

Three Perspectives on Moral Development in Jane Austen's Novels

Mansfield Park, Sense and Sensibility, Emma and Persuasion



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK.....	4
1. THE CORRUPTION OF SOCIETY.....	8
2. MORAL LUCK.....	13
3. SENSITIVITY AND SENSIBILITY.....	18
CONCLUSION.....	23
Works Cited.....	26

INTRODUCTION

It is repeatedly argued that morality owns a substantial share in Jane Austen's novels (Tandon 15, Rodham 6, Benditt 245). Martin Price argues that it is as destructive for the characters in her novels to live entirely by principle as it is to remain completely oblivious to any kind of moral order. Austen's protagonists are ought to develop "a mind that has range and stretch, an unconstricted consciousness that can make significant choices" (269).

Characters develop this unconstricted consciousness by, for example, a process of personal growth, with a wrong morality as a starting point and the right morality as a closure. Another way that characters acquire the road to contentment is when they behave properly from the beginning, while constantly being thwarted.

In both cases, before those positive outcomes are achieved, the characters are compelled to deal with all sorts of discomfort that is frequently caused by their own or other's actions. Although the main characters are usually morally purified at the end of the story, they get acquainted with all kinds of factors that occasionally discourage them and change their view on the world.

Yet, according to Theodore M. Benditt, it is, among other matters, these setbacks that hold a considerable influence on the moral development of the characters. He states that "she (Austen) is concerned with difficulty, in real life, of clearly understanding both ourselves and others, of figuring out the right thing to do, and trying to do it in the face of our desires and life's conflicts" (246). This statement suggests that there are countless perspectives from which moral development can be investigated. The pursuit for virtue is influenced by personality, social circle, environment, upbringing and so on.

In this thesis, it is investigated how three different factors contribute to the moral development of the characters in four of the novels by Jane Austen. The novels are discussed per chapter in order of relevance. The research question is: in what way is the moral

development of the characters of Jane Austen's novels *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* influenced by the corruption of society, moral luck and the opposition between sensitivity and sensibility? In the academic framework, the existing debate is presented with regard to the factors that are mentioned in the research question. In the current debate these factors have not yet been utilized to provide a better sense of all the different ways in which Austen works with morality. They are either briefly named or applied solely to a single novel.

Subsequently three chapters follow, each of which focuses on one factor that is applied to the novels. Finally, the conclusion is drawn, in which the findings are summarized and some critical reflections and suggestions for further research are made.

ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK

In Jane Austen's novels, morality and character development play major roles. Namely, Austen's novels belong to the genre of the Bildungsroman (Moretti 72). In Bildungsromans, protagonists are usually quite young, standing on the edge of adult life. They often gain moral insight after they are struck by the consequences of their mistakes, commonly youthful indiscretions. In general, overcoming these sins coincides with growing up (Moretti 184).

Simhachalam Thamarana provides the example of Bildungsroman *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, in which protagonist Pip learns through trial and error that money cannot buy happiness (23). Moreover in *Emma*, the reader learns that Emma perishes moral insight, when she is confronted time and again with her wrong opinions.

However, their own errors are not the sole tools in Austen's novels that teaches characters to distinguish between right and wrong. This chapter studies four articles that analyze how the characters gain moral insight due to the influence of three factors.

Josephine McDonagh states that it is remarkable that Nineteenth-century authors differentiate between worldly, corrupt city life and innocent, peaceful country life (269).

Austen is no exception, as is pointed out by Joseph M. Duffy (see below). Her characters are not unaffected by this dichotomy, thus it is important to consider to what extent moral development is under pressure from the corruption of society.

Furthermore, both Robert Hopkins and Kathryn Davis express the presence of another determining factor in *Persuasion*. Davis calls this force “Providence” and links it with God (215), while Hopkins names it “moral luck” in which, although not explicitly stated, a form of karma appears to participate (145). In this thesis, Hopkins’ approach is examined.

The last factor that receives attention is not limited to literature. Numerous researches have already been done into the opposition between reason and emotion during decisions and (moral) judgements (Quartz 209, Brosch 1, Rustichini 1624). This opposition is also present in Austen’s characters. P. Gila Reinstein takes this to a greater extent by suggesting an underlying contradiction between selfishness and selflessness. She explains this contrast using *Sense and Sensibility*.

