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Indifference in *Sense and Sensibility*[*]

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë famously criticizes Jane Austen as a cold lady writer indifferent to passions and uninterested in feelings. Modern Austen scholars have successfully refuted Brontë's arguments and confirmed Austen's familiarity with the business of the heart. This critical debate gives rise to two misconceptions about indifference: that it is irrelevant to Austen's art, and that it is irreconcilable with feeling. This essay seeks to redress both misunderstandings. I first define indifference as unconcern and reserve, before analyzing the formative role they play in the characters, plot, and sentences of *Sense and Sensibility*. Next, I discuss the affective core of indifference. I show that, throughout the novel, Austen frequently collapses the otherwise rigid boundaries between powerful emotions and the appearance of indifference. Just as the latter can conceal

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the former, the former may be the precondition for the latter. *Sense and Sensibility*, I conclude, is not about sense or sensibility. It is centrally concerned with feeling indifferent and with feelings in indifference. Brontë's criticism is certainly unjust, but the issue of emotional inadequacy raised therein can cast new light on Austen's first-published novel.

Key Words: indifference, *Sense and Sensibility*, unconcern, reserve

I. Introduction: Sensibility vs. Indifference

Ever since its publication on October 30th 1811, Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* has concentrated the attention of most literary critics on its title keywords. As early as February 1812, an anonymous reviewer for the *Critical Review* demonstrated the usefulness of sense and sensibility in understanding this novel: "The characters of Elinor and Marianne are very nicely contrasted; the former possessing great good sense, with a *proper quantity of sensibility*; the latter an equal share of the sense which renders her sister so estimable, but blending it at the same time with an *immoderate* degree of sensibility which renders her unhappy on every trifling occasion" (as cited in Southam, 1995: 35-36; original emphasis). Another reviewer for the *British Critic* followed suit: "The object of the work is to represent the effects on the conduct of life, of discreet quiet good sense on the one hand, and an overrefined and excessive susceptibility on the other. . . . No less excellent is the picture of the young lady of over exquisite sensibility, who falls immediately and violently in love with a male coquet, without listening to the judicious expostulations of her sensible sister" (as cited in Southam, 1995: 40). One of the greatest achievements of modern Austen scholarship with regard to this novel lies in its consistent and successful efforts to complicate the otherwise stark contrast between sense and sensibility. Ian Watt, for instance, has argued that in this novel "Jane Austen . . . brought off her supreme coup as a matchmaker, and triumphantly introduced Sense to Sensibility" (1963: 41-51). In his discussion of Colonel Brandon, Richard Jenkyns writes: "It is worth stressing that so early in the book there is a person identified as someone in whom both sense and sensibility are combined" (2007: 189). Despite their remarkable insight, Watt and Jenkyns recycle the two key terms employed by their nineteenth century predecessors. Is *Sense and Sensibility* centrally concerned with its title?

Claudia Johnson raised this question more than three decades ago and answered it with an emphatic no. “The stock terms of sensibility,” she argues, “surface [in this novel] only occasionally and somewhat vestigially” (1983: 172). Instead, uncertainty and hope “provide the most inclusive or penetrating terms for understanding *Sense and Sensibility*” (171). Although Johnson revolutionizes our interpretation of this novel by providing two new critical terms, she upholds the critical consensus that feeling, its excess, indulgence and chastisement play a central role in *Sense and Sensibility*. Thus when Johnson discusses the effect Marianne Dashwood’s hope of meeting Willoughby has on her behavior, she draws on a variety of emotional registers: happy possibility, frantic vision, anxious expectation, painful disappointment and anguished disillusionment (179-180). While Johnson seeks to rescue Austen criticism of *Sense and Sensibility* from the confines of its suggestive title, she acknowledges that this novel represents a rich emotional world and returns her readers to a world in which sense and sensibility are significant indicators.

Whether or not they adopt the traditional sensibility-oriented approach, Austen scholars agree that feelings play a central role in *Sense and Sensibility*. This critical consensus gives the lie to Charlotte Brontë’s famous accusation of Austen as a cold lady writer uninterested in emotions: “the Passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood; even to the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition” (as cited in Southam, 1995: 127). Austen scholarship in the twenty-first century continues to vindicate Austen’s familiarity with “the Passions” and to dismiss the idea of emotional impoverishment that Brontë broaches as unjust and irrelevant. [1] Interestingly, Brontë's criticism and its refutation establish a dichotomy between the infamy of frigidity and the honor of warm-heartedness, between indifference and feeling. This dichotomy is as misleading as the antithetical title of *Sense and Sensibility* has long been, not only because it underestimates the importance of emotional inadequacy in Austen's novel but also because it denies the possibility that affection and coldness can be closely intertwined. I agree with Johnson's argument that we need another key term to shed new light on *Sense and Sensibility*. I believe that indifference can best perform this critical task.

Unlike sensibility, which generally refers to an ability to feel intensely, indifference acquires two different meanings in *Sense and Sensibility*: unconcern and reserve.[2] A closer look at how Austen uses the word indifference in her text will bear out these meanings. Mr. Palmer, a minor character in this novel, treats his wife badly. He turns a deaf ear to her. When Mrs. Palmer calls on him to join her invitation of the Dashwood sisters to London, he "ma[k]e[s] no answer, and after slightly bowing to the ladies, beg[i]n[s] complaining of the weather" (Austen, 2006: 128). Mr. Palmer cares little about his wife's happiness, and his carelessness intensifies later in his public criticism of her mother, Mrs. Jennings, as a "very ill-bred" woman (129). Mrs. Palmer has a peculiar response to her husband's rudeness:

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[1] The past few years have witnessed three important accounts along this line. See Burgess (2012: 231), Guest (2013:162-187) and Wiltshire (2014: *passim*).

