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The Higher Senses of Sight and Sound
in Jane Austen's,
Sense And Sensibility.

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Introduction

How is it that people know what they know? A better question is, how is it that people know what they *think* they know? Jane Austen was particularly concerned with the answer to these questions, especially within the confines of her eighteenth century British society. Never more does she examine the possible answers to these questions than in her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. Most critics understand that Austen's original title for this novel was not "Sense and Sensibility" but was rather "Elinor and Marianne." Knowing this makes it more understandable as to why she used the word "sense" and the word "sensitivity"; to see them in congruence with one another allows us to appreciate the opposites of her intentional juxtaposition, which is in essence that Elinor's second name is "Sense," and Marianne's is "Sensitivity."

This becomes interesting because the definition of "sense" is that of having a "practical soundness of judgment," and the eighteenth century definition of the word "sensitivity" means an "emotional consciousness: quickness and acuteness of feeling" ("Sensitivity"). To name the novel after both protagonists by using their propensities for either sense or sensitivity is clever and draws her readers to begin the novel by examining Elinor and Marianne as keepers of either pathway to knowing what they think they know. It is a fair assumption that Austen, through her two protagonists, means to deliberately paint the portrait of separation and difference between them, hence establishing the juxtaposition.

This is an obvious conclusion regarding the two sisters and their embodiment of either inclination. Because of its obviousness, many critics desire to leave it there,

explaining that Elinor is “*Sense*,” Marianne is “*Sensibility*,” and therefore the simple dichotomy is further analyzed, yes, but is satisfactorily defined.

However, it is my assertion that there is far more Austen means to establish through her title of this novel. The word “sense,” standing alone in one word of the title and the root of the other word in the title, has multiple meanings. It is my estimation then, that Austen is playing on the word “sense,” showing that it actually refers to the five *senses*, those of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch that all human beings possess. Austen means to convey through Elinor and Marianne that not only do “good judgment” and “emotional consciousness” affect them, their lives and their situations, but their *senses*, particularly that of sight and hearing do as well.

Furthermore, Austen’s use of “sense” in this regard is just as important and ties into the lives of Elinor and Marianne just as much as do the previous and intended meanings of their names and the title of the novel. Along these lines, Austen critic Susan Morgan makes an important observation. She says:

One of the most important truths about *Sense and Sensibility* is how much of the action depends upon ignorance, misconception, deception, and surprise. People are continually arriving unexpectedly and leaving unexpectedly, making startling revelations or forming and acting on false conclusions. (Morgan 192)

Morgan’s point is important because she portrays how Austen’s characters are misled by their senses: either they are jumping to conclusions when they do not have enough information with which to fairly judge a situation (“ignorance”), or they have enough information but incorrectly process it (“misconception”), they are actually outright

“deceived” through what they see and hear, or they are “surprised,” therefore jolted into a wrong assessment by their surrounding circumstances. All four of Morgan’s situational examples of confusion result from invalid sensory information; the “revelations” these characters have and act on are based in “false conclusions.” These false conclusions result from the misconception of what is seen and heard.

Conversely, Austen does recognize this as a common mistake which is why she allows her characters to be tripped up frequently by their higher senses. Clearly defined, there are specific differences between what is meant by the “higher” senses versus that of the “lower.” Simply put, the lower senses are more literal; specifically, they [the senses personified] shout to the bearer of a particular sense, such as when something is hot the sense of touch shouts, “Don’t touch it!” In addition, if something smells bad the senses of smell and taste yell, “Don’t eat it!”; the lower senses are rarely wrong in what they ascertain. Specifically then, if one puts his/her hand near a roaring fire and feels the heat it gives off, one knows not to touch the burning log. If one holds a gallon of milk up to his/her nose and it smells sour, they know not to drink it because one hundred percent of the time it is going to taste bad and quite probably cause the consumer to be ill¹.

The higher senses however, are fallible. For example, it is natural for one to assume that if something can be assessed through what is seen and heard, that it is in fact truth. Yet, Austen knew that these senses are deceptive and that what one does see is not always what one assesses it to be. In addition, what one hears is not always as that person first thought it to be either.

¹ I was first introduced to the higher vs. the lower senses in Dr. Ben Lockerd’s Shakespeare graduate course at Grand Valley State University. I am introducing it as common knowledge here because it has become so for me after years of work on Austen and the senses; therefore I am not officially citing it on the WC page but want to give ample credit to Dr. Lockerd who first introduced me to the higher/lower senses.

