The Quest for Freedom, Morality and Self in Jane Austen’s «Sense and Sensibility»
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Every single person in the world tends to be free and independent of any other. In order to achieve this, each person struggles every single day trying to maintain their freedom and preserve their self. This quest is never an easy task to complete for the reason that it brings about many obstacles to anyone trying to reach the higher goal. A person faces this only while learning what morality is, not excluding an obligation to obey and act in accordance with it, and also while gaining personal freedom and independence and thus, consequently and eventually, preserve the self.

Such a quest is pursued and presented in Jane Austen’s “Sense and Sensibility” but from one quite different and, nevertheless important, aspect. It is realized through different characters, which clearly explains that it can be pursued in so many different manners; sometimes, sense can be a guiding star; on the other hand, sensibility can be the guide. Furthermore, money and pursuit of marriage may lead the way but always human goodness and original human nature – man’s true and immaculate self. Man does not always search for morality, or freedom, or self – nor even should – in isolation; what is crucial is that man learns and knows that all these final aims should be put together, should be combined – man should always search and long for the morality of freedom, for the freedom of the self and for the selfless self. Among all, man should always have some kind of hidden, latent potential that would serve for the purpose of finding what has been searched for; such potential is man’s idea – an idea that does have its values, but again, not in isolation. Whenever an idea is put into practice, there are always consequences which further have their own values in one way or another. As Lenin said, “ideas form the basis for people’s action, whether good or ill, whether explicit or implicit, and values result in various forms of human relationships and societies.”

In “Sense and Sensibility”, Jane Austen consistently opposes two poles – sense and sensibility, richness and rags, practicality and sensitivity. However, reading the novel, one subtler and more significant moral opposition is revealed; as already mentioned, it is the opposition between selfishness and unselfishness. This opposition, existing in most of the characters in the novel,
and characters themselves, faced with different moral discriminations and dilemmas, are altogether complex, which only strengthens the complexity of life itself. Other aspects of life and society, such as culture and its movements of the period, romanticism and classicism are also crucial moments in the novel and the lives of the characters for the reason that they determine the characters’ position in society, their status, obligations and, eventually, freedom.

The two poles are represented through the characters of the two Dashwood sisters – Elinor and Marianne – sensible and sensitive views towards life. There is an incessant battle between the reason and the heart – Elinor and Marianne. Elinor, the eldest sister of the three Dashwood sisters, always tries to rationalize every single situation and the positions she and her dearest ones find themselves in. This is clearly obvious in the scene when Lisa tells Elinor about her being engaged to Edward Ferrars; Elinor, trying to find a reasonable explanation for this, ignores the picture of him, the hair and the ring but it all becomes clear, real and true to her due to her own reasonable way of thinking. Conversely, Marianne is guided by her heart and emotions and she always finds, or even thinks to have found, love even where there is no love at all, which is clearly noticeable in the scene when Elinor asks her if there is such thing as love between Willoughby and herself where Marianne says that “it was implied, but not declared.” Jane Austen compares these two sides, poles, realized through the characters of two sisters because they are, combined together, ever-present in each person equally but exposed and shown to the environment in a considerable and particular amount.

Elinor and Marianne, together with their mother, Mrs. Dashwood, and the youngest sister Margaret, go through both good and bad things and situations; although there are things that happen throughout man’s lifetime that are unfortunately bad, they happen for a reason, among all, that the best of all possible environments, the best of all possible worlds be created. Such bad things are practically necessary just in order to achieve the best of such worlds. There is always one special kind of struggle between the two sisters, who stumble upon happiness in the manner they have not expected or believed it would happen. The struggle is revealed in its two different aspects – through Marianne, personifying the romantic ideals of the period, and Elinor, representing the rational components of the Enlightenment altogether. However, throughout her life and struggles and battles she had to lead, Marianne eventually does change and grow in her view of love. This explains her life quest in the best of manners of all. What is crucial here is to have and cherish values and good conduct since this novel is concerned, among all, with the
code of values and conduct. Following that path, some aspects and institutions must be respected and praised, such as marriage and courtship, together with family relations.