[2] I use the word "unconcern" rather than the more familiar eighteenth-century idea of disinterestedness because the latter word carries strong positive connotations. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "freedom from self-interest or selfish bias" (disinterestedness, 2016). The former word is more neutral in meaning. Since I will discuss both selfish disregard for the feelings of others and other innocuous forms of indifference, I believe that "unconcern" speaks much more closely to my purpose.

> Charlotte laughed heartily to think that her husband could not get rid of her; and exultingly said, she did not care how cross he was to her, as they must live together. It was impossible for any one to be more thoroughly good- natured, or more determined to be happy than Mrs. Palmer. The studied indifference, insolence and discontent of her husband gave her no pain: and when he scolded or abused her, she was highly diverted. (129)

In this passage we see indifference defined as apathy in general, and as the absence of sympathetic communication in particular. Together they characterize the interactions between the Palmers. Mr. Palmer shows no concern for his wife's psychological well-being, in a way similar to his wife's demonstrated paucity of interest in understanding the cause of his sullenness. She treats every breach of courtesy as a source of amusement: "Mr. Paler is so droll! . . . He is always out of humour" (129).

Major characters in the novel also understand indifference as unconcern. Early in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood invites Edward Ferrars to discuss the beauty of country scenery. Edward responds by forestalling any allusion to the picturesque, the popular way of appreciating natural landscape in Austen's age: "You must not inquire too far, Marianne—remember I have no knowledge of the picturesque, . . . I shall call hills steep, which ought to be bold; surface strange and uncouth, which ought to be irregular and rugged" (Austen, 2006: 112). Edward's refusal to recycle the fashionable jargons of the picturesque and his professed lack of interest in this aesthetic fashion are summarized by Elinor Dashwood as indifference: "he affects greater indifference . . . in viewing [the beauties of nature] than he possesses" (112). Later in the novel, Mrs. Jennings offers to take the Dashwood sisters to London. Firmly believing that such a journey will bring Willoughby to her again, Marianne is eager to accept her offer and, as a result, cares nothing about the potential embarrassment that Mrs. Jennings's vulgar jokes may inflict on her. Once again Austen uses the term indifference to describe this state of unconcern: "Elinor could not help smiling at this display of indifference towards the manners of a person, to whom she had often had difficulty in persuading Marianne to behave with tolerable politeness" (178).

There exists a second meaning of indifference, one that emphasizes the problem of concealed feeling. While Elinor has no difficulty understanding Marianne's disregard of Mrs. Jennings's gossipy habit, she feels puzzled when Edward becomes the subject of her interpretation. Judging from the close interaction between her sister and Edward, Marianne concludes that they must have been engaged and teases Elinor about her future marriage: "When you tell me to love him as a brother, I shall see no more imperfection in his face" (Austen: 2006, 24). Elinor "start[s] at this declaration" because, although her affection for him is sincerely reciprocated, mutual affection alone does not equal a marriage proposal (24-25).

> Elinor had given her real opinion to her sister. She could not consider her partiality for Edward in so prosperous a state as Marianne had believed it. There was, at times, a want of spirits about him which, if it did not denote indifference, spoke a something almost as unpromising. A doubt of her regard, supposing him to feel it, need not give him more than inquietude. It would not be likely to produce that dejection of mind which frequently attended him. A more reasonable cause might be found in the dependent situation which forbad the indulgence of his affection. . . . With such a knowledge as this, it was impossible for Elinor to feel easy on the subject. . . . 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. (25-26)

The concept of indifference operates in this passage on several fronts. First, Edward's occasional low spirits in Elinor's presence seems to suggest a Mr. Palmer-like disregard of a woman's happiness. Yet Edward's indifference is more complex than that of Mr. Palmer precisely because it remains at a superficial level. Edward only appears to be indifferent. This appearance of indifference, I argue, is best understood as reserve, as burying crucial feeling under the mask of emotional detachment. And this is exactly what Elinor feels. Disturbed by Edward's near-indifference, Elinor intuits that there is something about Edward's emotional world that lies beyond her ken. She tries to grasp that mysterious something by her reason but to no avail.

The passage above demonstrates a marked decrease in Elinor's assurance of Edward's affection. She begins with optimism: "[a] doubt of her regard . . . need not give him more than inquietude" because her consistent kindness toward him is bound to remove that doubt. Yet this optimism ends in temporary despair: "for a few painful minutes, she believed it to be no more than friendship." Significantly, this decrease accelerates as Elinor's thoughts touch on information about which Edward chooses to be silent. The first blow to Elinor's confidence is "that dejection of mind which frequently attend[s] him" and which he never explains. Elinor's optimistic view is further shaken by her "knowledge" about Edward's mother, about her snobbishness and about the absolute impossibility of her allowing her son to marry a poor woman. It is worth noticing that Elinor's "knowledge" comes not so much from Edward himself as from her sister-in-law Fanny Dashwood (née Ferrars). Elinor acknowledges this point earlier: "What his mother really is we cannot know; but, from Fanny's occasional mention of her conduct and opinions, we have never been disposed to think her amiable" (25). Edward, in other words, says nothing about his low spirits and his family background. Little wonder that Elinor feels that his reserve "denote[s] indifference." Little wonder that Elinor's conviction of his indifference to her as a lover coincides with Edward's staunch insistence on reticence. "[T]he longer they were together," the longer Edward's reserve gnaws at Elinor's heart. Such is Edward's reserve that Elinor "believe[s] [his affection for her] to be no more than friendship."