However, the character that best matches the traditional Bildungsroman is Emma. Karin Jackson writes that Emma’s mistakes are due to her pride and imagination (1). Her pride makes her believe she is always right and her imagination assigns incorrect wishes and feelings to the people around her (and herself). The article argues that she finds out about her mistakes either through the effects they have on their loved ones or through the reprimands she receives from Mr. Knightley.

Additionally, according to P. Gila Reinstein, the two sisters Elinor and Marianne make the wrong choices for an entirely different reason than Emma. Both of them represent an extreme form of either sensitivity or sensibility (269). Behind this contrast lies another contrast, that of selfishness and selflessness. The article explains that neither sensitivity or sensibility is wrong. Only when one of the two completely pushes the second to the

background, it is disapproved. Too high a dose of one or the other would automatically lead to selfishness.

According to the article, sensitivity leads to selfishness more quickly than sensibility, which causes Marianne to be more morally wrong than Elinor. Besides, the mistakes made by Marianne are more striking, since they have greater consequences for herself and her environment. Furthermore, it is explained that both Elinor and Marianne gain moral insight in the end. They both need to model their sister in some way. Elinor should be open about her feelings and Marianne needs more self-control. This is achieved when they both are confronted with great pressure. Marianne gets so carried away by her feelings that it makes her very ill, while Elinor is ultimately so overloaded with love and happiness that she can no longer contain her feelings. However, Marianne's change is more noticeable, since the consequences of her mistakes have been extra serious.

Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* is slightly different from the rest of her novels. Protagonist Fanny is a paragon of virtue. She observes and condemns the behavior of the people around her throughout the entire story.

However, Joseph M. Duffy argues that the subject of *Mansfield Park* is the corruption of society (73). In this context, the corruption of society refers to unethical issues that are either stimulated or caused by society in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century in England. It is important to be aware that the average "Englishman acquired his sense of public identity in relation to his birth, his property, his occupation and his social rank. Most women were defined by the honor of their presiding male" (Porter 59). Furthermore, according to Duffy, urban life represents the corruption of society, as the city is compared to a jungle and "real beasts are lurking there" (73). The city is sharply contrasted to Mansfield Park and country life in general. Mansfield Park is not only presented as an estate but, moreover, as a way of

life. The city's tainted influences have no impact on this remote estate, despite the imperfections of the inhabitants. Their lifestyle is calm, peaceful and elegant.

The transition from countryside mentality to city life mentality occurs as well in *Sense and Sensibility*, when Elinor and Marianne move to London. This is explained in the following chapter.

In *Persuasion*, main character Anne Elliot has to deal with additional moral issues. In his article 'Moral Luck and Judgment in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*', Robert Hopkins argues that Anne has not necessarily made a mistake by refusing Captain Wentworth's first proposal. It is true that she suffers under the consequences of this refusal. However, this is because, in hindsight, his circumstances turned out to be suitable for marriage.

Additionally, Hopkins states that Anne's motives to reject Wentworth were morally approvable (144). She turned him down out of the conviction that a marriage would be hardly capable of success, and that it was to his own advantage. In fact, Hopkins claims that moral luck plays a major role in the outcomes of Anne's decision, and that it can only be judged afterwards, whether a decision was right or wrong.

Therefore, according to Hopkins, there is less emphasis on a certain understanding Anne should gain, in order to receive love and happiness (145). It appears it is preferred that characters attempt to undertake the right thing in uncertain situations, over that they always deliver prudent, moral judgments. Hopkins claims the latter, somewhat disapprovingly, to be the case in Austen's other novels. The question is to what extent he is right, and whether Anne is actually more guided by moral luck in settling ethical choices than other characters.

The following chapters consist out of further analyzes of the functioning of the factors highlighted in the research question. Thereby, the above findings are responded to, and they are more elaborated and criticized.

1. THE CORRUPTION OF SOCIETY

As is mentioned in the previous chapter, Joseph Duffy addresses in ‘Moral Integrity and Moral Anarchy in *Mansfield Park*’ the corruption of society, as this is visible in *Mansfield Park* (73). In this chapter, all the novels are discussed in the light of this theme. Paying attention to the corruption of society describes how the world around them contributes to (or detracts from) the moral development of the characters.