Subsequently then in accordance with Morgan's assessment (that Austen's characters arrive at continual false conclusions), critic Jessamyn Jackson takes us a step further as she agrees with this understanding, given her definition of the word "fiction" regarding this novel:

Sense and Sensibility confronts the tremendous power of the fictions of feeling that conduct literature promotes, those fictions' power to shape the plots of people's lives. The novel presents life's fiction of sensibility as fiction not only in being made up, or constructed, but also in being not necessarily true, sometimes false to a particular situation or an individual's feelings. *Sense and Sensibility* demonstrates the necessity for both novelists and readers to come to terms with them, to negotiate carefully and consciously their participation in fictions of female sensibility[...] (Jackson 251-252)

Jackson's point agrees with mine, that what Austen's character's feel (see and hear) at times is fictitious; the word "fiction" assumes that what we think we actually know is incorrect, or not "necessarily true." This examination will focus specifically on Marianne, Elinor, and Mrs. Dashwood who all have incorrect or "fictitious" feelings based on the inaccurate information absorbed through the higher senses of sight and sound.

Marianne

The analysis of this argument begins with Marianne: for her, the senses of sight and hearing cloud her judgment (her *sense*) in regards to many things, but especially Willoughby. She sees and hears his handsome, well-mannered, well-spoken, and debonair qualities, and she believes what she sees and hears from Willoughby on the surface; she

believes that these surface qualities are equal to his character. However, she is deceived by her higher senses due to the fact that he is not who he claims to be: in reality, he is a liar, a player and a tease.

Critic Gloria Sybil Gross, although definitely an Austen critic, is an expert on Samuel Johnson who happens to be Austen's favorite author. Gross has written much criticism on Johnson's work primarily, yet one entire book based on Austen, devoting an entire chapter to each of Austen's novels; she outlines how Johnson's influences tie into Austen's character's actions and thoughts. In addition, the book portrays specific comparisons from Johnson's scenes to Austen's. Gross relates the following regarding *Sense and Sensibility*, quoting Johnson at the end of this passage:

Speaking directly to the irrational, to the chimerical, he [Samuel Johnson] confronts the most radically censored of human conceptions, which are submerged, to use his thrilling phrase, in 'some internal consciousness':
'Nothing is to be estimated by its effect upon common eyes and ears.'
(Gross 59)

It is a fair connection to make: Johnson, according to Gross, was among not only Jane Austen's favorite herself, but her entire family's [Gross relating that it was Austen's father who first introduced the family to his work (Gross 6)]. If Samuel Johnson was preoccupied with the higher senses, then it is fair to assume that Austen adopted this line of thought as well; in addition, Gross points out that Austen was actually "schooled by Johnson" so therefore Austen "honors [his] inferences" (Gross 61).

Therefore, as Gross points to Marianne through Johnson's assertion, we understand that one ought not give that much trust or power to their higher senses because it is dangerous to

one's heart. Although Gross is careful to point out that Johnson "declines to sit in judgment or pass sentence over right and wrong modes of thinking" (Gross 59), he and therefore Austen do warn against the irresponsible filtering of sensory information. For Marianne, her "internal consciousness" has to be recognized by her as one that forms opinions based upon "common eyes and ears," [not "common" in the sense of being a "commoner" or non-royalty, but as in "regular"]. Everyone has the same ability to make meaning out of the information that his/her senses bring in and it is up to each person individually what he/she does with that information. What Marianne chooses to do with her sensory information is to blindly trust her senses; she believes Willoughby's character is the same entity as what she perceives *through* seeing his handsome appearance and hearing his charming wit. It is this blind trust in her own "common eyes and ears" that leads to the illness that almost kills her and wracks her loved ones with great fear and concern when the truth of his character is revealed.

The first place that Austen portrays Marianne as a prisoner to her higher senses regarding Willoughby is in chapter 11: "When he was present she had no *eyes*² for anyone else. Everything he did, was right. Everything he *said*, was clever" (88). Clearly, she has fallen for what she has simply seen and heard—according to Marianne, Willoughby is perfect because of her view of him. In reality no one does or says *everything* right all of the time, but Marianne's heart is what is doing the seeing and hearing which renders any practical thoughts about him or the situation powerless to her; she has been hypnotized by her senses to the exclusion of any "practical soundness of judgment"; she has not remembered that eyes and ears are "common" and they need to bring in more information before she makes a decision about Willoughby.

²Emphasis mine.

