

"i have suffered now":
jane austen's
repressed romantic



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Elinor Dashwood's famous speech in Volume III of *Sense and Sensibility*, in which she gives vent to emotions long-repressed, is in many senses the heart and soul of the novel. Having suffered through months of silent disappointment, endured for the sake of obligation and propriety, Elinor is at last given the chance to explain her passivity to her sister Marianne—to whom the very mention of such quiescence is an enigmatic outrage. It is generally held that Elinor's defense of discretion is Austen's own voiced espousal of so-called sense over sensibility; and while this may be true, it is not the passage's only truth. Starting with Marianne's denunciative summation of Elinor's "way of thinking" (246), there unfolds a bewitching shift in both women's apparent intonations. Before long it is Marianne who speaks the language of coolheaded restraint, and Elinor who indulges in intense theatricality. Keeping in mind the fact that Elinor's speech at this juncture is meant to represent everything she stands for, it is undeniably interesting that she actually delivers it in a manner that represents everything she stands against. Austen is careful to set Elinor up as the victor in this passage, and in this she succeeds—but the methods she ends up employing cast some doubt on the staunchness of the argument she means to represent. Before Elinor reaches her celebrated outburst she gives an earlier, more collected explanation of her actions. It is to this first speech that Marianne's offers a rather cold reply, which goes a long way in alienating any reader that might not already hold their allegiance with Elinor. Besides the fact that the entire novel has been told predominantly from Elinor's point of view, Marianne is here jumping to conclusions about things that the Elinor, the narrator, and most importantly the reader have all understood for much longer than she has. She has only just discovered that

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Elinor has secretly known the man she loves to be engaged for months, but her initial shock at Elinor's resignation quickly gives way to a simplistic and ungenerous reasoning away of it—possibly the closest Marianne ever comes to meanness with respect to her sister. “ If such is your way of thinking,” she says, “ if the loss of what is most valued is so easily to be made up...your resolution, your self-command, are, perhaps, a little less to be wondered at” (246). The key word here is “ easily;” Marianne cannot yet believe that a person with deep-rooted feelings could have borne Elinor's situation at all, let alone with anything like dignity, so the fact that her sister has done so begs the conclusion that she is shallow enough to find it easy. It is important to note that Marianne's response at this juncture shows more restraint and cool collection than we have ever seen from her before; in keeping with the reply's spiteful spirit, it is fashioned in an almost facetious mockery of Elinor's self-control. Though the narrator tells us that Marianne is in fact “ much struck” (246) by Elinor's restraint, she muses primly that upon reflection it is “ a little less to be wondered at.” The ideas of “ little” and “ less” are linked by alliteration to strengthen the very smallness in scope of Marianne's utterances. And nowhere is this pettiness more pronounced than in her next sentence—in which, having explained and belittled Elinor's merits, she concludes that “ they are brought more within my comprehension” (246). For Marianne, this is a somewhat wordy and mild way of essentially saying “ I understand you.” Yet instead of saying just that, she suddenly feels the need to rely on polite periphrasis. Rather than announcing that Elinor's virtues make complete sense to her, she only says that they make “ more” sense to her. Rather than remarking that she now can understand them, she ventures to surmise that they're “ within my

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comprehension." In a perfect illustration of the reversal their roles have undergone, Elinor replies to Marianne's nicety with a strong, unbridled echo of its fundamental essence: " I understand you," she says simply. " You do not suppose that I have ever felt much" (247). Such directness is not altogether unprecedented for Elinor, but never before has she been so unconcerned about its results. Her subsequent reversion to more mild language in her use of the word " suppose"—instead of, say, " think" or even " feel"—testifies to the struggle she has already begun: that between voicing the thoughts that she longs to express, and saying the words she wants others to hear. Yet her next thought moves back to the use of strong, Romantic language. " For four months," she says, " I have had all this hanging on my mind" (247). If this monologue had been written as poetry, Austen would have here been starting a line with two spondees—the stressed syllables of " four" and " months." The structure of the words makes it impossible for a speaker not to draw them out, and Elinor undoubtedly does so here. In the pages before her outburst, it was Marianne who continually harped on this idea of four months (" ' Four months!'—cried Marianne again... ' Four months!—and yet you loved him!'" (246)), and it was Elinor who set it aside. But now Elinor takes it back up with a vengeance, beginning her sentence with a built-in accent of just how long her suffering has gone on. Elinor's rising emotion continues in this vein; she stresses the magnitude of her concerns when she refers to them as " all this," in contrast to Marianne's claims that she had never " felt much." What's more, Elinor next explains that she was unable to discuss them with anyone—and here she actually dramatizes the idea by saying that she could not speak of them to " a single creature," instead of merely " a single <https://assignbuster.com/i-have-suffered-now-jane-austens-repressed-romantic/>