Recalling English, Eighteenth-century society as described above by Porter, men were judged on their income and occupation, while women were judged on the position of their father or husband. In numerous instances both men and women went to great lengths to improve their situation. This is acceptable, provided the individual strives to improve his position in an ethical manner. However, Porter reveals that citizens were under severe pressure, on average more severe than their contemporaries in nearby societies, to enhance their social position. Above all, people from a higher rank tended to contempt people below their means. In addition, “England was a society in which the fences dividing social ranks were, in theory and in practice, jumpable” (Porter 61). At first glance, this offers opportunities for low-class people to flourish, but alternatively the combination of these circumstances form the ideal recipe for promoting social corruption. The reflection of this in Austen’s novels, is analyzed in this chapter.

Starting with *Mansfield Park*, Maria Bertram, for example, is a superficial woman who is solely bothered with her own demands. This is evident from the fact that she is discontentedly married to Mr. Rushworth. She is furtively enamored of Henry Crawford. The fact that she eventually surrenders to her desires is not merely her own fault, but is also generated by the corruption of society. As is mentioned before, women were expected to enter in a pragmatic marriage with someone conducive to their status and their wallets:

Being now in her twenty-first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty; and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as ensure her the house in town, which was now a prime object, it became by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could. (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 38)

Living up to the standards of society, marrying the rich Mr. Rushworth, transpires to make her miserable, which drives her to yield to social pressure and commit adultery.

Recollecting Duffy's theory on the difference between city and countryside life, Henry Crawford symbolizes the poisonous influence of the city, as a "worldly charmer" (79) and one of the "pleasure-loving anarchic children of the metropolis" (80). From the perspective of Maria, Henry draws the contrast betwixt a life in accordance with the expectations of society and a life of pleasure and excitement.

Nevertheless, Henry himself is also influenced by the corruption of society. His parents passed away prematurely, therefore he and his sister were nurtured together by his uncle, whom Duffy connects with London (80), and whose influence Fanny claims is harmful. His uncle is quite depraved which, according to his sister Mary, heavily influenced Henry in his character: "I assure you he is very detestable – the admiral's lessons have quite spoiled him" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 43).

On the other hand, the corruption of society can also contribute to the characters developing the right morals, instead of the wrong. During the events, Fanny Price never allowed herself to be tempted into wrong decisions. Her behavior is therefore comparable to that of Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*. Neither will be persuaded to say or do anything immoral. And that Fanny was tested is certain, as Henry did everything he could to conquer her:

She had begun to think he really loved her, and to fancy his affection for her something more than common – and his sister still said that he cared for nobody else. (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 434)

However, when the Bertram family is impacted by one crisis after another, Fanny is deeply shocked but even more determined not to allow herself to be dominated by the ubiquitous corruption:

Fanny devoted to her aunt Bertram, returning to every former office, with more than former zeal, and thinking she could never do enough for one who seemed so much to want her. (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 445)

In *Sense and Sensibility*, a clear distinction is made between peaceful, rural and corrupted, urban life. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood experience a considerably stable life in the countryside, in which they are not confronted with corrupted influences from the outside world. Their characters are not flawless, but their blemishes do not cause insurmountable problems in their environment. Marianne settles all her decisions based on how she feels about them, without involving her common sense. At home, this produces some exaggerated emotional scenes, but nothing significant.

However, only one trigger from society is needed to make the wrong choices. This trigger is Willoughby, who shares a number of similarities with *Mansfield Park*'s Henry Crawford. At first sight, he is a neat man with the intention of wooing and eventually marrying Marianne. In reality, he is an unwise spendthrift, who thinks only of himself and has hurt people in the past. He in turn has also been negatively influenced by the ideals of society. Porter argues that “extreme distinctions in wealth were sometimes sealed by attitudes which almost denied that rich and poor came from the same species” (80). Due to attitudes like this, Willoughby developed a fear of poverty that prompts him to abandon Marianne:

My affection for Marianne, my thorough conviction of her attachment to me – it was all insufficient to outweigh that dread of poverty, or get the better of those false ideas of the necessity of riches, which I was naturally inclined to feel, and expensive society had increased. (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 346).

When he breaks her heart, she drowns in self-pity and lapses into selfishness, until she makes herself terribly sick with grief before she repents. It is no coincidence that most of the drama happens in London, since this city was the place to be. A stainless reputation was paramount there, and corruption automatically more common (Porter 50).

In the end, the corruption of society benefits Marianne for the better and the worse. On the one hand, she is almost destroyed by her own incapability to deal with the depravity of the outside world, but on the other hand, she needs this setback to gain insight into her own character.