In *Sense and Sensibility*, indifference takes the form of either cold unconcern or apparent reserve, or both. Both valences indicate the relevance of emotional impoverishment and inadequacy to Austen's fiction. Both connect ethical concerns with the absence of powerful feeling. Who appears indifferent to whom raises the issues of social power and moral character, while why indifference is necessary complicates them further. *Sense and Sensibility* takes shape as Austen contemplates what can happen when "the Passions," as Brontë calls them, are deliberately frozen and withheld.

II. Unconcern

In her recent book, *Unbounded Attachment* (2013), Harriet Guest discusses how women writers by the turn of the nineteenth century relied on feeling to forge an imagined sense of community otherwise unavailable in a time of political turmoil. She writes: "In the decade of the French Revolution, when political debate in Britain seemed increasingly to polarize society and leave few speakers innocent of its divisions, the availability to women writers of a language of human feeling . . . which seemed to transcend social boundaries and political differences, acquired a new urgency and significance" (5). Guest argues that Austen's novels exemplify this faith in the power of affection to alleviate the anxiety of social discord. *Sense and Sensibility* is the first novel she draws on to illustrate her point. This novel, she maintains, "is the narrative of the brief period in which Elinor's intense concern for her sister creates a network of relations among what . . . would otherwise have been a disarticulated assortment of individuals" (172). Although Guest never mentions Brontë's criticism, her emphasis on the representation of sentiments in Austen's novels serves to refute Brontë's understanding of Austen as a proper lady more interested in good manners than in strong feelings. In this respect, Guest unwittingly joins other Austen defenders who vindicate Austen's familiarity with affection yet who forget that it is unconcern that characterizes many major scenes of *Sense and Sensibility* and offers a fresh insight into the emotional world of Austen's novel.

The novel begins with a disappointing will of an old gentleman, who bequeaths the lion's share of his fortune to John Dashwood and his four-year-old son Harry, thereby leaving other Dashwood women, John's step-mother and step-sisters, vulnerable to financial difficulties. This will alone, however, does not set the plot in motion. On his deathbed, John's father, Henry Dashwood, solemnly requests that he take good care of his widow and daughters. John promises to do so and plans to give each of his sisters one thousand pounds: "The prospect of [his future wealth] . . . warmed his heart and made him feel capable of generosity.—'Yes, he would give them three thousand pounds'" (Austen, 2006: 6). Had he carried out his plan, the Dashwood women would not have been poor and much of the story of *Sense and Sensibility* would have disappeared.[3] It is only when John stops "feel[ing] capable of generosity," when indifference interferes, that the plot of the novel starts to unfurl.

Mrs. Fanny Dashwood is the key figure who successfully forestalls all her husband's benevolent plans. Her success

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[3] Female poverty plays a central role in unfolding the plot of *Sense and Sensibility*. For instance, Willoughby abandons Marianne because her lack of wealth cannot promise him a life of ease and enjoyment. Mrs. Ferrars opposes the marriage of Edward and Elinor/Lucy also because neither woman is rich.

depends on extinguishing his residual affection for his relations and on replacing it with unconcern. John promises his dying father to make the lives of his wife and daughters comfortable presumably because, on that solemn occasion, he understands and sympathizes with his father's apprehension. Fanny maintains that this sympathetic bond is unreasonable and therefore untenable: "[Your father] did not know what he was talking of, I dare say, ten to one but he was light-hearted at the time. Had he been in his right senses, he could not have" made such a request (Austen, 2006: 10). After questioning the binding nature of her husband's promise, Fanny moves on to undermine his sibling love. John wishes to be a good brother: "I would not wish to do any thing mean" (11). Fanny challenges this wish by pointing out that he is not really a brother of Elinor and Marianne and that such affection is unnecessary: "What brother on earth would do half so much for his sisters, even if *really* his sisters! . . . only half-blood!" (11; original emphasis). John's personal attachment to his half-sisters is also overwhelmed by Fanny's cold "truism": "It was very well known that no affection was ever supposed to exist between the children of any man by different marriages" (10). Fanny's last sleight of hand comes when John brings up the idea of giving his step-mother Mrs. Dashwood an annuity. Fanny overrules this idea, not least by citing the trouble her mother once had in paying such a money to "old superannuated servants" (12). Here Fanny draws an analogy between Mrs. Dashwood and old servants, stressing the inability of both to contribute to her family income. Just as Mrs. Ferrars feels no affection for the latter, Fanny suggests, so should John alienate himself from the former. This comparison allows Fanny to instill cruel unconcern in her husband, one that involves the cancellation of warm sympathy.

Fanny succeeds only too well. By the end of their conversation, John becomes indifferent to the potential economic hardships of the Dashwood women and his generous plan dwindles into a decision to help them move their things to a new house when necessary. Ruth Perry has argued that Austen's age witnessed a sharp decline of women's economic power and independence. Through the manipulation of jointure and dowry, the development of waged labor and the redistribution of lands, wealth was increasingly concentrated in the male line. Perry terms this historical development "the great disinheritance" of daughters (2004: 38-75). Perry has explained in details the legal and social factors underpinning and facilitating this development. Austen's novel reveals another, less documented, aspect. The great disinheritance happens also because the possessor of wealth chooses to be indifferent to the financial insecurity of his sisters.