Critic George E. Haggerty puts it this way: “Marianne becomes the sullen guardian of her own emotions” (Haggerty 221), referring to a phrase from the novel describing Marianne’s doctrine of life where Austen describes her saying, “...it was impossible for her [Marianne] to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion” (149). What Haggerty means and I think it a prudent point is that as the novel deems Elinor as the one with “sense” and so seeming to validate her stature as a woman of sense, so does it also value Marianne’s stature as an emotional responder. This raises a fair question then, which is how her response can be “valuable” if her emotions lead her to an illness? It is because Austen is juxtaposing the two extremes in order to demonstrate to her readers that even though too much of a good quality becomes a negative attribute, that does not erase the possibility for a hair of positive influence the quality has. Subsequently, when Haggerty says that “Marianne becomes the sullen guardian of her own emotions,” he points to the fact that Marianne has taken a play from Elinor’s playbook. She does not keep them locked up inside her as Elinor would, but she is violently protective of them, and I also feel defensive of them, as we will see with the following examples.

The most important position still is that we understand that Marianne’s propensity is to believe in what she sees and hears on the surface. To this end we have further help. Critic Rodney S. Edgecomb explains this about Marianne:

Marianne’s sensibility [regarding the Willoughby situation] is very much a fragmented care of parts...a memorializing of process and change. It extends...into her conception of human conduct (as in the eighteenth-century theory of the ruling passion) and has them stand in for the fluctuating reality of human sentience. (Edgecomb 610)

Edgecomb asserts here that Marianne's conduct stands outside of what is acceptable within the confines of what the social code of her societal day would suggest as propriety. I take it a step further and submit that it is her surface judgments alone through her misreading of Willoughby through what she assessed with her seeing and hearing that pushes her to such behavior. I do not mean to suggest that she is not ultimately responsible for her behavior. As human beings we are always responsible for our choices. To suggest otherwise is to take away the free will we were all born to live with. I do propose however, that our circumstances do push us further along sometimes in areas we are likely to go anyway, but possibly not as far as we would end up on our own. So, as Edgecomb asserts her behavior as over-the-top, I stress it is so because her heart *saw* what it wanted to see, not what was actually present within the folds of Willoughby's true character.

It is this point then that pushes me to part ways with Edgecomb. He goes on in his article to say this: "Marianne does not misread Willoughby's behavior...(his subsequent explanation to Elinor makes it plain that he *was* infatuated with her)" (Edgecomb 610). I could not disagree more. Of course Marianne misreads Willoughby's behavior! Is not a person's actions indicative of the greater picture that lies within him/her? So he was "infatuated" with her! That does not mean he *loved* her which is what she fervently believed, but even more importantly than that, what is of utmost significance is that Marianne misreads Willoughby's *character*. Her heart assesses what it wants too: it sees a good man and hears the return of loving feelings in his words. In actuality Willoughby is a scoundrel. It is that simple. And, the fact that it is that simple shows the degree to which Marianne has allowed her senses to deceive her.

Yet, the example of Willoughby and Marianne is the most obvious example of sensory deception in the novel, and it is necessary to take a closer look at how the higher senses deceive Marianne because it is in the specifics that the reality of this problem plays out in Austen's novel. It is not so difficult to believe when one considers Marianne, for her "sensibility" is always coinciding with her trust in what she sees and hears.

For example, when Edward first arrives at Norland in the beginning of the novel, she is highly critical of him because he does not read aloud with the fervor of a man *she* would prefer, nor does she think he is good looking enough to be worthy of Elinor's love.

Marianne says the following to Mrs. Dashwood:

...he [Edward] is not the kind of young man—there is something wanting---his figure is not striking; it has none of that grace which I should expect in the man who could seriously **attach** my sister. His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which once announce virtue and intelligence...Oh! Mama, how spiritless, how tame was Edward's manner in reading last night! I felt for my sister most severely. Yet she bore it with so much composure, she seemed scarcely to notice it. I could hardly keep my seat. To those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild, pronounced with such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference! (55)

Marianne's basis for the majority of her opinions is on what she sees, Edward's lack of having a "striking" appearance, and what she hears, his inability to read in an attractive manner; both bother her so much, she is feeling actual pain for her sister over it. Elinor as herself is not bothered by what Marianne deems as weaknesses in Edward. This portrays

the fact that Elinor is able to look past that of the auditory sense and consider Edward for more than what the higher senses communicate on the surface; Elinor understands that there is more to someone “than meets the eye” as the figure of speech suggests.

Before going further, there is a crucial aspect to consider and that is this: it is easy to get the two ways of judging people confused with one another. Some critics might argue that Marianne’s surface convictions enable her with “sense” as opposed to “sensibility,” because it may mean she is holding back and making certain to NOT be quick to judge. This miscalculation is easily arrived at. However, Marianne does not hold back because she means to collect more information about an individual or situation, thereby arriving at a fair assessment. She holds back because she knows no other way to make an evaluation, therefore, basing her first impressions in her final judgment. She arrives at these judgments *through* what she initially sees and hears or does not see and does not hear. Simply put, when Marianne first assesses a situation, she jumps to a steadfast conclusion.