Another novel in which the characters suffer greatly from the corruption of society is *Persuasion*. As is mentioned in the previous chapter, Robert Hopkins argues that Anne's motives to reject Captain Wentworth were morally approvable (144). He bases this on the fact that Anne tells Wentworth after his second proposal, that she does not regret breaking their engagement the first time, since she obeyed her duty by turning him down.

I disagree with his theory that Anne's motives would be pure. The reason Anne backed down from their engagement, was that she otherwise would

Throw herself away at nineteen; involve herself at nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession. (Austen, *Persuasion* 25-26)

Furthermore “she was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing – indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it” (Austen, *Persuasion* 26). The

corrupt influence of society is notably evident in this argumentation, since Wentworth is judged by his opportunities in the world rather than by his character. The painful consequences of this are innumerable, not the least of which is that “she had to encounter all the additional pain of opinions, on his side, totally unconvinced and unbending, and of his feeling himself ill-used by so forced a relinquishment” (Austen, *Persuasion* 27).

Simultaneously, the fact that she suffers from her decision is also what ultimately makes her strong enough to shake off the yoke of society. She has grown to such an extent that she even dares to state that duty no longer has any value to her: ““When I yielded, I thought it was to duty; but no duty could be called in aid here. In marrying a man indifferent to me, all risk would have been incurred, and all duty violated”” (Austen, *Persuasion* 241).

The way in which the corrupt society influences Anne’s moral development is similar to Marianne Dashwood’s process, since they both initially suffer under painful social circumstances, whereafter they tackle their problems anyway.

In *Emma*, the corruption of society is on the agenda in a completely different manner. This time it is the female protagonist, Emma, herself who imposes her ideal on others. Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin writes that “in assuming an aristocratic pose replete with its abuse of power, Emma threatens to alienate the middle-class members of her community from the interests of the gentry” (422). This is reflected in, for example, the method she deals with her friend Harriet. Emma is fond of her and decides to introduce her to high society. Her motive behind this is that Harriet’s “natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her” (Austen, *Emma* 24). These assumptions eventually break Harriet’s heart, as Emma persuades her to reject Robert Martin and to fall in love with Mr. Elton, who does not love her back. When Emma considers the effects of her actions, she admits her guilt.

However, the damage she has caused is not enough to dismiss her views on class and marriage. Her social position makes her feel superior to the people around her, for example Mrs. Bates. Emma openly embarrasses her by telling a joke that hints that she believes Mrs. Bates to be stupid. She is reproached for this by Mr. Knightley, who explains in great detail why the joke was offensive:

Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! – You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honor, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her. (Austen, *Emma* 443)

Again, Emma is overwhelmed by guilt. This moment marks a major turnaround in her behavior, as her self-confidence takes a real dent for the first time. However, her ultimate repentance has little to do with her image of society, but rather with the insight in her own feelings.

2. MORAL LUCK

According to Hopkins, moral luck contributes to the events of *Persuasion*, since Anne claims that ““it was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides”” (Austen, *Persuasion* 243). Moral luck means that the correctness of a moral judgment of an individual depends on the outcome of that judgment. In his essay on moral luck, Thomas Nagel argues that “where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck” (32). Thus, moral luck is not intrinsically good or bad, nor does it depend on whether an individual has acted ethically correct. Namely, the individual is judged by the result of his actions. Moral luck is closely related to consequentialism, “a moral doctrine which says that the right act in any given situation is the one that will produce the best overall outcome” (Scheffler 1). According to Hopkins, Austen

is in *Persuasion* influenced by the insights of consequentialism, and struggling to place Anne's judgments in the context of moral luck (150).

Nonetheless, there is a variety of matters that work in the disadvantage of the theory that moral luck is the determining factor in *Persuasion*. In the first place, Anne indicates that she is “not saying that she (Lady Russell) did not err in her advice” (Austen, *Persuasion* 243) and that Anne herself “certainly never should, in every circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice” (Austen, *Persuasion* 243). Assuming Lady Russell's advice was not correct, and compared to situations in which bad advice is given in other Austen-novels, it is in truth remarkable, that Anne did not regret following it up. In *Emma* for example, Emma advises Harriet to reject Robert Martin for similar reasons Anne turns Wentworth down (low status, low income). Afterwards, both Emma and Harriet are remorseful about giving and following this counsel.