person." Assuming that Elinor does not make a habit of confiding in woodland creatures, it goes without saying that when she says she could confide in no creature, she can only mean that she could confide in no person. Yet she insists on using the wider, more dramatic—and incidentally, more bucolic—substitute that only a Romantic would employ at the height of her convulsions. Within her own modest bounds, Elinor is now actually exaggerating. Having committed herself to such a course, she can no longer look back. It is true that her next thought—that she dreaded the effect her own disappointment would have on Marianne and their mother—is classically Augustan in its concern for appearances and the convenience. But then this makes perfect sense, since Elinor does continue to espouse such principles—founded in sense, but now shaped by sensibility. In describing her struggle to dissimulate her feelings before Lucy, Elinor never says that she regrets having done so or feels it was wrong; she merely relates her discomfort with unprecedented wildness. Beginning by saying that Lucy “told” her of the engagement, she cuts herself off (with one of many breathless dashes that Austen usually reserves for Marianne) to amend “told” to the much more emotional “forced.” The histrionic diction continues with descriptions of hopes that were “ruined” and an enemy full of “triumph”—the very word that Marianne used earlier in the novel when, full of pain over Willoughby, she speculated on the world’s “triumph at seeing me so” (179). Though her conviction in the justness of her behavior never visibly falters, Elinor now begins to paint herself more like a victim than she has ever previously allowed herself to do. She repeats the phrase “I have had” throughout—as in “I have had all this,” “I have had to oppose,” “I have had her hopes,” and “I have had to contend,” mingling this, in the next section, with “I have

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been" and " I have known" to rhetorically reinforce her powerlessness in a powerful way:" This person's suspicions, therefore, I have had to oppose, by endeavouring to appear indifferent where I have been most deeply interested;-and it has not been only once;-I have had her hopes and exultation to listen to again and again.—I have known myself to be divided from Edward for ever, without hearing one circumstance that could make me less desire the connection." (247)Tied in with this oratorical repetition are instances of literal repetition, invoked by Elinor to gain our sympathy. Her suffering " has not been only once," and she has listened to Lucy's rapture " again and again." At this point there is no reason, technically speaking, for Elinor to tell us this; the only motive for such asides is to paint her restraint with newly-desired sensationalism. Such aspirations to our pity actually lead to delusions in her subsequent train of thought. Knowing that she's separated from Edward " for ever", Elinor says that she did not hear " one circumstance that could make me less desire the connection. Nothing has proved him unworthy; nor has any thing declared him indifferent to me" (247-italics mine). She now seems to rely in her language on absolute, black-and-white distinctions that leave no room for error or moderation; just so, she does not allow Edward room for error or moderation either. Some might say that discovering the man you love to be engaged, while quietly courting you and allowing you to believe otherwise, would count as at least one proof of the man being unworthy. Not so for Elinor. Although it is true that Edward's offense is not so grave as Willoughby's toward Marianne, he is not by any means blameless in this affair—and when, earlier in the novel, Marianne insists Willoughby to be " not so unworthy as you believe him" (176), Elinor cannot take her seriously. Yet here Elinor finds herself doing the <https://assignbuster.com/i-have-suffered-now-jane-austens-repressed-romantic/>

same favor for Edward, in a completely irrational defense of her own rationalism. Arriving full circle from her point of departure, Elinor eventually returns to Marianne's original accusation of her shallowness. "If you can think me capable of ever feeling," she says to Marianne, "—surely you may suppose that I have suffered now" (247). Coming as it does after a torrent of emotion, the effect of this sentence is a faintly sardonic one; if anything is clear at this point, it is that Elinor feels a great deal. Yet perhaps still stinging from her sister's callousness, she expresses an uncertainty of having proven herself that can only be facetious—catering to Marianne's faulty judgment with the words "If you can think me capable of ever feeling" (italics mine). Her stress on the word "now", in saying that she has surely felt now, drives home a smarting ridicule of anyone who could at this point possibly doubt it. Her next italicized word, "then," continues literally and figuratively from "now" to say that, had she not been restrained by duty, she too might have been unable to hide her own pain then. That fact that she recognized this duty, and acted under it as well, is ultimately what separates Elinor's conduct from Marianne's and makes her Austen's designated hero. Marianne's mortified dismay at this realization, now delivered with all the dashes and melodrama of the truly Romantic, is meant to serve as an illustration of everything that makes such a mindset ridiculous. Yet though Marianne does finally see reason, she (and perhaps the audience as well) is unable to do so until she first feels its truth in her heart. And Austen, whether consciously or not, understood that no such wisdom could truly be felt unless it was coiled in irrational sensibility, in illogical sensitivity. One can't help but wonder whether Austen herself was far more romantic than she ever recognized.

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