John Dashwood's rapid switch from generosity to indifference is perhaps understandable given his natural propensity for apathy: "Mr. John Dashwood had not the strong feelings of the rest of the family" (Austen, 2006: 5). Unconcern and strong feeling, it seems, are irreconcilable. But Austen incorporates another, more subtle, understanding of unconcern in her text. Through the example of Marianne, Austen shows that the problem of unconcern can infiltrate emotional demonstrativeness and that it in fact constitutes part of a character's powerful feeling. The fluctuation of Marianne's emotions, covering romantic longing, lovesickness and traumatic disappointment, is always characterized by excess. Situating Marianne's emotional excess in the context of the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, many literary historians demonstrate that Marianne's susceptibility to strong feelings establishes her as a sentimental heroine, that her indulgence in them indicates the decline of such culture by the turn of the nineteenth century, and that her recovery from morbid sentiments reveals the priority of self-control over self-expression. [4] Compelling as these analyses are, they understand Austen's treatment of Marianne simply in terms of emotional investment. It seems that Austen depicts a woman of feeling calculated to arouse readers' sympathy because she desires us to appreciate the power and danger of youthful love.[5] Missing from this critical commonplace is an important question involving a subtle distinction: why is it that, while many readers feel sorry for Marianne when she marries Colonel Brandon at the end of the novel, few can sympathize with Marianne's early lovesickness?[6] I would contend that it is because Austen works as much on Marianne's attachment to Willoughby as on her detachment from everyone else. The problem of indifference, as much as that of emotional fluctuations, plays a formative role in Marianne's development.

Consider one famous passage describing Marianne's misery after Willoughby abruptly leaves her:

> This violent oppression of spirits continued the whole evening. She was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself. The slightest mention of any thing relative to Willoughby overpowered her in an instant; and though her family

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[4] A classic example of this argument can be found in Butler (1975:182-196). Benedict also suggests that, like many other late eighteenth-century novels, *Sense and Sensibility* "depict[s] [its] characters' passionate feelings . . . [but] enclose[s] these portraits within a narrative endorsing restraint, contemplation and self-control"(1994: 210).

[5] Walter Scott's 1815 review of Austen's novels demonstrates the affecting power of Austen's narratives. Having read *Sense and Sensibility*, Scott apparently sympathizes more with Marianne: "Who is it, that in his youth has felt a virtuous attachment, however romantic or however unfortunate, but can trace back to its influence much that his character may possess of what is honourable, dignified, and disinterested?" (as cited in Southam, 1995: 68).

[6] Readers' dissatisfaction with Marianne's marriage can be found in Mudrick (1968: 91-93) and Tanner (2007: 100-101). I will address this issue later in this essay.

> were most anxiously attentive to her comfort, it was impossible for them, if they spoke at all, to keep clear of every subject which her feelings connected with him.
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> Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. . . . But the feelings which made such composure a disgrace, left her in no danger of incurring it. . . . She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough! (Austen, 2006: 95-96)

On the face of it, this passage discusses Marianne's passions and represents one of a few occasions in the novel where the title key word "sensibility" occurs. Indicating an ability to feel strongly for another party, be it a human being, an animal, a piece of art or natural landscape, sensibility in Austen's age evokes sympathetic interaction, one that bridges the artificial distances of gender, class, race and age. [7] This passage, however, casts doubt on the usual assumption that sensibility is the crucial concern in this novel, not least because sympathetic exchange, the hallmark of the eighteenth-century sentimental culture, is conspicuously absent here.

For one thing, an invisible wall is established between Marianne and her family as Marianne shuts down all avenues of communication. She is "unable to talk" and "forbid[s] all attempt at consolation from" her friends. Moreover, absorbed in her sorrow, Marianne shows no concern for the discomfort she causes her family. This absence of reciprocal sympathy suggests that unconcern is Austen's real narrative focus. Austen

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[7] Julie Ellison, for instance, argues that "sensibility mattered because it provided a way to feel toward others across distances of place, time, race, and social class" (2012: 41).

even encourages her readers to refrain from sympathizing with Marianne. Few readers can retain their gentle feeling for Marianne when he realizes that she can be strong but chooses not to: "She was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself." The superior importance of emotional detachment in this passage can be explored on the sentence level. We are told that Marianne's behavior "giv[es] pain every moment to her mother and sisters." Do her mother and sisters experience pain because they are admitted to the recess of Marianne's heart and are able to understand it or because they are not? The syntax, framing this phrase within Marianne's defiant self-absorption ("unable to talk"; "forbidding all attempt"), supports the latter interpretation. If readers of *Sense and Sensibility* are encouraged to distance themselves from Marianne's sorrow and to dismiss it as self-inflicted trouble, Marianne's family, whose affectionate gestures either meet rejection or serve to exacerbate her grief, are forced to assume the role of an indifferent bystander.

