

Sense and Sensibility

Marilyn Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, Oxford UP, 1988

Of the novels Jane Austen completed, Sense and Sensibility appears to be the earliest in conception. The didactic novel that compares the beliefs and conduct of two protagonists — with the object of finding one invariably right and the other invariably wrong — seems to have been particularly fashionable during the years 1795–1796. Most novelists, even the most purposeful, afterwards abandon it for a format using a single protagonist, whose experiences can be handled more flexibly and with much less repetition. By its very nature, Sense and Sensibility is unremittingly didactic. All the novelists who choose the contrast format do so in order to make an explicit ideological point. Essentially they are taking part in the old argument between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’: which is the more virtuous man, the sophisticated, or schooled individual, or the natural one.

Of the novels Jane Austen completed, Sense and Sensibility appears to be the earliest in conception. An uncertain family tradition suggests that its original letter-version, ‘Elinor and Marianne’, may have been written in 1795:¹ before the publication of Mrs. West’s similar Gossip’s Story, and in the same year as Maria Edgeworth’s Letters of Julia and Caroline. The didactic novel which compares the beliefs and conduct of two protagonists—with the object of finding one invariably right and the other invariably wrong—seems to have been particularly fashionable during the years 1795–6. Most novelists, even the most purposeful, afterwards abandon it for a format using a single protagonist, whose experiences can be handled more flexibly and with much less repetition.² On the whole, therefore, all Jane Austen’s other novels are more sophisticated in conception, and they are capable of more interesting treatment of the central character in relation to her world. But there is a caveat. Catherine in Northanger Abbey is dealt with, as we have seen, in an inhibited manner. A rather mindless character, of somewhat undefined good principles, she matures in a curiously oblique process that the reader does not quite witness. The format of the contrast-novel, with all its drawbacks, at least obliges Jane Austen to chart the mental processes of her heroines directly, and to locate the drama in their minds.

By its very nature Sense and Sensibility is unremittingly didactic. All the novelists who choose the contrast format do so in order to make an explicit ideological point. Essentially they are taking part in the old argument between ‘nature’ and (p.183) ‘nurture’: which is the more virtuous man, the sophisticated, or schooled individual, or the natural one? Obviously there is a total division on the issue between the type of traditional Christian who takes a gloomy view of man’s unredeemed nature, and the various schools of eighteenth-century optimists, whether Christian or not. Although a Catholic, Mrs. Inchbald is also a progressive: of the two brothers in her Nature and Art, the sophisticated one stands for greed, self-seeking, worldly corruption, the ‘natural’ one for primal simplicity, honesty, sympathy, and innate virtue.¹ Maria Edgeworth, although in a sense favouring ‘nurture’ in her Letters of
Julia and Caroline, does so on idiosyncratic terms which take her out of rancorous current controversy. But Mrs. West, in preferring her disciplined, self-denying Louisa to her self-indulgent Marianne, is entirely relevant to the contemporary issue, and entirely conservative. So, too, is Jane Austen.2

Jane Austen conscientiously maintains the principle of a didactic comparison. Her novel advances on the assumption that what happens to one of the central characters must also happen to the other; at every turn the reader cannot avoid the appropriate conclusion. The motif of the first volume is the attitude of each girl towards the man she hopes to marry. When the novel opens Elinor already knows Edward Ferrars. Her views about him are developed in conversation with Mrs. Dashwood, and the reader is also given Marianne’s rather qualified opinion. When Edward and Elinor have to separate, Mrs. Dashwood invites him to visit them at Barton, but Edward seems reluctant. Thereafter Elinor’s endurance of uncertainty about Edward’s feelings becomes a factor in her character, and in our response to her.

Shortly after the family’s arrival at Barton Cottage, Marianne’s lover, Willoughby, enters the novel. His dramatic arrival is in keeping with his more flamboyant character; his (p.184) appearance, too, is contrasted with Edward’s; but the manner in which the sequence of his courtship is developed shows Jane Austen’s concern to enforce a similarity of situation in order to bring out a dissimilarity of character. Again, Mrs. Dashwood gives her enthusiastic approval, while the other sister, in this case Elinor, expresses her reservations. When Willoughby leaves, Mrs. Dashwood once more issues her invitation, which is inexplicably not accepted, and Marianne, like Elinor, is left to a period of loneliness and anxiety.