What aids Marianne in her quick decisions about people and situations is the social code in which she exists: the social code of her day is the filter through which everything goes. It is a fair question to ask, that if Marianne’s ways are ruled by such a filter, why does it seem that Elinor is able to resist jumping to conclusions in spite of that filter? To be honest, I am not certain of the answer but do think it has something to do with Austen’s intention to juxtapose the two. And, in actuality, the fervent sensible Elinor is also tripped up by her own senses as I will establish later on. Critic Susan Morgan has much to offer on the subject. Regarding *Sense and Sensibility* and the filter of social code, she has determined the following:

The pervasiveness of mysteries and the limited truth that learning mere facts can provide constantly remind the reader of how difficult it can be to behave sensitively in social situations or to understand others without seeing into their minds and hearts. (Morgan 192)

I agree with Morgan. However, I would take it a step further and establish the difference in sensitivity through which Elinor and Marianne differ regarding the social code they exist within: where Elinor is able to give others the benefit of the doubt when she cannot see “in to their hearts and minds,” Marianne cannot. Elinor, although she does not see the heart or mind, only the surface, determines there is in fact something more to an individual, and Marianne assumes that “what you see is what you get.” She assumes that because she cannot see “in to their hearts and minds” that nothing else exists there except that which she has perceived, and it is her final decision on any matter.

Subsequently, as we have established then that Marianne is stuck on the surface, that she cannot get past the immediate pictures and sounds which she takes in, Morgan offers her agreement with my original assessment of Edward: she says that, “Marianne’s demand for a spirited reading of Cowper...” is the “...criteria of surface...seeing through her own projection of value, she is blind to Edward’s real nature and independent worth” (Morgan 190). Exactly! This is how Marianne is: to live on the surface, to gather little data before making an assumption, and to leave most of the sense of “rational understanding” (Watson) out of her calculations. What is even more fascinating is what Morgan says next in her article:

Jane Austen has arranged the opening scenes so that Elinor, in describing Edward, provides the first expression of proper feeling in the book. The

coldness [to judge Edward on the surface]...and extravagance of Marianne call[s] attention to the strength of Elinor's affections and the justness of her perceptions...as Elinor's opinion of Edward has developed, so her perception of him has changed. She has gotten to know him...This is the statement of one who sees through surfaces and can judge in other and more generous terms. (Morgan 190)

In keeping with this astute observation, we understand then that Marianne does not see past surfaces and does not judge in "other and more generous terms." It sounds strong, but I believe it to be apt, that Marianne is not "generous" in her estimations of people.

Before we venture to more examples of Marianne's lack of generosity, it is important to pause and look at one more point that Morgan makes that I feel is prudent and clever of Austen. Regarding this section of the novel with Edward's reading at Norland, Marianne's misjudgments, and the narrator's explanation of Elinor's admiration for him in spite of it, Morgan says this: "The reader must feel that Jane Austen does not allow us to see Edward's charm, but we are asked to value him because Elinor does" (Morgan 190). This is clever and brilliant of Austen; as Marianne is misjudging Edward based on the tone of his voice during a reading and the lack of austerity she does not see him display during such reading, we the reader are asked to also not make the same mistake. It is as if Austen is saying to her reader, "Hang in there with me—I will show you over the course of time in the novel the true character of this man. Do not make the mistake Marianne makes—trust the sense of Elinor...." In so doing, we are asked along for the ride of gathering more data before making a judgment about Edward and I think it is excellent that Austen does not

only portray through her characters that this is a better way to exist, she demonstrates it by asking us to enter into the process as well.

Moving forward, we see more of Marianne continuing to fall victim to her higher senses as the following common misjudgments will portray. These continue to be specific to her overall unfair appraisal of Edward. In chapter 14 of Volume I, there is a scene between Edward, Marianne, and Elinor where Edward has come to Barton to visit and the three of them are having a conversation about what life would be like if they all had a great deal of money. However, when the conversation shifts to talking about perceptions and judging people, Marianne says, “At any time of life opinions are tolerably fixed. It is not likely that I should now see or hear anything to change them” (123). Marianne is not simply failing to pay attention to the sensory information she is privy to; she is actually firmly denouncing the two senses of seeing and hearing as a means to take in more than her first opinion of what she does see and hear. Instead of using these senses to collect data that builds over time which can then lead to a deeper opinion of someone, her first impression is her first and last (at this point in her life) and she is happy to declare it so.