The problem of unconcern dominates the representation of Marianne after she learns a lesson from her unsuccessful romance. Significantly, this lesson involves not so much the danger of her "unguarded affection" as the moral inadequacy of her indifference (Austen, 2006: 390). In the presence of Elinor, Marianne does not even wish to discuss her old affection: "I do not mean to talk to you of what my feelings have been for him" (390). But her comments on her disregard for other people's feelings span two pages of the novel: "the unceasing kindness of Mrs. Jennings, I had repaid with ungrateful contempt. To the Middletons, the Palmers, the Steeles, . . . I have been insolent and unjust, with an heart hardened against their merits . . . Your [i.e. Elinor's] example was before me; but to what avail?—Was I more considerate of you and your comfort?" (392). This textual imbalance is suggestive, because it implies that the novel in fact dwells much more on Marianne's social awkwardness than on her love of Willoughby. Indeed, Marianne is early described as lacking in social grace: "she was every thing but prudent" (7). When Marianne famously shows no interest in flattering Lady Middleton, "upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies . . . always fell" (141). Even in those descriptions of Marianne's interaction with Willoughby the narrative focus frequently shifts to Marianne's indifference to everyone else apart from her lover, to everything else apart from seeing him again. Thus their courtship in Barton cottage can be summarized in one sentence: "[w]hen he was present she had no eyes for any one else" (64). Thus another sentence suffices in encapsulating Marianne's sojourn in London: "At one moment she was absolutely indifferent to the observation of all the world, at another she would seclude herself from it for ever" (228). There certainly are brief discussions of Marianne's feeling *per se*. But they tend either to be placed in the context of unconcern or to introduce the problem of indifference again. Marianne's anxious expectation to see Willoughby, for example, renders her oblivious to common courtesy (184). And her traumatic encounter with Willoughby results in a cynical belief that the gossipy Mrs. Jennings could not feel her sorrow (228).

Of course, the unexpected meeting of Marianne and Willoughby in a London party marks the apex of Marianne's emotional excess. But once again, indifference and its social ramifications lie at the heart of this dramatic scene. We see Marianne "give way in a low voice to the misery of her feelings" (Austen, 2006: 202). At the same time we understand that it is Willoughby's cold politeness, the conspicuous absence of his former passion for Marianne, that occasions her sorrow in the first place. Moreover, Austen quickly whisks a grieving Marianne away from her narrative and, in her stead, places a thinking Elinor contemplating on the cause of Willoughby's cold formalities. Judging from his unwillingness to come closer to Marianne in the party, Elinor assumes that Willoughby must have been "weary of" her sister (203). But she also detects clues that contradict this assumption. Willoughby evidently is embarrassed and uncomfortable when he acts like a stranger to Marianne. His embarrassment predisposes Elinor to believe that he is not a cold-blooded scoundrel as he appears to be (203). In other words, Willoughby's indifference goes beyond the confines of unconcern. It suggests that he has important feelings to convey, finds it impossible to do so in public and can only find shelter in the appearance of coldness. The problem of indifference is intimately connected with the issue of reserve.

III. Reserve

It is important to note that Brontë's criticism of Austen is couched in terms of reserve: "the Passions are perfectly unknown to her; . . . to the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition. . . . Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet; what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full . . . what is the unseen seat of Life . . . *this* Miss Austen ignores" (as cited in Southam, 1995: 128; original emphasis). In her attempt to describe Austen as a passionless writer, Brontë mobilizes the contrast between surface and depth, between what one perceives with her five senses and what one feels with her heart. Brontë argues that Austen privileges the former at the expense of the latter. There is, however, an interesting concession in Brontë's comment. Instead of maintaining that Austen is a heartless woman, she suggests that "[her] business is not *half so much* with the human heart as with the human eyes" (128; my emphasis). What irritate

Brontë are Austen's reserve, her refusal to explore emotions thoroughly, and her insistence on giving feelings at best a "distant recognition." Reserve, for Brontë, is a sign of emotional inadequacy, signifying one's inability to feel strongly and her indifference to the calling of the heart. Brontë implies that a great novel cannot be born out of reserve. *Sense and Sensibility* proves her wrong, not least by showing how closely connected reserve and feelings are.

Brontë defines a great novel as one that displays "deep feeling."[8] She dislikes reserve because it apparently shuts down all avenues toward the human heart, the voice of which she values highly. In sharp contrast, in *Sense and Sensibility* it is reserve that allows us a glimpse of the deepest feeling of its characters, not least because Austen consistently shows it to be a result of harboring a secret. Critics have noticed that secrecy is a crucial theme in this novel and have discussed it in terms of concealment.[9] But if we pay attention to reserve and its social ramifications, we can see that Austen explores the revelatory power of secrecy as well. A case in point lies in Colonel Brandon's sudden termination of his visit at Barton Park. This incident demonstrates the extent to which reserve has permeated the world of *Sense and Sensibility*. It not only affects social interactions but also provides important glimpses of the characters' moral and psychological universe. Brandon has promised to take his friends to visit Whitwell, a fine country estate. The unexpected arrival of a letter scuppers this plan. Brandon feels obliged to leave for London immediately yet says nothing about the cause. Creating an air of secrecy, his

[8] In another of her letter about Austen, Brontë associates "poetry" and "sentiment" with "deep feeling." She contends that Austen "cannot be great" because she writes without sentiment and poetry (as cited in Southam, 1995: 127).

[9] For important arguments along this line, see Morgan (1980: 115), Tanner (2007: 80) and Wiltshire (2014: 29).

reticence makes him liable to the charge of being indifferent to social courtesy, a criticism that Willoughby does not hesitate to voice: "[Brandon] was afraid of catching cold I dare say, and invented this trick for getting out of it" (Austen, 2006: 76). Significantly, Willoughby's opinion is expressed "in a low voice to Marianne" (76). Common courtesy forbids him to criticize Brandon in public, but he communicates what he really feels at heart to Marianne. Willoughby's whispering offers an early clue that he does not do everything above board and that the voice of his heart is not always honorable. Moreover, Brandon's behavior sets in motion Mrs. Jennings's inquisitive imagination. Envisioning alternately that Brandon "must have been sent for about money matters," about his illegitimate daughter and about his sick sister, Mrs. Jennings "wishes him out of all his trouble with all [her] heart" (82-83). Here we see early evidence of Mrs. Jennings's sympathetic heart, one that deserves commendation despite its owner's vulgar manners. Obliging him to be reserved and encouraging him to brave criticism, Brandon's hitherto-undivulged secret also reveals Willoughby's and Mrs. Jenning's "deep feeling."

