (154). Mary has a family of her own, yet she continues to try and make Anne feel guilty for going to Bath, or really anywhere, without her, which only further demonstrates how ill-prepared she was for marriage and motherhood. Though Mary, like her sister Elizabeth, is often considered unlikeable, her recklessness following her mother’s death demonstrates her inability to imagine her future without her mother in it, while also connecting her to the other characters and thus making her a more sympathetic character.

In contrast to the rest of her family, Anne is typically perceived as an example of near-perfect morality and intelligence. While she is certainly both highly moral and highly intelligent, closer examination of her behavior in the novel shows that much of her behavior after her mother’s death is out of character and even, at times, reckless. Early in the novel, Anne is described as having “an elegance of mind and sweetness of character”—often considered the exact opposite of her father and sisters (7). She demonstrates her intelligence clearly, particularly in the way that Lady Russell turns to her for thoughts and advice when she learns that the Elliots are in financial trouble, even though no one else in Anne’s family thinks to do so (13). Anne then

develops a plan that will make her family debt-free in seven years (13). In addition to her keen intellect, Anne also demonstrates strength and confidence in her opinions and decisions. When Charles Musgrove proposes to her, she refuses despite Lady Russell's wishes for her to accept (28). Anne also senses the danger in Elizabeth's friendship with Mrs. Clay and warns Elizabeth of her fears (33). Even after Elizabeth dismisses Anne's concerns, though, Anne continues to be wary of Mrs. Clay and her intentions (128). She further demonstrates this firmness of opinion in her suspicions of Mr. Elliot, which she maintains from the moment she meets him despite the fact that the rest of her family is completely enamored with him: "Still, however, she had the sensation of there being something more than immediately appeared, in Mr. Elliot's wishing, after an interval of so many years, to be well received by them" (131). Because of Anne's caution regarding Mr. Elliot, she is not entirely unsurprised by Mrs. Smith's revelation of his true character, even as the rest of her family is shocked (194-5). Anne is also firm in her friendship with Mrs. Smith. Sir Walter is harsh in his judgment of Mrs. Smith, saying, "Upon my word, Miss Anne Elliot, you have the most extraordinary tastes! Every thing that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations are inviting to you" (148). Despite her father's criticism, Anne maintains that friendship and continues to visit Mrs. Smith.

Anne's steadfastness in her opinions and choices makes it very odd that she allows herself to be persuaded to break off her engagement to Wentworth. This is particularly true because Wentworth was the only one outside of Lady Russell who has truly paid any positive attention to her since her mother died (44). While Anne has no problem with going against her father's wishes, it is Lady Russell's advice that proves to be the most persuasive: "Young and gentle as she was, it might yet have been possible to withstand her father's ill-will…but Lady Russell, whom she had always loved and relied on, could not…be continually advising her in

vain" (27). In the absence of Lady Elliot, Lady Russell stepped in as Anne's counsel and confidante. However, Anne does otherwise go against Lady Russell's advice—as in the case of Charles Musgrove's proposal—so Anne's willingness to be persuaded to break off her engagement is out of character, particularly because ending her engagement is something Anne clearly did not actually want to do: "Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given him up" (27). It is only by convincing herself that doing so is in Captain Wentworth's best interest that she is able to go through with ending the engagement, and her reluctance to be apart from him makes her compliance with Lady Russell's advice out of character for Anne.

Along with allowing herself to be persuaded to do something she does not want to do, Anne's misinterpretation of Captain Wentworth's words and actions throughout the novel is also unusual, as she is otherwise very perceptive. She notices the smallest nuances and facial expressions that those around her seem to miss. When she and Captain Wentworth are talking with the Musgroves, she notices the small changes in his facial expressions: "There was a momentary expression in Captain Wentworth's face at this speech, a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth, which convinced Anne, that instead of sharing in Mrs. Musgrove's kind wishes, as to her son, he had probably been at some pains to get rid of him" (63). As Captain Wentworth would not have wanted to offend the grieving Mrs. Musgrove, he likely to not intend for anyone to detect this expression, and Anne is the only one who does so. Anne is just as perceptive of Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove's true feelings toward her sister Mary when Mary invites herself to go walking with them: "Anne felt persuaded, by the looks of the two girls, that it was precisely what they did not wish" (77). As she proves with Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot, Anne is also very perceptive in her judgments of character. She watches Mrs.

Clay very closely: “With a great deal of quiet observation, and a knowledge, which she often wished less, of her father’s character, she was sensible that the results the most serious to his family from the intimacy, were more than possible” (33). The accuracy with which Anne closely observes the people around her makes it out of character, then, that she spends most of the novel misinterpreting most of what Captain Wentworth says and does. Like Elinor Dashwood, she often jumps to illogical conclusions, including that Captain Wentworth “wished to avoid seeing her” (55). She also assumes, when she notices his expression change when he realizes she is waiting to ride in the carriage and not her sister Mary, that he was only interested in the aid she could provide Louisa after her fall (107). For someone who is otherwise quite perceptive, these incorrect assumptions about Captain Wentworth’s behavior are out of character.

