

Sense and Sensibility

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In many ways 'Sense and Sensibility' may be the most vulgar of all Austen's novel, and hence the most accessible and easily enjoyable. Everything is laid out thickly and spelled out for no one to miss. Or so it seems. Apart from the two sisters by name of Dashwood, everybody seems to be a caricature, admittedly some more than others. The two sisters, the elder Elinore, and the younger Marianne, are both in the late teens, and incredibly sophisticated already. There is also a younger sister - Margarette, barely mentioned, and still not much more than a child, and a mother, lovable but not very smart and sophisticated. How have the two sisters picked up their superior education and sophistication? Hardly from their mother, no matter how devoted they are to her. Maybe from their father, recently dead, but they make almost no reference to him. They are both intellectuals¹ fond of intellectual conversation and both equipped with exquisite artistic taste. Marianne is an accomplished musician, performing at the pianoforte, while Elinore is quite good at painting, in particular screens.

The novel starts out by the family of four being evicted from their residence after the death of the father. It has been set up, by an uncle of the father that the estate should fall after his death to his son by a first marriage, the half-brother of the three sisters. The fine inventories though would go with the mother and the daughters. They are able, however, to stay on at the estate for some time while finding an alternate abode, thus being brought into close contact with the half-brother and his greedy wife, and also the brother Edward of the latter. The greedy wife readily talks her husband into relinquishing any obligation to provide handsomely for his half-sisters that he had given on the death-bed of his father, and in fact thinks it is a shame that the beautiful furniture and other inventories should be wasted on such paupers. The scene in which the wife persuades her far too easily persuaded husband to renege on his solemn promise to his father, is one of the funniest in the novel. Eventually an offer of an abode, a cottage in fact, is provided in far-off Devonshire, off the mansion of Park, occupied by a relative Sir John Middleton, and the entire family can repair there, to the great relief of the brother and his wife.

So we are being made privy to the striking economical inequalities which characterized the time of Austen. Such inequalities ran straight through families and separated for all intents and purposes close relatives. For a woman to make a good match, i.e. marrying someone with property and income, was of course of paramount importance, making the difference between a life in want and a life of comfort. Similarly for a man of expensive taste, marrying rich would enable him to carry on the life, often one of leisure and indulgence,

¹ *..and Marianne, who had the knack of finding her way in every house to the library, however much it may be avoided by the family in general, soon procured herself a book. or her promise By reading only six hours a-day, I shall gain in the course of a twelve-month a great deal of instruction which I now feel I want.*

not to say indolence, to which he was habituated. So what kind of matches would the two able sisters realistically expect to make? They come of good family, they are pretty and they are accomplished. But of course they have no money, in fact living on a very limited allowance, making them very dependent upon the largeness of relatives and friends to host them and keep them in good society, out of which they would have no prospects of meeting the right kind of spouse.

It is the charms of the social settings which mostly effect the viewers of latter-day dramatizations of Austen novels. Those costume dramas, set in an English lush landscape, as of yet unsullied by the vagaries of industrialization, concerning people with plenty of leisure and comfort, strike us as idyllic. But closer inspection would no doubt have revealed beyond the glittering surface boredom and insipidity. Conversations being silly and empty, and in principle not that different from contemporary chatter. This is indeed what the two sisters Dashwood would to their chagrin encounter. They took two different approaches. Elinore, as being the sensible one, tried to make the best of the situation. She knows that one needs to be civil, that one has to put up with boring people, and say things more in accordance with social expectation than personal expression. In short one has to suffer fools. Marianne, on the other hand, has no truck with such expectations and obligations. Not to her the finer points of social hypocrisy. She refuses to learn to play whist, and when people retire to their tables, she finds a pianoforte and plays, or as noted above, goes in search of a book, no matter how unfavorably the circumstances may be to locate one. Consequently their ambitions as to a future husband are different. Elinore does not set her sights higher than finding a man of principles and honesty, with whom one can carry on some meaningful conversation, even if he would be insensitive to the finer points of ones sensibilities, especially as to art. Passion is not an issue, steadfastness and decency counts for more. Marianne on the other hand refuses to bulge. To her, a man should be passionate and lively, and share all her tastes, going straight to her heart. She has great problems understanding what her sister sees in Edward, the brother of their despicable sister-in-law. He may applaud music, but has no personal relation to it, just as he is more than willing to praise a drawing, without having any developed personal taste himself.