The revelatory power of Brandon's secrets becomes more apparent when it is Elinor who shows some interest in them. Brandon quietly admires Marianne when her romantic relationship with Willoughby attracts public raillery. Elinor's thought casts Brandon's situation in a sympathetic light:

> She saw it with concern; for what could a silent man of five and thirty hope, when opposed by a very lively one of five and twenty? And as she could not even wish him successful, she heartily wished him indifferent. She liked him—in spite of his gravity and reserve, . . . his reserve appeared rather the result of some oppression of sprits, than of any natural gloominess of temper. Sir John had dropt hints of his . . . being an unfortunate man, and she regarded him with respect and compassion. (Austen, 2006: 59)

Brandon's reserve, his unwillingness to showcase his affection for Marianne as openly as Willoughby, does not indicate a passionless character, as Brontë's criticism of Austen would have us believe. Rather, it is the result of having experienced such passions. Brandon's reserve does not annoy a spectator capable of feeling, as Brontë suggests that it must. Instead, romanticized by a secret history, it excites Elinor's "compassion." Such is Elinor's compassion for Brandon that, for his own sake, she wishes that he carry his reserve even further. Brandon has been showing little apparent affection for Marianne. Elinor wishes that he has none: "she heartily wished him indifferent." While this short sentence implies that forgetting is the best cure for unrequited love, it also summarizes the affective texture of indifference. The absence of feeling ("indifferent") has a lot to do with the business of the heart ("heartily").

The affective implications of reserve can be explored further in Elinor's own experiences. Edward's secret engagement with Lucy Steele weighs on his mind and forestalls any open expression of love for Elinor. He appears reserved when he meets Elinor again after a brief separation: "On Edward's side, . . . there was a deficiency of all that a lover ought to look and say on such an occasion. He . . . looked neither rapturous nor gay, said little but what was forced from him by questions, and distinguished Elinor by no mark of affection" (Austen, 2006: 100). This behavior nearly convinces Elinor of his utter indifference to her: "the continuance of his preference seemed very uncertain" (111). Elinor feels hurt as a result, but, unlike Marianne who "exclaimed in a voice of the greatest emotion" at Willoughby's cold formality, she withholds her "greatest emotion" and appears unconcerned about Edward's un-lover-like reticence (201). The passage describing Elinor's response deserves close attention:

> His coldness and reserve mortified her severely; she

> was vexed and half angry; but resolving to regulate her behaviour to him by the past rather than the present, she avoided every appearance of resentment or displeasure, and treated him as he ought to be treated from the family connection. (102-103)

In this passage we see Elinor's anger and resentment subside as social expectations exert a cooling effect. Edward's role as her guest and the brother of her sister-in-law compels her to be polite to him. Elinor does not show, let alone tell, Edward that she is displeased. If Edward holds back his genuine feeling in the presence of Elinor, so does Elinor in his. But Austen takes care to reveal that Elinor's reserve is not devoid of powerful feeling and that family connections alone do not fully explain Elinor's calm appearance. Elinor thinks of those good old days when Edward's affection for her was incontrovertible and this happy memory enables her to resist emotional demonstrativeness: "resolving to regulate her behaviour to him by the past rather than the present, she avoided every appearance of resentment or displeasure." Elinor's passionless appearance is underpinned by and suffused with her affection for her lover.

IV. The Affective Core of Indifference

If, as demonstrated above, indifference is the central issue that Austen deals with in *Sense and Sensibility*, why is it that this issue rarely attracts critics' attention? To ask this question is to reconsider the assumed dichotomy between indifference and feeling, a dichotomy that has dominated the study of feelings in Austen's novels. For most Austen scholars, *Sense and Sensibility* seeks to cultivate readers' sympathetic appreciation of another individual's peculiar circumstance and to celebrate those characters who possess this ability. Thus the diffident Edward becomes attractive to the eyes of Elinor, who pleads that it takes time to understand his intrinsic worth: "His abilities in every respect improve as much upon acquaintance as his manners and person" (Austen, 2006: 23). Even the morally corrupt Willoughby is saved from utter condemnation by his confession. After listening to his story, Elinor "forgave, pitied and wished him well" (376). Such is the narrative's endorsement of sympathetic understanding that, when Austen fails to sympathize with Marianne's youthful infatuation with Willoughby and decides to marry her off to Colonel Brandon, her readers feel dissatisfied. To the eyes of Marvin Mudrick, Marianne's strong emotions have long been "the life and center of the novel" (1968: 93). He famously argues that Marianne's final withdrawal into domestic peace and calm reveals her author's moving away from and eventual burial of "the heart of passion" (91). This plot arrangement induces Mudrick to suggest that, despite her creation of a sentimental heroine, Austen after all is a cold lady fundamentally "against feeling" (91). Mudrick's complaint indicates a disjunction between the unfeeling conclusion and the bulk of the novel celebrating "the heart of passion." This textual discontinuity annoys him and gestures toward another reason why indifference largely eludes critical accounts of this novel. Critics tend to assume that indifference and feeling are opposites. In a novel supposedly dominated by strong feeling, indifference is at best a tangential issue.