Anne’s actions are not just out of character—they are also reckless. Going through with her engagement and marrying Captain Wentworth would have given her a way out of her father’s house, and to not take that opportunity when she had it seems quite thoughtless. This is something that even Lady Russell seems to consider when she encourages Anne to accept Charles Musgrove’s proposal: “she would have rejoiced to see her at twenty-two, so respectably removed from the partialities and injustice of her father’s house” (28). Lady Russell had previously believed that Anne marrying Wentworth would have been reckless, but the true recklessness is not to do so. Anne does not consider that by refusing to marry Wentworth she must remain in her father’s house and thus prolongs her own misery. Much like Elinor Dashwood, Anne is typically considered to be better than everyone around her. While she is actually more intelligent and more ethical than the rest of her family, her uncharacteristic and even reckless behavior demonstrates that she is more like the rest of her family than critics generally think. Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and Mary remain largely unlikeable, but they are made to

be more sympathetic by their reaction to loss, and Anne's similar reaction suggests that she has at least one thing in common with them, which ultimately humanizes her, as well. This similarity between these characters highlights their common humanity and thus challenges our idea of how Austen sees the world.

The extent to which the loss of Lady Elliot impacts the behavior of the characters tends to be overlooked. Following her death, Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mary, and Anne become unable to imagine their futures in a clear way, and this causes them to behave in ways that are reckless and out of character. Sir Walter is reckless both in his management of his family's finances and in the poor examples he sets for his children. Elizabeth recklessly avoids marriage, while Mary does the opposite and rushes irresponsibly into a marriage she is too immature to handle. Anne, who is otherwise steadfast, intelligent, and perceptive, is oddly convinced to break off her engagement and jumps to illogical conclusions when she finally sees Captain Wentworth again eight years later. These behaviors are all strange and reckless, especially considering how different Anne is typically considered to be from the rest of her family. Just like in *Sense and Sensibility,* acknowledging the similarity they all have in their reaction to death both demonstrates the intense impact death has on those left behind, and also emphasizes the commonality of the characters as central to the vision of reality *Persuasion* offers.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the behaviors of the characters in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* in order to demonstrate the similarities in the characters' reactions to death—uncharacteristic and reckless behavior. Critics tend to overlook this similarity, as do Austen's readers. In a time when Austen's novels are being made into major motion pictures, BBC television series, and even YouTube series, readers have particular expectations of who Austen's characters are before they ever read the novels. The dramatized versions of these novels, which emphasize the comic elements of Austen's work, have created an expectation of romance for readers that causes them to overlook the complexities of the characters and the novels themselves. While the characters in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* are clearly depicted as being remarkably different from one another, they are more similar than they first appear. By demonstrating the characters' underlying similarity in their reaction to death, Austen creates sympathy for the characters we tend to dislike and humanizes the protagonists who are so much better than everyone around them that they can seem perfect. That similarity does not change our overall impression of these characters—we still dislike the unlikeable ones and relate to the protagonists—but it does cause the characters' reality to feel closer to ours, which is perhaps why these heroines remain so beloved by readers. By closing this gap between the protagonists and the other characters, Austen creates her version of realism—one that emphasizes the common humanity of her characters.

In these two novels specifically, Austen also seems to comment on the commonality of loss among people. She treats loss as a humanizing force, something that everyone experiences and is impacted by. Even the most moral and intelligent characters do not escape the trauma of loss and grief. Through these characters and their actions, Austen demonstrates the intense and

often long-lasting impact that loss can have on people. The recklessness that the characters embody following the loss of their parent or spouse often has severe consequences, while also serving to connect them to one another. The similarity of each of their reactions emphasizes their common humanity and thus helps to create Austen's view of reality—one that acknowledges that people are often not as different as they appear.

Acknowledging this trait of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* could lead to changes in the way that critics examine Austen's novels. While none of Austen's other novels center on characters who have lost a parent in the way the Dashwoods and Elliots do, they do contain characters who are markedly different from each other. The consistency between *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*—Austen's first and last published novels—indicates a possibility that an underlying similarity could exist among the protagonists and other characters in Austen's other novels. It would be interesting to examine, for example, whether or not Elizabeth Bennet is truly as different from the rest of the Bennet family as she appears. While the similarity Austen's other characters have may not be their reaction to death, more research should be done to examine whether or not another kind of similarity exists in any of the other novels. Additionally, the acknowledgement of Austen's form of realism may also indicate something about her work as a whole. The social satire she is often credited with is clearly not the only thing working in her novels. Her characters and their motivations are far more complex than that, which makes them more interesting to readers and is perhaps why, two centuries later, readers continue to return to Austen's novels as life-long favorites.

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