It is of high importance to emphasize that Jane Austen represents the whole society and its people’s two sides of the character; on the one hand, Elinor stands for the people acting like having no emotions or feelings and doing everything logically and sensibly; on the other hand, Marianne represents the people who are guided by their emotions, not sense or logic, and who rely on their heart exclusively. Although Elinor examines and listens to other people thoroughly and patiently, Marianne is that kind of person who thinks that she knows the best – what a person should be, act or look like; she believes that two people can be together only and exceptionally on the basis of mutual passions and that is all. Elinor does not show her emotions not even towards Edward himself, which results in his not knowing whether to and how to show his; she never truly confesses her own emotions to him throughout the novel. However, when she eventually finds out that he is not engaged to Lisa any longer, she grasps all the happiness of the world crying and finally marries him, showing her emotions and feelings in an outspoken way. Unlike her, Marianne, an impetuous, young girl of not even seventeen, feels that the highest moral duty is to respond to the beauties of the world. She literally embraces the world around her – the trees, the grass and the hills. She is supported to be doing so by the youth optimism and her own sensibility. At first not believing that she would ever find her man, Marianne, having met Willoughby, acknowledges that there really is a man out there who can satisfy her ideas and notion of perfection. Marianne is, unlike her elder sister Elinor, characterized by her own typical rashness but nevertheless confronted and tested by rationality and experience. Being completely innocent and thus lacking in self-protection, Marianne has to struggle much to bring her own quest to an end. Along that way, she is simply forced to learn much about self-discipline and compromise throughout her lifetime.

This quest cannot be accomplished if the two heroines did not possess some basic characteristics needed for someone to perform an action or make such a step. Elinor is guided by Victorian social codes as well as Christian codes. This means that in order for her to preserve her own freedom and self, and thus not lose her morality, Elinor turns to and act in accordance with the moral standards of Victorian England. On the other hand, Marianne is a type of person who is much more prone to excess and outbursts of romantic sensibility. Therefore, Elinor’s character shows that one’s freedom and self depend on adherence to sense as a value to both self-preservation and the good of the family. Eventually, she finalizes the
greatest part of her quest due to her own sense, which brings her a husband; this means that self control and character consistency together result in comfort in every sense. All of this makes Elinor a true representative of the 18th century personality due to her neoclassical restraint, resistance to emotional outbursts and romantic sensibility and extraordinary intelligence. Elinor gains this status as a result of Marianne’s romantic sensibility which tells much about Marianne’s own quest and self-preservation. It is noticeable from her behavior that her sensibility is detrimental; her quest might easily be brought to an end when she exposed herself completely and literally to her sensibility when she became ill because of bad weather which nearly brought her to death.

What is common to Elinor and Marianne – and what helps and facilitates their quest as well – are the facts that they have mastered languages and literature; they are excellent in writing and conversation; they can play music instruments; they are successful in needling; they dance almost professionally. This is what is crucial for a person to be free and independent and to belong to oneself in the real world of chances and needs, hopes and realizations, competition and extraordinariness. Had not they been this much strong, their quest would end in emptiness and vain. They could even live extravagantly but it might as well mean that they are barely alive. On their quest, in order to preserve their selves and gain complete freedom, Elinor and Marianne must enter the battle with the gender role in Victorian England. This means that they practically have to struggle through their lives without some great property and face the fact that gender does dictate acceptable behavior and roles. What strikes Marianne most on such a quest are her expectations which bring even greater drama than there really is. However, there is always Elinor, representing reality, tending thus towards subvert expectations and, consequently, putting Marianne back on the ground. At the end of their quests, Elinor and Marianne are married; it is a necessity for them... not a choice... but this point of life is not reached by Elinor so easily as it might seem; she has previously lived in discretion; she has not let other people know all that she thought or felt. Unlike her, Marianne has let other people know everything about her own emotions, probably way too much, which led her to a great deal of gossip. That is why she has remained disappointed in front of other people for expecting too much for so many times; reality turned out to be different in comparison with her own expectations. The quest on which Elinor and Marianne go depends also on their own judgment; harmful people should be avoided in order for one to remain consistent and thorough. This further brings about another obstacle that has to be overcome – self-sacrifice; it is inevitable and it is presented through the character of Elinor – she is a true model of it. This is seen when she
decides to go to London completely against her own will and when she maintains her civility at times when Marianne did not act properly. On the other hand, Marianne is preoccupied with herself only, not caring for other people. However, in order to become an independent person, she has to learn much from Elinor. Only then would Marianne be a person from whose behavior towards others other people would be able to make conclusions about some other people's behavior and characters. This is true for Elinor, from whose behavior a true estimate of Edward’s character can be gained.

Taking this into consideration, it is obvious that people should be guided by both their sense and their sensibility. The former is a true guiding star, whereas the later is here only to help it when the hardship occurs. Besides the fact that sensibility may help, it may as well mean near death as in the case of Marianne’s. Nevertheless, Elinor resisted sensibility; her neoclassical restraint created strong self control in Elinor, which made her a person with true individualism, whereas she was the very one who allowed herself very little of sentimentalism on the other hand. Marianne turned her back on romanticism in order not to deviate much from the Victorian standards. Therefore, sense can be compared to the intellectual objectivity or the objective intellect; sensibility, on the other hand, may really stand for the subjective intuition or the intuitive subjectivity, impulse behavior and the belief in the innate moral sense. Thus, sense and sensibility probably may together affect the course of life and the life quest in general but they certainly do affect the course and way of love, resulting in what has never been truly expected so far.

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