When in the second volume the two heroines go to London they are placed, again, in a similar predicament. Both expect to meet the loved one there, both are obliged uneasily to wait; cards are left by each of the young men; each is lost, or seems lost, to a rival woman. In all the embarrassments and worries of the London visit, the reader’s developing knowledge of the sisters is based on a substructure which demands that he adjudicate between them. And they leave London, as they entered it, still similarly placed, travelling towards the county, Somerset, where each believes her lover to be setting up house with his bride.

The parallels can be taken further, for example to the influence first of upbringing, later of idleness, on the characters of the two young men. The entire action is organized to represent Elinor and Marianne in terms of rival value-systems, which are seen directing their behaviour in the most crucial choices of their lives. It is an arrangement which necessarily directs the reader’s attention not towards what they experience, but towards how they cope with experience, away from the experiential to the ethical.

In the two contrasted opening sequences the emphasis is on each girl’s scale of values as she applies it to both young men. Edward Ferrars’s attractions are not
Edward Ferrars was not recommended to their good opinion by any peculiar graces of person or address. He was not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing.¹ But even Marianne, who has reservations about Edward as a lover, has 'the highest opinion in the world of his goodness and (p.185) sense I think him everything that is worthy and aimiable.'¹ For Elinor, this is commendation so high that she does not know what more could be said. As for herself, she admits that she 'greatly esteems' and 'likes' him: words which define the state of her understanding rather than her feelings, and, as such, seem to Marianne inappropriate.

But Marianne hesitates because in addition to Edward’s lack of physical grace (what we might call physical attractiveness), he does not act like a lover with Elinor. In Marianne’s language, he wants fire and spirit. His passionless temperament is further illustrated in his attitude to literature and to matters of ‘taste’ generally. When set by Marianne to read Cowper, he was, as she complains to her mother, tame and spiritless:

‘To hear those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild, pronounced with such impenetrable coldness, such dreadful indifference! ——’

‘He would certainly have done more justice to simple and elegant prose. I thought so at the time; but you would give him Cowper.’

‘Nay, Mama, if he is not to be animated by Cowper! —— but we must allow for difference of taste. Elinor has not my feelings, and therefore she may overlook it, and be happy with him. But it would have broke my heart had I loved him, to hear him read with so little sensibility!’²

Marianne’s objection is that Edward does not give free rein to the intuitive side of his nature. She equates lack of ‘taste’ with lack of response, an inability to enter subjectively into the emotions of a writer, or to attempt rapport with the spirit of a landscape. Again, as in Northanger Abbey, the reader is certainly not supposed to draw a moral distinction between characters concerned with literature, and characters concerned with life: for Elinor likes books and drawing, and Edward, who has views about both, and about landscape too, would do justice to ‘simple and elegant prose’. But he, like Elinor, approaches the arts differently from Marianne. He would be likely to concern himself more than she with the intellectual content; when he looks at a landscape, he considers questions of utility—such as whether the terrain would be good for (p.186) farming—and practicality—such as whether a lane would be too muddy for walking.

Edward’s tastes can be considered aesthetically, as Augustan and thus in terms of contemporary landscape art old-fashioned: he has more in common with Pope than would please Marianne. But, and this is more to the novel’s purposes, they are also the tastes of a self-effacing man, who likes to apply objective criteria, independent of his own prejudices and the limitations of his knowledge. His objective approach to
art resembles Elinor's way of evaluating him. She knows enough of his background to see beyond the defects of his manner to the enduring qualities of his mind and spirit, his 'sense' and 'goodness', and both these words imply that Edward's virtues are those of a given code of value, namely the Christian. Edward's character, Edward's aesthetic opinions, and Elinor's method of assessing Edward, all have this much in common—that they are based on prescribed standards, not on subjective impulse.