Does this signify that Anne is aware of the principle of moral luck? The answer is no, as this is rather an occasion where it is facile to make a statement afterwards. This is substantiated by the fact that in the same monologue Anne claims “I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience” (Austen, *Persuasion* 243), a claim which appears easy to disprove. To be specific, before she realized that she and Wentworth would obtain a second chance, she believed that she

was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays and disappointments, she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it. (Austen, *Persuasion* 28)

Furthermore, According to Hopkins the influence of moral luck reunited Anne and Wentworth. This simultaneously implies that if Anne and Wentworth had not been

reassembled, Anne's fate would have been determined, as she draws the conclusion that "their union, she believed, could not divide her more from other men, than their final separation" (Austen, *Persuasion* 189). Suppose life had indeed eventuated in this fashion, would she yet not have regretted her rejection?

On top of that, if her relatives and Lady Russell had still advised her not to marry Wentworth, she would probably have ignored this advice. Namely, she knows in her heart that keeping her friends and family satisfied, is outweighed by the misery of denying her true feelings.

Additionally, in the twelfth chapter an I-figure is introduced, who expresses his/her opinion on marriage. This unknown person argues:

When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth. (Austen, *Persuasion* 245)

This citation contradicts Hopkins theory on moral luck, since the consequence of this attitude is no longer a priority. The moral of the novel implies that Anne was erroneous to repudiate Wentworth at first, nevertheless she is not too late to recover the mistake when the opportunity arises. He did not enter her life again as a reward for her right decision, but he did return to provide her with a second chance after she wasted their engagement the first time. Thus, *Persuasion* fits in with the other Austen novels, holding the subsequent idea that love triumphs, inasmuch as the personages conduct themselves properly. This vision is underscored by K. K. Collins, who writes in his article "Mrs. Smith and the Morality of *Persuasion*" that "the comic resolution testifies to a providential universe that gains its rectifying strength from the power of love" (397).

The question remains whether there is nothing at all to be argued in favor of Hopkins theory on moral luck. Fortunately, the principle is somehow visible in all Austen's novels. Barbara Hardy has noticed that Austen manipulates moral luck to produce positive outcomes for the protagonists (6). She suggests that the periodically tough, yet morally correct decisions, consistently produce the right denouement for the characters. Thus, the existence of moral luck is perceptible, precisely for the reason that Austen denies its reality.

This is reflected in *Mansfield Park*, for example, as Fanny's persistence in virtue, ultimately yields her Edmund. Austen is both praised and criticized for this omission of moral luck, as it eliminates all complications that moral luck in reality might entail. Ashley Tauchert articulates that "Austen turns the tragic possibilities of meticulous realism into the comic resolutions of romance" (4).

With that in mind, it is interesting to consider some less prominent characters in her novels. Namely, it is true that the fate of other Austen characters is less straightforward to predict. Moral luck asserts itself, since their destinies are sometimes arbitrary. (Nagel 32). Commencing with the characters that receive their deserved fate, this applies, for example, to the previously discussed situation of Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park*. It is relevant as well for Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*. He made the morally reprehensible choice to consciously break Marianne's heart and was doomed to suffer from it afterwards:

Each faulty propensity in leading him to evil, had led him likewise to punishment. (...).
And the connection, for the sake of which he had, with little scruple, left her sister to misery, was likely to prove a source of unhappiness to himself of a far more incurable nature. (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 354)

However, despite the cases in which the wrongdoers are punished for their actions, there are also examples of characters that escape their deserved fate. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Ferrars is one of them. She has treated Elinor with contempt, disinherited Edward and favored

her eldest son. Despite these deeds, she is satisfied with herself and her son's marriages, and has found an indispensable companion in Lucy Steele. In this situation, moral luck is effortlessly detectable, as Mrs. Ferrars is blessed by circumstances beyond her control.