Enit Karafli Steiner's recent discussion of *Sense and Sensibility* demonstrates how persistent the opposition between feeling and indifference can be in Austen scholarship. Steiner argues that the ability to "enter into another's feelings" plays a central role in the development of Elinor and Marianne (2012: 86). This novel, therefore, bears witness to "the transformative power of what Adam Smith called 'sympathy,'" a power that seems antithetical to either unconcern or reserve (87). Understandably, in her attempt to scrutinize the circulation of feeling in Austen's novel, Steiner bypasses the issue of indifference. But Steiner does not perceive that unconcern and reserve lurk behind the façade of sympathetic conversation and that behind the appearance of indifference there lie powerful emotions. In other words, the assumed absence of feeling in *Sense and Sensibility* is never a straightforward lack. The boundary between absence and presence blurs as we pay attention to the affective core of indifference in Austen's novel.

The interaction between Elinor and Lucy exemplifies this point. Ever since their acquaintance began, Lucy "missed no opportunity of engaging [Elinor] in conversation, or of striving to improve their acquaintance by an easy and frank communication of her sentiments" (Austen, 2006: 146). Elinor, however, resists such familiar gestures with her "[caution in] giving her real opinion," her "civil reply" and even her "silence" (147). Although fully aware of Lucy's "want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind," Elinor withholds her genuine feeling and does not openly condemns her (146). Her reserve preserves the veneer of sympathetic friendship and underscores its shallowness. The superficiality of their friendship becomes most apparent when Lucy communicates to Elinor her secret engagement with Edward. It is a conversation where sympathy is in crisis. Acting a sentimental heroine, Lucy laments:

> "I only wonder that I am alive after what I have suffered for Edward's sake these last four years. Every thing in such suspense and uncertainty; and seeing him so seldom—we can hardly meet above twice a-year. I am sure I wonder my heart is not quite broke."
>
> Here she took out her handkerchief; but Elinor did not feel very compassionate.
>
> "Sometimes," continued Lucy, after wiping her eyes, "I think whether it would be better for us both, to break off the matter entirely." As she said this, she

> looked directly at her companion. "But then at other times I have not resolution enough for it.—I cannot bear the thoughts of making him so miserable, as I know the very mention of such a thing would do. And on my own account too—so dear as he is to me—I don't think I could be equal to it. What would you advice me to do in such a case, Miss Dashwood? What would you do yourself?"
>
> "Pardon me," replied Elinor, startled by the question; "but I can give you no advice under such circumstances. Your own judgement must direct you." (152-153)

In this passage we see Elinor readily dismissing Lucy's sentimental posture as a falsehood that deserves no sympathy. Lucy's tears meet Elinor's refusal to participate in her emotions. Austen's concise sentence structure ("Elinor did not feel very compassionate") suggests that this refusal is Elinor's spontaneous response unaided by her characteristic thoughtfulness. Noticing that her effort to engage Elinor's feeling fails, Lucy opts for a new strategy. Instead of focusing on her suffering alone, she talks about that of Edward and offers a solution out of this conundrum: ending the engagement. As this solution would free Edward to marry another woman, it is reasonable to expect Elinor's obvious interest in this proposal. Lucy's direct gaze at her companion betrays her expectation to see Elinor's consequent emotional turmoil. But Elinor once again refuses to dance with Lucy's tune. Her reply, deliberately cold and polite, distances herself from the difficulties besetting Lucy. Elinor appears an indifferent spectator to the emotional drama that Lucy stages in front of her. Her indifference defends her against Lucy's triumphalism and disarms her hurtful claim on Edward's affection.

Into this scene of verbal duelling Austen drops important clues that indifference need not mean emotional impoverishment. Elinor may appear reserved and unconcerned in the presence of her rival, yet Austen repeatedly draws our attention to the emotional turbulence hidden behind her calm face: "her heart sunk within her," "under [her composure of voice] was concealed an emotion and distress beyond any thing she had ever felt before" (Austen, 2006: 154-155). The affective core of indifference recurs in the second confrontational dialogue between Elinor and Lucy. Having contemplated on Lucy's words for a while, Elinor decides to discuss with Lucy the secret engagement again. In particular, they talk about Edward's feeling. Lucy boasts of Edward's constancy, to which her rival replies:

> "That conviction must be every thing to you; . . . If the strength of your reciprocal attachment had failed, as between many people and under many circumstances it naturally would during a four year's engagement, your situation would have been pitiable indeed."
>
> Lucy here looks up; but Elinor was careful in guarding her countenance from every expression that could give her words a suspicious tendency. (168)

Indifference in this passage involves more than the absence of feeling. Elinor hypothesizes that Edward's love for Lucy has died out. Her hypothesis in fact rests on a deeper assumption that Edward's affection for her occasions his indifference to his fiancée. When she apparently seeks to hurt her rival by an unwelcome hint ("If . . . your reciprocal attachment had failed"), she wraps up her attack with her alleged sympathy ("your situation would have been pitiable"). Elinor may carefully "guard[ ] her countenance from every expression" and appear emotionless. Yet following Lucy's inquisitive eyes, we are invited to speculate about the cauldron of emotion seething behind Elinor's performance of unconcern.

Austen gives the affective core of indifference another touch as her narrative draws to an end. After Nancy Steele carelessly exposes Lucy's secret engagement, Elinor tells Marianne that she has known it for four months, during which she behaved as if nothing had happened. Marianne interprets the appearance of indifference in terms of emotional inadequacy, as Brontë did. Assuming that Elinor is able to remain calm in the face of disappointed love because she does not love Edward very much, Marianne says: "if the loss of what is most valued is so easily to be made up by something else [i.e. wishing Edward a happy marriage], . . . your self-command, [is] . . . a little less to be wondered at" (Austen, 2006: 298). Elinor tries to undeceive her sister. She is able to "appear indifferent where [she] ha[s] been most deeply interested" (299) because, she tells Marianne, "I did not love only him" (297). The adverb "only" challenges and transforms Marianne's understanding of Elinor's indifference as lack of feeling. It suggests the presence of another form of feeling that exists alongside romantic yearning. Elinor succeeds in appearing calm and unconcerned because her strong affection for her family trumps her inclination to indulge in her personal sorrow: "while the comfort of others was dear to me, I was glad to spare them from knowing how much I felt" (297).