With all this Marianne's choice of Willoughby is carefully compared. His entrance, like that of the 'preserver' of the heroine in a romantic novel, at once gives him a superficial glamour. He is 'uncommonly handsome' and his manner 'frank and graceful', so that not merely Marianne, but Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor, are struck with admiration on his first appearance. His beauty encourages an intuitive response from Marianne, and receives it. She reacts to Willoughby with the same whole-hearted impulsiveness with which she reacts to books, and indeed before long she is reacting to books and Willoughby together, in a style that suggests all feeling, little or no intellectual detachment:

The same books, the same passages were idolized by each—or, if any difference appeared, any objection arose, it lasted no longer than till the force of her arguments and the brightness of her eyes could be displayed. He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm; and long before his visit concluded, they conversed with the freedom of a long-established acquaintance. ²

(p.187) When Elinor teases Marianne for running so recklessly through the beauties of Cowper and Scott, Jane Austen clearly means no criticism of two poets who were among her own favourites. But she does mean to criticize, through Elinor, the way Willoughby and Marianne read, and to show that, when they abandon themselves to their reading together, the result is grossly self-indulgent. Everything they do follows the same pattern of shared selfishness. Wholly absorbed in one another and in their exclusive pursuits, they rudely ignore the rest of their social circle, and, on the day of the cancelled outing, drive off together to Allerton in Willoughby's phaeton. As it happens, Sir John Middleton and Mrs. Jennings cheerfully tolerate the lovers. They in their turn are less tolerant; indeed, their self-sufficiency has an unattractive arrogance about it, which is displayed when they mount their unreasonable joint attack on Colonel Brandon. Willoughby's irrationality is as apparent here—'he has threatened me with rain when I wanted it to be fine'¹—as it is later, when he begs that no alteration be made to Barton Cottage because he has pleasant associations with it as it is.² That Marianne has gone far along the same subjective path is demonstrated after her visit to Allerton. Elinor argues that she has been guilty of serious impropriety in going there in Mrs. Smith's absence. Marianne relies on her usual criterion, intuition: “If there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure.”³
She believes in the innate moral sense; and, since man is naturally good, his actions when he acts on impulse are likely to be good also. Just as Marianne has no doubts about herself, so she can have none about her alter ego, Willoughby. Neither can Mrs. Dashwood, who, proceeding according to the same intuitive method as her second daughter, is wholly convinced of the goodness of Willoughby. When Elinor tries to argue with her, and to check instinct with the objective test of Willoughby’s behaviour, her mother protests. She rightly sees that a broader question is at issue: Elinor’s sense (stemming from the Christian tradition that man’s nature is fallible) has come into conflict with the sentimentalist’s tendency to idealize human nature. From Elinor’s caution, Mrs. Dashwood draws a universal inference. ‘You had rather take evil upon credit than good.’

So far, then, the issue between the two contrasted sisters is presented according to the view of the nature–nurture dichotomy usually adopted by conservatives. The contrast, as always, is between two modes of perception. On the one hand, Marianne’s way is subjective, intuitive, implying confidence in the natural goodness of human nature when untrammelled by convention. Her view is corrected by the more cautious orthodoxy of Elinor, who mistrusts her own desires, and requires even her reason to seek the support of objective evidence.

It is in keeping with Elinor’s objectivity (and also typical of the feminine variant of the anti-jacobin novel) that she should advocate a doctrine of civility in opposition to Marianne’s individualism. Elinor restrains her own sorrow in order to shield her mother and sister. By her politeness to Mrs. Jennings she steadily makes up what Marianne has carelessly omitted. She respects Colonel Brandon for his activity in helping his friends long before Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne have seen his virtues. Civility is a favourite anti-jacobin theme, which does not appear in Northanger Abbey, although it is present in Jane Austen’s later novels. Its objective correlative, the sketch given in Sense and Sensibility of society at large, is impoverished compared with the solid worlds of Mansfield Park, Emma, and Persuasion: the Middletons and Colonel Brandon, even supported by Mrs. Jennings, hardly stand in for a whole community. Yet this is a judgement arrived at by a comparison with Jane Austen’s later work. If Sense and Sensibility is compared with other novels of the same genre, and originating at the same time, it can be seen to move in innumerable small ways towards fullness and naturalness. A conception of civility illustrated by gratitude to Mrs. Jennings is more natural, for example, than portraying a similar concept in terms of prayers beside a dying father, or fidelity to the death-bed advice of an aunt.