Furthermore, in *Emma* the reader is introduced to Mr. Elton. He is a superficial man who looks down on people below his means. When he realizes Emma tried to pair him up with the inferior Harriet, he is deeply insulted and as soon as he is married to a woman he does regard as his equal, "he came back gay and self-satisfied, eager and busy, caring nothing for Miss Woodhouse (Emma), and defying Miss Smith (Harriet)" (Austen, *Emma* 211-12). Numb as he is, he deliberately torments the amorous Harriet. His wife, Mrs. Elton, is hardly better than he is. Emma describes her as "self-important, presuming, familiar, ignorant, and ill-bred." Furthermore, together Mr. and Mrs. Elton treat Harriet scandalous: "Her manners too – and Mr. Elton's, were unpleasant towards Harriet. They were sneering and negligent" (Austen, *Emma* 329). However, if it were true that every Austen-character receives what he or she deserves, it would be right for them to be unhappily married. Ironically, they are content with each other, as their bad traits are a perfect match: "There was no reason to suppose Mr. Elton thought at all differently from his wife. He seemed not merely happy with her, but proud" (Austen, *Emma* 328).

From the above examples it can be deduced that Hopkin's idea of moral luck applies to some characters who make the morally wrong decisions. Nevertheless, characters that exhibit morally correct behavior, are always rewarded for their virtues. However, Barbara Hardy's more radical statement that in Austen's novels, right or wrong decisions lead automatically to the corresponding ending is not true, as the fate of the wrongdoers can be very unpredictable.

3. SENSITIVITY AND SENSIBILITY

Another method to paint a picture of the factors that influence the moral development of Austen's characters, is to characterize them as either sensitive or sensible. It is interesting to attempt to divide them in these two categories for a few reasons. Firstly, the distinction creates a more complete image of what motivates them to act the way they act, as Chelsea Helion and David A. Pizarro state that "this characterization has served as a basic organizational framework for understanding the processes involved in human judgment across a variety of domains, including moral and ethical judgment" (3). Are Austen's characters driven by deliberate thinking or by impulses from the heart?

Secondly, efforts to construct this division reveal complications that arouse wonder about the difficulties with which some characters allow themselves to be labeled.

P. Gila Reinstein argues that Marianne and Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, both represent an extreme form of either sensitivity or sensibility. In order to gain moral insight, they both need to find a better balance between these two opposites. Reinstein further substantiates this, by showing that too high a degree of one or the other leads to selfishness. Thus, she states that the underlying contradiction in the novel, is that of selfishness and selflessness.

She has a point by defending that Marianne is too guided by her feelings, and needs more self-control, as she ultimately realizes herself: "I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to my grave" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 369). Additionally, Marianne not only endangered herself by giving in too much to her feelings, but also did others short: "Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged. Every body seemed injured by me" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 369). In that respect, Reinstein's link with selfishness is also correct.

The stumbling block of her findings lies in the aspect that Elinor should change as much as Marianne. Reinstein makes some firm, disapproving statements about her behavior, but without delivering concrete examples. For example, she claims that both an overdose of sensibility and sensitivity “tend to lead to selfish, even destructive behavior” (Reinstein 269), and she states that Elinor needs to change. The question remains what that destructive behavior might entail in Elinor’s case, and why it is necessary for her to change.

Throughout the article Reinstein manages to attribute only one flaw to her. She blames Elinor for depriving herself of the help and sympathy of her loved ones, by not offering them insight into her true feelings. However, all it takes to debunk this accusation is to ask what would be the result if she actually did give her mother and sister access to her heart. Marianne was devoured by her own grief and Elinor knew that her only consolation was her knowledge of Elinor’s happiness. Allowing her this consolation was a grand gesture of selflessness instead of a fault. Susan Morgan adds that “Elinor has fulfilled her author's opening description and emerged as the moral center of *Sense and Sensibility*, having both deep affections and the willingness to control the desires of her own heart for the sake of the people she loves” (191). For approximately the same reason she did not inform her mother either.

In my opinion, all Elinor really can be blamed for is a harmless form of hypocrisy, which Marianne makes her aware of when Elinor complains that she does not confide her in her true feelings : “Nay, Elinor, this reproach from you – you who have no confidence in no one!” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 180).

Furthermore, Reinstein contradicts herself by introducing her article by asserting that “in *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen ostensibly opposes practicality and sensitivity, praising the former and censuring the latter” (Reinstein 269). This is completely contrary to the essence of the article, namely that:

To Jane Austen, neither sense nor sensibility is all-good or all-bad. Her judgement upon all the characters, including the heroines, depends on whether they use their sense or sensibility for selfish satisfaction or for the general comfort. (Reinstein 276)

This citation is a link to another argument she uses for her viewpoint. At one point, she admits that it comes across as if Marianne's behavior is more severely condemned in the novel than Elinor's behavior. To explain this, she assumes that sensitivity is more likely to generate selfishness than sensibility. According to her, people who let themselves be guided by their feelings value their own satisfaction the most. On the contrary, people guided by their mind are more likely to make choices that serve the common good.