The match with Edward is impossible, his mother would never consent to it, set as she is that he will marry rich, a certain Miss Morton is mentioned, good at least for thirty thousand pounds, and the daughter of a lord to boot. Their relationship is cut short by their removal from the estate. A further complication will arise, because of a certain Lucy Steele, who discloses to Elinore that she is secretly engaged to him. The two sisters Steele, of whom only one is pretty, namely the younger sister Lucy, turn out to be relatives of the Middletons, and on account of this tenuous connection are invited as family to stay with them. There is of course a reason of connections, making this unlikely engagement possible, which we need not go into. When this secret engagement is made know to Mrs Ferrars, she goes into a rage, disowns his son completely and settles her estate and fortune, entirely on Edwards younger brother Robert, a good-for nothing snob. But in spite of such formidable opposition, Edward holds true to his fiancée, although it has been obvious to Elinore that he has since a long time grown tired of her. But his steadfastness owns her appropriation. Her attachment to him, she is at pains to hide to the world, including herself, but when she finally learns that Lucy has been turned into Mrs Ferrars, her disappointment is bitter

and acute, far more bitter than she had expected. But then by a twist of the turn of events, hardly believable outside the realm of fiction, it turns out that Lucy is indeed a Mrs Ferrars, but not the wife of Edward, but of his brother Robert, who previously have spoken so slightly of her. How can a novelist make this believable, the reader is kept on his or her tenterhooks, incredulous of this unexpected development. The explanation is simple, almost inevitable in retrospect. Lucy is a gold-digger, once she has found out that her suitor has been made penniless, she bides her time and works on his brother instead, who has come into what was rightfully his older brother's, while at the same time keeping her engagement and sending affectionate letters to her unsuspecting fiancée. The brother is vain and stupid, and it does not take long until he succumbs to her charms, and once she is assured of his commitment, only then does she find it fit to inform his brother of her change of heart. Of course a completely rational strategy unencumbered by unnecessary sentiment². Thus, through no efforts of his own, Edward is liberated from an onerous commitment and free to propose to Elinore, who naturally accepts his proposal and they are married happily ever after, one presumes.

This part of the plot, although retold at a certain length, is just a side plot. The real plot concerns Marianne and her beaux, to use the vulgar terminology introduced by the elder of the sisters Steele. She meets with an accident resulting in a strained ankle, a certain Mr Willoughby turns up, and carries her to her home. He is indeed charming and soon the two of them has found an usually close and intensive rapport. He is the dream prince of all her ardent adolescent desires, a real soul-mate sharing her taste in everything that matters. They read together, they sing together, they act together, they dance together. She has eyes for no one else, and he is of course more than gratified by the attentions of a lively and beautiful young woman. But there is a break, he has business elsewhere. Marianne is devastated, but is of course convinced of a speedy return. Although not formally engaged, they are so *de facto* if not *de jure*. When an opportunity presents itself to spend the winter season in London, the guest of the tiresome gossip Mrs Jennings, the mother of Lady Middleton, she jumps at it, and smothers any opposition to the scheme offered by Elinore. But her hopes of reuniting with Willoughby are cruelly disappointed. He simply does not care for her at all, it is as if all this love and understanding that went on between them meant nothing to him. He does not return her calls, and when they are accidentally thrown in each others company at a party, he pointedly ignores her in studied conversation with his wealthy fiancée, and when presented with a letter of explanation, he replies with the most studied indifference in a very formal letter. Marianne is cut to the quick and goes into a deep depression, being indisposed to any social intercourse, later to become utterly indifferent to any. As her half-brother cruelly remarks, she loses her beauty, her one asset. This causes a minor scandal among those close to the sisters, and added proof of the villainy of Willoughby is brought about by Colonel Brandon, a thirty-six year old bachelor, hopelessly in love with Marianne. Eventually they decide to leave London by way Cleveland where they are held up by Marianne falling seriously sick. Her life is clearly in danger, her mother is sent for by Brandon, but just before they are due to arrive, the most dramatic and unexpected scene in the whole novel takes place, the