(p.189) In fact, granted the rigidity imposed by the form, the second half of Sense and Sensibility is remarkably natural, flexible, and inventive. Both the sisters are presented as plausible individuals as well as professors of two opposing creeds. Another contemporary novelist—Mrs. West, Mrs. Hamilton, or the young Maria Edgeworth—would almost certainly have had Marianne seduced and killed off, after the errors of which she has been guilty. For during the first half of the novel
Marianne has stood for a doctrine of complacency and self-sufficiency which Jane Austen as a Christian deplored:

Teach us to understand the sinfulness of our own hearts, and bring to our knowledge every fault of temper and every evil habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures, and the danger of our own souls. ... Incline us to ask our hearts these questions oh! God, and save us from deceiving ourselves by pride or vanity. ...

Incline us oh God! to think humbly of ourselves, to be severe only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow-creatures with kindness, and to judge of all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves.

After Allerton, Marianne failed to examine her own conduct at all. She had none of the Christian's understanding of the sinfulness of her own heart; and she showed a notable lack of Christian charity towards Colonel Brandon, Mrs. Jennings, and the Middletons. Elinor alone had exercised the self-examination prescribed for the Christian, by questioning the state of her heart in relation to Edward, and, even more, her complex and disagreeable feelings about Lucy. Elinor never had the same certainty that Edward loved her which Marianne always felt about Willoughby. 'She was far from depending on that result of his preference of her, which her mother and sister still considered as certain.'

The most interesting feature of the character of Elinor, and a real technical achievement of *Sense and Sensibility*, is that this crucial process of Christian self-examination is realized in literary terms. Elinor is the first character in an Austen novel consistently to reveal her inner life. The narrative mode of *Sense and Sensibility* is the first sustained example of ‘free indirect speech’, for the entire action is refracted through Elinor’s consciousness as *Northanger Abbey* could not be through the simple-minded Catherine’s. Other technical changes necessarily follow. Dialogue is far less important in *Sense and Sensibility*, since the heroine is not so much in doubt about the nature of external truth, as concerned with the knowledge of herself, her passions, and her duty. Judging by the narrative mode alone, *Sense and Sensibility* is, like *Mansfield Park* after it, an introspective novel. And yet it is clearly important to recognize that both are introspective only within closely defined limits. The inner life led by Elinor, and later by Fanny, is the dominant medium of the novel, but it is entirely distinct from the irrational and emotional states which the post-Romantic reader thinks of as ‘consciousness’.

Technically, as well as intellectually, Elinor’s scrupulous inner life has great importance in the novel, and Jane Austen brings it out by giving similar qualities to the two male characters who approach a moral ideal. Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon have the same wary scepticism about themselves. Rather to the detriment of their vitality, Jane Austen’s characteristic word for both of them is ‘diffident’. Diffidence helps to explain Edward’s unwillingness to expatiate on matters of taste; and ‘the epicurism, selfishness and conceit’ of Mr. Palmer are contrasted with
Edward’s ‘generous temper, simple tastes and diffident feelings’.\(^1\) Robert Ferrars’s complacent comparison of himself with his brother Edward enforces a similar point.\(^2\) And diffidence, especially in relation to Marianne, is also the characteristic of Colonel Brandon as a lover.\(^3\)

But it is Elinor alone who can be seen living through the moments of self-examination that are evidently typical of both men. The most interesting sequence in which she is shown doubting herself occurs after she has heard Willoughby’s confession. Many modern critics interpret this passage as evidence that Jane Austen is qualifying her own case, in order to arrive at a compromise solution somewhere between ‘Sense’ and ‘Sensibility’. According to Mr. Moler, for example, Elinor feels after she has heard Willoughby that her own ‘Sense’ has been (p.191) inadequate: ‘Elinor’s rationality causes her to reach a less accurate estimate of Willoughby than Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood reach with their Sensibility.’\(^1\)

Such interpretations are interesting as evidence of the difficulty the twentieth-century reader has with the notion of an objective morality. What happens in this episode is surely that Elinor is shaken by her feelings, for she finds both that she pities Willoughby and that she has a renewed sense of his ‘grace’, or personal attractiveness. Her judgement is assailed by involuntary sympathy: part of her wants to excuse his injuries to Marianne and Miss Smith. Yet the fact that Willoughby was tempted—by the two young women on the one hand, and by an education in worldliness on the other—does not in fact absolve the adult man, or not, at least, if one employs the objective ethical code rather than the relativist subjective one. The progressive supposedly sees the evil in individual men as social conditioning, the operation of impersonal forces which the individual cannot help. Elinor now considers Willoughby from this point of view—which is, of course, his own—and she finds it impossible to absolve him. ‘Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish.’\(^2\) This is not Jane Austen qualifying Elinor’s sense with a dash of Marianne’s sensibility. On the contrary, she shows Elinor’s judgement reasserting itself, with some difficulty, after a most effective and deeply felt appeal has been made to her sympathies:

... Willoughby, in spite of all his faults, excited a degree of commiseration for the sufferings produced by them, which made her think of him as now separated for ever from her family with a tenderness, a regret, rather in proportion, as she soon acknowledged within herself—to his wishes than to his merits. She felt that his influence over her mind was heightened by circumstances which ought not in reason to have weight; by that person of uncommon attraction, that open, affectionate and lively manner which it was no merit to possess; and by that still ardent love (p.192) for Marianne, which it was not even innocent to indulge. But she felt that it was so long, long before she could feel his influence less.\(^1\)

It is easy to mistake Elinor’s sense for coldness. She is intended to be quite as loving and quite as accessible to ‘feeling’ as Marianne. The difference between them is one of ideology—Marianne optimistic, intuitive, un-self-critical, and Elinor far more
sceptical, always ready to study the evidence, to reopen a question, to doubt her own prior judgements. She can be ready to revise her opinion of Willoughby. She can admit her mistakes, as she does of her wrong estimate of Marianne’s illness.\textsuperscript{2} The point about both episodes is that Elinor was never intended to be infallible, but to typify an active, struggling Christian in a difficult world. Indeed, Jane Austen clearly argues that we do not find the right path through the cold, static correctness of a Lady Middleton, but through a struggle waged daily with our natural predisposition to err.

It is the role of Marianne Dashwood, who begins with the wrong ideology, to learn the right one. After her illness she applies her naturally strong feelings to objects outside herself, and her intelligence to thorough self-criticism in the Christian spirit. In what for her is the crisis of the book, her confession of her errors to Elinor,\textsuperscript{3} Marianne resembles Jane Austen’s other heroines Catherine, Elizabeth, and Emma, all of whom arrive at the same realization that (in the words of Jane Austen’s prayer) ‘pride’ and ‘vanity’ have blinded them in relation both to themselves and to external reality.

It is quite false to assume that merely because Marianne is treated with relative gentleness, Jane Austen has no more than a qualified belief in the evils of sensibility. She spares Marianne, the individual, in order to have her recant from sensibility, the system. Even this is possible only because Marianne, with her naturally affectionate disposition and her intelligence, is never from the start a typical adherent of the doctrine of (p.193) self: youth and impetuosity for a time blinded her, so that she acted against the real grain of her nature.\textsuperscript{1} Because Marianne is not representative, other characters are needed, especially in the second half of the novel, to show the system of self in full-blooded action. Jane Austen provides them in the group of characters who fawn upon and virtually worship that false idol compounded of materialism, status-seeking and self-interest, Mrs. Ferrars.

The leading characters who take over from Marianne the role of illustrating what worship of the self really means are Lucy Steele and Fanny Dashwood. It is clear, of course, that neither Lucy nor Fanny is a ‘feeling’ person at all. Both are motivated by ruthless self-interest, Lucy in grimly keeping Edward to his engagement, Fanny in consistently working for her immediate family’s financial advantage. But both Lucy and Fanny, though in reality as hard-headed as they could well be, clothe their mercenariness decently in the garments of sensibility. Lucy flatters Lady Middleton by pretending to love her children. She acts the lovelorn damsel to Elinor. Her letters are filled with professions of sensibility. Similarly, in the successive shocks inflicted by Lucy’s insinuation of herself into the family, ‘poor Fanny had suffered agonies of sensibility’\textsuperscript{2} It is no accident that at the end the marriages of the two model couples, Elinor and Marianne and their two diffident, withdrawing husbands, are contrasted with the establishments, far more glorious in worldly terms, of Lucy and Fanny and their complacent, mercenary husbands.\textsuperscript{3} Lucy and Fanny may quarrel, but it is suitable that they should end the novel together, the joint favourites of old Mrs. Ferrars, and (p.194) forever in one another’s orbit. However it begins,
the novel ends by comparing the moral ideal represented by Sense with a new interpretation of ‘individualism’. The intellectual position, originally held in good faith by Marianne, is abandoned; what takes its place is selfishness with merely a fashionable cover of idealism—and, particularly, the pursuit of self-interest in the economic sense. Willoughby’s crime proves after all not to have been rank villainy, but expensive self-indulgence so habitual that he must sacrifice everything, including domestic happiness, to it. Lucy’s behaviour is equally consistent, and it, too, is crowned with worldly success:

The whole of Lucy’s behaviour in the affair, and the prosperity which crowned it, therefore, may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest ... will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience.¹

Jane Austen’s version of ‘sensibility’—that is, individualism, or the worship of self, in various familiar guises—is as harshly dealt with here as anywhere in the anti-jacobin tradition. Even without the melodramatic political subplot of many anti-jacobin novels, Mrs. Ferrars’s London is recognizably a sketch of the anarchy that follows the loss of all values but self-indulgence. In the opening chapters especially, where Marianne is the target of criticism, ‘sensibility’ means sentimental (or revolutionary) idealism, which Elinor counters with her sceptical or pessimistic view of man’s nature. Where the issue is the choice of a husband, Jane Austen’s criteria prove to be much the same as Mrs. West’s: both advocate dispassionate assessment of a future husband’s qualities, discounting both physical attractiveness, and the rapport that comes from shared tastes, while stressing objective evidence.² Both reiterate the common conservative theme of the day, that a second attachment is likely to be more reliable than a first.³ By all these characteristic tests, Sense and Sensibility is an anti-jacobin novel just as surely as is A Gossip’s Story.

The sole element of unorthodoxy in Sense and Sensibility (p.195) lies in the execution, and especially in the skilful adjustment of detail which makes its story more natural. Sense and Sensibility is not natural compared with Jane Austen’s later novels. Any reader will notice the stiffness of some of the dialogue, particularly perhaps those speeches early in the novel where Elinor sums up the character of Edward.¹ And yet, especially in the second half of the novel, it is remarkable how the harsh outlines of the ideological scheme are softened. Often the changes are small ones, such as turning the jilted heroine’s near-obligatory decline and death into a feverish cold caught, plausibly, from staying out to mope in the rain. Alternatively the difference may show in the born novelist’s sense of occasion, her flair for a scene. Twice in the latter half of the novel, for example, there are theatrical entrances, consciously worked for: Edward’s, when at last he calls on Elinor in London, only to find her with Lucy Steele; and Willoughby’s, when he comes to Cleveland in response to the news that Marianne is dying. Developments like this do more than rub away some of the angularities of the old nature–nature dichotomy. They begin to make so many inroads on it (particularly in relation to Marianne) that many readers have had the impression Jane Austen was trying to break it down
altogether. Certainly there is plenty of evidence in the second half of the novel that Jane Austen was impatient with the rigidity of her framework; and yet all the modifications she makes are a matter of technique, not ideology. Lucy Steele resembles Isabella Thorpe and Mary Crawford, George Wickham, Henry Crawford, Frank Churchill, and William Walter Elliott in that she does not come, like some other authors' representations, vociferously advocating free love, or revolution, or the reading of German novels. She is a harbinger of anarchy for all that.