However, the dichotomy she creates, is not necessarily true. A highly empathetic individual who decides based on his/her feelings, might be more selfless than someone predominated by reason. Research from 2014 shows that emotions do not necessarily undermine selflessness, and that people occasionally perpetrate an altruistic act, driven by their emotions (Barasch et al. 408). On the other hand, an individual who considers himself more important than others, can very well use his intellect to benefit himself (at the expense of others).

One more of Reinstein's arguments needs to be addressed. Namely, she states that "in the course of the novel, each (Marianne and Elinor) grows to be less one-sided and more like her sister" (Reinstein 269). It is obvious that Marianne ultimately follows Elinor's example, as the latter notices her newly acquired self-control. Above all, Marianne herself declares that she should have behaved like Elinor:

ELINOR: 'Do you compare your conduct with his (Willoughby's)?'

MARIANNE: 'No. I compare it with what it ought to have been; I compare it with yours.' (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 368)

On a side note, from this citation one can draw a parallel between Elinor and Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, who consistently presents her behavior as the prototype of moral conduct. The balance between reason and emotion is the sole moral matter Fanny can be caught struggling with. This is discernible when she learns that she is able to leave Portsmouth to return to Mansfield Park. The opportunity presents itself, because of the multiple crises affecting the Bertram family, and Fanny is torn between her own happiness and the knowledge that it is hugely inappropriate to be cheerful.

Returning to *Sense and Sensibility*, Reinstein attempts to substantiate that Elinor in turn, is growing to be more like Marianne. She undertakes this by showing that at the end of the novel “Elinor is so overwhelmed with emotions that she shows her feelings openly and spontaneously” (Reinstein 271). This takes place at the moment Elinor learns Edward is available for her, and again when they are engaged. Reinstein attributes this change to discovering the right balance between sense and sensibility through experience.

Nevertheless, there are some obstacles to this argument. In Elinor’s case, there is no question of her expressing her emotions as a result of a confrontation with an incorrect course of action. The sole reason she is so expressive all of a sudden, is because she is overwhelmed with joy. In my opinion, this outburst of emotion is a fair reward for her suffering and her modesty, rather than a change in her character. There exists indeed an opposition between sensitivity and sensibility in the novel, along with a contrast between selfishness and selflessness. Nonetheless, the latter depends entirely on how the protagonists deal with their preference for either sense or sensibility.

In *Persuasion* Anne initially relies too heavy on her reason. By rationalizing, she has inexorably rejected Wentworth. However, on account of the suffering she endured, her love for Wentworth eventually prevails. Nevertheless, the struggle between reason and emotion is less applicable for *Persuasion*.

In *Emma* however, it can be observed that Emma utilizes both her common sense and her intuition to thoroughly mislead herself. In her article, Karin Jackson attributes Emma's mistakes primarily to her pride and her imagination (1). It turns out that Emma's main issue stems from her incapability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, which is also quite clear from her observation of Mr. Elton:

But Emma, too eager and busy in her own previous conceptions and views to hear him impartially, or see him with clear vision, was very well satisfied with his muttering acknowledgement of its being 'very cold, certainly very cold,' and walked on. (Austen, *Emma* 128)

Simultaneously, this citation manifests that Emma has a toxic interaction going on between her mind and her feelings. On the one hand, she is blessed with an adequate mind and utilizes it to form plans and to rethink them extensively. On the other hand, her plans offer her such a degree of satisfaction that she is blind to criticism (from Mr. Knightley) and signals that prove her wrong. She has developed a tunnel vision, and therefore only perceives what fits within her opinions.

Furthermore, the novel displays that her emotions are strong, but she misinterprets them. Despite her sharp mind, she has no clear understanding of her feelings (Buskermolen 10). This is overly visible when she examines her tenderness for Frank Churchill. Initially she draws the conclusion that she is in love:

'This sensation of listlessness, weariness, stupidity, this disinclination to sit down and employ myself, this feeling of everything's being dull and insipid about the house! – I must be in love; I should be the oddest creature in the world if I were not – for a few weeks at least'. (Austen, *Emma* 306)

This citation indicates once again the twisted interaction between Emma's thoughts and feelings. She convinces herself that she feels something that is not there, based on sentiments

she does actually sense, but that stem from elsewhere. It also seems a bad fit for Emma to admit she is amorous so quickly, since she has no intention of ever getting married and desires to stay in control. However, this is currently so easy for her, since she is not actually in love.