² As Austen expresses it. Through no other sacrifices than time and conscience, see what a determined woman can do committed to her self-interest

arrival of Willoughby. What follows may be one of the least satisfactory parts of the novel. Willoughby tries to explain his conduct, to make penitence. He is sufficiently successful as to enlist the sympathy of Elinore, but not enough to escape her censure. No matter what, how sincere his regrets may be, he has acted selfishly and dishonorably and fully deserves his misery. He leaves after having extracted a promise from Elinore to relay his explanation to Marianne, which she eventually reluctantly obliges, but only when she is assured that Marianne has recovered enough from her sickness. A sickness clearly brought about by unhappy love, and thus liable to resurge with any recall of it. Marianne takes it calmly though, the crises of her physical collapse, having changed her, yet with some gratification. She can accept the selfishness of Willoughby's behavior, his callous betrayal, as long as she is assured that it was indeed a betrayal, that his feelings for her once were real enough, that what they shared at least once had an undeniable reality and was not just a delusion entirely of her making. Such a confirmation does indeed assure her of her sanity.

In the end she consents to marry Colonel Brandon, the old man at thirty-six more than twice her age of seventeen. A man she formerly had thought of in horror. How could such an old man even think of being in love, what liveliness of spirits could he still maintain, so far past his prime. He could have been her father. This is the world of Jane Austen. Passion alone is after all not a proper basis for companionship to last a life. Thus this is a highly moral novel, it has a message and a lesson to teach those young ladies that may read it. A few decades later, this would be overturned by the Brontees. A character in their fiction, certainly would never have traded in a Brandon for a Willoughby, and damn the consequences.

As noted, the only two rounded characters are Elinore and Marianne, the rest are characters out of Dickens, carrying on their absurd antics, some of it exceedingly funny. There is the character of their half-brother, so fixated on status and money and the formalities which go with them, weak too, and easily manipulated by his wife, a greedy misery woman, whose horridness is however second to that of her mother, whom her half-brother refers to, without any apparent consciousness of misplaced irony, to be the most affectionate of mothers, that after she had just disinherited her oldest son Edward. There is in addition the relation John Middleton, the man who so kindly invited them to the use of his cottage, with a frantic desire for company, only so he can escape dreaded solitude. His haughty wife, and the mindless prattler of his mother-in-law, Mrs Jennings, whose kindness nevertheless in the end even wins over the critical Marianne. Her other son-in-law Mr Palmer, is another dickensian character, one of the funniest in fact, who resolutely refuses to reside in an Austen novel, who disregards any pretense of civility, and who is rewarded by this deliberate rudeness by the hysterical appropriations of his wife, although she is as much a target of his insults as society itself. Not surprisingly Elinore finds much to commend him to her upon closer acquaintance, but of course to a limit.

The novel, maybe because of its vulgarity reads well, and turns into something of a page turner, there being being unexpected turns and twists in the plot. She does employ a fair amount of narrative techniques, conversations are never tedious, timing is perfect, and she tries out some elaborate techniques, as to enhance the comedy of errors, as when Mrs Jennings becomes only partially privy to a conversation held between Elinore and

Colonel Brandon, because of the ostentatiously loud playing by Marianne, thus willfully misunderstanding its contents to have it comply with her expectations. A farcical interlude worthy of any bedroom comedy.

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