Compared with the common run of anti-jacobin novels it is a considerable achievement, and yet it has never been found quite good enough. *Sense and Sensibility* is the most obviously tendentious of Jane Austen's novels, and the least attractive. The trouble is not merely that, for all the author's artistic tact, the cumbersome framework and enforced contrasts of the inherited structure remain. It matters far more that the most (p.196) deeply disturbing aspect of all anti-jacobin novels, their inhumanity, affects this novel more than Jane Austen's skilled mature work. In a way *Sense and Sensibility* is worse affected than many clumsy works by lesser writers, because it is written naturally, and with more insight into at least some aspects of the inner life. The reader has far too much real sympathy with Marianne in her sufferings to refrain from valuing her precisely on their account. There is plenty of evidence that Jane Austen, anticipating this reaction, tried to forestall it. As far as possible she tries to keep us out of Marianne's consciousness: Marianne's unwonted secrecy, after Willoughby has left Barton, and after her arrival in London, functions quite as effectively in restricting the reader's sympathy as in restricting Elinor's. Merely to have Marianne's sufferings described after she has received Willoughby's letter is sufficient, however, to revive all the reader's will to identify himself with her. The effort to point up Elinor's feelings instead will not do: either we do not believe in them, and conclude her frigid, or the felt presence of suffering in the one sister helps us to supply imaginatively what we are not told about the inner life of the other. It is difficult, in short, to accept the way consciousness is presented in this novel. Marianne, and to some extent also Elinor, are drawn with strong feelings which the reader is accustomed to sympathize with, and actually to value for their own sake. But it is the argument of the novel that such feelings, like the individuals who experience them, are not innately good. Unfortunately, in flat opposition to the author's obvious intention, we tend to approach Marianne subjectively. Right or wrong, she has our sympathy: she, and our responses to her, are outside Jane Austen's control. The measure of Jane Austen's failure to get us to read her story with the necessary ethical detachment comes when she imposes her solution. What, innumerable critics have asked, if Marianne never brought herself to love Colonel Brandon? The fact that the question still occurs shows that in this most conscientiously didactic of all the novels the moral case remains unmade.

**Notes:**

Nature and Art appears to borrow its format from Thomas Day's Rousseauistic Sandford and Merton, 1783–9, with its spoilt little aristocrat Tommy Merton, and its robust, simple farmer's son, Harry Sandford.


Ibid., p. 20.

Sense and Sensibility, p. 42. Elinor's involuntary admiration of Willoughby is important in the light of their last interview together. See below, pp. 190–2.

Ibid., p. 52.

Sense and Sensibility, p. 78.


Sense and Sensibility, p. 305.

Jane Austen's Art of Allusion, p. 70. For other expositions of the view that JA is 'ambivalent' between sense and sensibility, see Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and her Art, p. 120; Andrew Wright, Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure, pp. 30–1 and 92; and Lionel Trilling, 'A Portrait of Western Man', The Listener, 11 June 1953, 970.

Sense and Sensibility, p. 333.

Marianne's intelligence is of a kind which gives her moral stature within Jane Austen's system of belief. Although she begins the novel professing an erroneous system, it is always clear that she has the capacity for the searching self-analysis of the Christian. Simple, good characters like Mrs. Jennings are valued by Jane Austen, but she never leaves any doubt that individuals with active moral intelligence are a higher breed. See below, pp. 270–1.

Sense and Sensibility, p. 876.

Sense and Sensibility, p. 20.

Maria Edgeworth does not completely discard the contrast-novel, which recurs in one of the Popular Tales, The Contrast, 1804, and in Patronage, 1814. Jane Austen does not quite discard it either—for Mansfield Park is a contrast-novel, of the consecutive rather than the continuous type. See below, p. 220 ff.

The very terminology adopted by some of the titles is revealing. Mrs. Inchbald sees the issue in terms of 'nature' versus 'art', art in this context having the connotation of artificiality. 'Sense' gives nurture a very different bearing. By the
mid-nineties sensibility is commonly a pejorative word. See E. Erämetsä, *A Study of the Word 'Sentimental'* etc., Helsinki, 1951.


JAWI—G


(2) Tests of the heroine’s virtue in, respectively, Mrs. West's *Gossip's Story*, and Mrs. Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*.

(2) *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 22.


(2) *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 331.

(2) For Mr. Moler, Elinor's complacent first opinion, that Marianne will soon recover, is further evidence that JA meant to show the limits of sense, and to strike a balance with sensibility. *Jane Austen’s Art of Allusion*, pp. 62–73.

(2) *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 371.

(2) See above, pp. 97–101.


(3) *Sense and Sensibility*, pp. 345 ff.

(3) Some critics have called Elinor's marriage 'romantic', Lucy's 'prudent', and the end another instance of JA’s compromise between sense and sensibility. (Cf. Andrew Wright, *Jane Austen’s Novels*, p. 92.) But this shows a continued misunderstanding of JA’s interpretation of her two terms: her ‘sense’ approximates to the traditional Christian personal and social ethic, her ‘sensibility’ to a modern individualist ethic in two different manifestations, Marianne’s and Lucy’s.

(3) Marianne, Colonel Brandon, Edward Ferrars, the late Mr. Dashwood, and even perhaps Lucy Steele are better matched in their second choice than in their first.