Additionally, the impression that she is deceiving herself only enhances:

Emma continued to entertain no doubt of her being in love. Her ideas only varied as to the how much. At first, she thought it was a good deal; and afterwards, but little. (...) the conclusion of every imaginary declaration on his side was that she refused him. (Austen, *Emma* 308)

How little she comprehends of her inner passions, becomes undeniably evident when her sentiments are wholly vanished after two months of being separated from Frank: “Her own attachment had really subsided into a mere nothing; it was not worth thinking of” (Austen, *Emma* 371). Yet she remains convinced that she has been in a state of infatuation. Researcher Dorothy Tennov has learned by means of questionnaires and interviews that the average infatuation lasts for approximately two years. Naturally, exceptions occur, yet when a state of limerence lasts for less than six months, chances are it has not reached the expected intensity (Tennov 142). Therefore, I believe Emma has never been in love with Frank Churchill. The fact that she assumed she was in love, is the result of the unhealthy cooperation between her heart and her brain.

CONCLUSION

The research question that is put forward in the introduction is: in what way is the moral development of the characters of Jane Austen’s novels *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* influenced by the corruption of society, moral luck and the opposition between sensitivity and sensibility? Commencing with the first-mentioned factor, Emma stems from a higher class and possesses more wealth than the majority of her circle of acquaintances. Society in the eighteenth century learned that a woman’s status is inferred

from the status of her father or husband. However, Emma dominates her father and is sovereign, which allows her to exceed society's standards and be incredibly proud.

Subsequently, this pride prevents her from being self-reflective, thereby hurting herself and her environment. Therefore, Emma herself is being corrupted by the ideals of society and this prevents her from gaining moral insight.

On the other hand, the moral sense of Fanny and Elinor is reinforced by the corruption of society. They perceive its influence with astonished disgust and turn away from it. Marianne experiences the same disgust, but she is almost destroyed by the crimes the corrupted Willoughby commits against her. Eventually, it turns out that she needed this attack on her constitution in order to achieve moral insight.

Furthermore, Anne is also hindered in her moral development by the corrupt society. Since Wentworth does not meet the standards of society, she rejects him. After seven years, she comes to an understanding and marries him after all.

Additionally, Emma is the only protagonist who experiences the influence of moral luck. Elinor, Fanny and Anne are all rewarded for their right choices, without arbitrariness involved. Marianne is heavily punished for her selfishness, yet when she recognizes her mistakes and actually adjusts her behavior to her newfound understanding, she is still dealt a joyful fate.

Nevertheless, Emma deserves to fall off her pedestal, yet several factors deliver her moral insight and she acquires her happy ending. Her moral development is thus largely brought about by moral luck, whereas the principle of moral luck is manipulated in the other discussed novels. Remarkable is the fact that several characters other than the protagonists, are actually at the mercy of moral luck. Figures with defective personalities are usually not, or hardly ever punished for their errors.

The influence of sensitivity and sensibility is withal most noticeable in the moral development of Elinor and Marianne. In Elinor's situation, her sensibility keeps her from being overwhelmed by self-pity and helps her to put other people's interests ahead of her own. On the contrary, Marianne's hypersensitivity prevents her from being an honorable sister to Elinor and transforms her into a pathetic, feeble woman. Ultimately, Marianne learns that she must adopt a more healthy balance between reason and emotion to become a better person. Anne as well, is ought to gain an improved balance between sensitivity and sensibility. In her condition it is the other way around, as she negates her feelings for her mind. When she finally surrenders to her emotions, she acquires insight into the past.

Emma deceives herself by allowing her reason and emotions to create their own illusions, and confuse them with reality. Not until she threatens to lose her intimate association with Mr. Knightley, she realizes her deception and finally attains insight into her true feelings.

A limitation of the research is, that in the chapters certain novels obtain more attention than others, so that there is plenty left to remark about, for example, the opposition between sensitivity and sensibility in *Mansfield Park*. However, based on relevance, it was necessary to cover some novels more extensively in certain cases than others.

Suggestions for further research are analyzing *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* as well, based on the factors from the research question. Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyze the novels from a consequentialist perspective, since the principle of moral luck is closely related to this.

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