The extinction of Marianne's strong feeling has long been regarded as the key element in her transformation. When Mudrick argues that "Marianne . . . has been betrayed" (1952: 93) by her author, he is lamenting the loss of Marianne's "heart of passion" (91). More recently, Shawn Lisa Maurer sees Marianne as an emotionally unstable adolescent and maintains that by the end of the novel she has outgrown "psychological excesses" typical of a teenage girl (2013: 750). But the role feeling plays in Marianne's emotional maturation is more complex than both critics allow. Consider one passage where a repentant Marianne agrees to behave calmly and courteously even when Elinor's enemy is commended and Edward's youthful indiscretion celebrated:

> These were great concessions;—but where Marianne felt that she had injured, no reparation could be too much for her to make.
>
> She performed her promise . . . to admiration.—She attended to all that Mrs. Jennings had to say upon the subject, with an unchanging complexion, dissented from her in nothing, and was heard three times to say, "Yes, ma'am."—She listened to her praise of Lucy with only moving from one chair to another, and when Mrs. Jennings talked of Edward's affection [for Lucy], it cost her only a spasm in her throat. (Austen, 2006: 300)

Indifference and emotions jostle for attention in this passage. Marianne's quiet attention, her "unchanging complexion" and her mechanical repetition of "Yes, ma'am" all suggest that she tries to appear unconcerned in a discussion of Edward's early engagement. At the same time, her "moving from one chair to another" and "a spasm in her throat" betray powerful feelings beneath the calm surface. Moreover, Austen takes care to show that Marianne's newly-acquired skill of reserve should be attributed to her love for Elinor, upon whom she has inflicted emotional pain unwittingly: "where Marianne felt that she had injured, no reparation could be too much for her to make." Marianne certainly learns a lesson. That lesson is not to smother strong emotions or to replace them with prudence but to appreciate the presence of affection in alleged indifference.

Readers are also invited to learn this lesson. *Sense and Sensibility* concludes with the apparent unconcern of Marianne's friends for her marital happiness. Marianne speaks not a word when all her family wish her to be the wife of Brandon: "They each felt his sorrows, and their own obligations, and Marianne, by general consent, was to be the reward of all. With such a confederacy against her . . . what could she do?" (Austen, 2006: 429). Austen's choice of word ("their own obligations," "reward" and "confederacy against her") conjures up the problem of indifference. On the face of it, Marianne's friends care more about rewarding their benefactor than about her happy marriage. But close attention to Austen's text reveals a different story. They promote the marriage also because they genuinely believe that Marianne "[would find] her happiness in forming [Brandon's]" (430). This belief is corroborated by future events: "Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became . . . as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby" (430). Austen encourages us to penetrate the façade of indifference and to appreciate its affective core.

V. Conclusion

The willingness to acknowledge the link between indifference and affection is exactly what is lacking when Austen critics discuss whether and how she represents feeling in her novels. Brontë's famous criticism establishes reserve as a serious weakness that damages Austen's reputation as a great writer. Modern refutation of this charge, be it Burgess's and Guest's historical approaches or Wiltshire's close reading, certainly proves Brontë wrong and uncovers an Austen deeply interested in emotional complexity. At the same time, however, they unwittingly agree with Brontë that indifference is a derogatory term. Their defense of Austen implies that to discuss indifference in relation to Austen's novels is irrelevant, unjust, and even disrespectful. Their argument may seem a far cry from that of Brontë, but they share her view that indifference and affection are irreconcilable. Brontë believes that a reserved woman like Austen cannot feel much, while twenty-first century Austen scholars assume that a feeling Austen cannot be interested in unconcern.

Sense and Sensibility encourages us to reconsider these misconceptions. The problem of indifference does not detract from, but underlies, the greatness of Austen's art. In the form of unconcern and reserve, it infiltrates Austen's characterization, plot and even sentence formation. Feeling and indifference are not antithetical. Powerful affection, Austen shows, can lie behind an emotionless appearance. The former is even necessary to sustain the latter. Of course Brontë is wrong in denouncing Austen as a stranger to strong passions. But the idea of emotional inadequacy that she raises provides a new perspective through which we can read Austen's novel afresh. Austen's first-published novel is not about sense or sensibility, but about feeling indifferent and feelings in indifference.

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《理性與感性》中的漠然

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摘要

英國小說家夏綠蒂・伯朗蒂曾批評珍・奧斯汀是一位冷漠的作家，此一評論引發後世奧斯汀學者的反彈與駁斥。冷漠被認為是和奧斯汀小說無關的議題，因為它和情感似是兩個極端。本文嘗試破除此一偏見。首先，作者細究奧斯汀在《理性與感性》中如何使用冷漠 (indifference) 一詞，並定義冷漠為不關心 (unconcern) 與未言之情 (reserve)。從此角度來看，冷漠主導了小說中角色發展、劇情變化甚至句型結構。奧斯汀不認為冷漠與情感乃兩對立的概念，前者可能遮掩了後者的存在，後者也可以是前者存在的必要條件。伯朗蒂提出的漠然議題能讓我們重新思考《理性與感性》的意義與價值。

關鍵詞：漠然、《理性與感性》、不關心、未言之情