Critic Marilyn Butler gives Marianne a pass here, blaming this weakness in Marianne on her youth. She says that “Marianne, with her naturally affectionate disposition and her intelligence, is never from the start a typical adherent of the doctrine of self: youth and impetuosity for a time blind[s] her, so that she act[s] against the real grain of her nature” (Butler, “War of Ideas” 6). Subsequently, Butler excuses Marianne’s rush to judgment as a typical quality of immaturity.

However, esteemed Austen critic Claudia Johnson disagrees with Butler: her point is that “...Marianne is particularly reckless about the management of her mind” (Johnson 18).

Johnson understands Marianne as culpable to all she experiences including that which is sorrowful, clearly stating that it is her own fault for rushing to judge people and situations. Subsequently, regarding the aforementioned statement that Marianne has boldly asserted that "...At any time of life opinions are tolerably fixed. It is not likely that I should now see or hear any thing to change them," Johnson also says this: "Austen's concern here is to show how the mind animated by hope is later shackled by expectation and...despondently arrested by disappointment..." (Johnson 18). Marianne sets *herself* up here. Although this is a simple conversation with Edward and Elinor, Johnson concludes and I along with her, that Marianne's "recklessness" is always her downfall. Her opinions and judgments are fixed: end of story and no further discussion!

So, as Butler excuses Marianne, I do not and here is the reason: I believe that Austen had a purpose in creating Marianne the way that she is. After all, Marianne is fictional: she is made up. So although we as readers can be sympathetic, I'm not certain it is ever helpful to *excuse* her behavior on that which would normally seem an obvious point, in this case, Marianne's youth. Why excuse her? She's not real! Therefore Austen has a point for us not to miss then, and if we "excuse" Marianne, we miss that point [that actual "point" containing several entities which have already been established with more to come, not the least of which is how Marianne's senses deceive her, and as we've just determined it is by her own volition as this previous passage suggests].

Therefore, as we have established the validity of Marianne's culpability, the scene then goes on to something even more profound: Elinor responds to this explaining that judging by first impressions can be dangerous as she says, "I have frequently detected myself in such kind of mistakes...in a total misapprehension of character in some point or other:

fancying people so much more gay or grave, or ingenious or stupid than they really are...” (124). Elinor admits here that judging people based on first impressions alone can often leave one mistaken. And, as the scene continues, Elinor and Marianne discuss the problem of being guided by what others think and living one’s life in relationship to the opinions of others, Marianne being for this “doctrine,” and Elinor strongly against.

Yet, it is what Edward finally says here that has philosophical value: he says to Elinor, “My judgment...is all on your side of the question; but I am afraid my practice is much more on your sister’s. I never wish to offend, but I am so foolishly shy, that I often *seem*³ negligent, when I am only kept back by my natural awkwardness” (124/125). Marianne has judged Edward on the basis of sight and hearing and has used these senses only to absorb enough information to form a first impression. She criticizes his reading ability as lacking “taste” and originally questions the legitimacy of his worth of Elinor based on this alone. This is doggedly unfair because in truth, Edward is simply *shy*.

Initially I disagreed with Marilyn Butler. However, I believe her to be accurate on other fronts and here in her evaluation of Edward. Her point is this:

Edward’s tastes...are...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... 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’...Edward’s character, Edward’s aesthetic opinions, and Elinor’s method of assessing Edward, all have this much in common--

³ Emphasis Mine.

-that they are based on prescribed standards, not on subjective impulse.

(Butler, “War of Ideas” 4)

I love Butler’s analysis here and this is my point exactly which encapsulates two things.

First, it is that Marianne’s weakness is that she does make her “tolerably fixed” judgments *through* subjective impulse. Anything “subjective” is subject to one’s own opinion, not what an actual fact about an individual would purport as truth. Marianne’s willingness to rush to judgment is absolutely based through her eyes and ears taking in quick assessments deciding there is nothing more that she could ever “see or hear... to change them.” She has drawn a line in the sand regarding her sensory experiences and refuses to step beyond that line.

In contrast, and this is the second aspect, is that Elinor “evaluates” Edward the opposite from the way Marianne has; Elinor is patient, gathering information based on what she knows about his background, and so is *able* to “to see beyond the defects of his manner” which have been less than attractive reading abilities, a lack of outward infatuations with Elinor and his somewhat “shy” demeanor. But here is the most important component within Butler’s statement: it is no wonder that Elinor likes Edward! Butler’s says that they [Edward and Elinor] have this ability to form slow opinions based in facts rather than self-deceived quick judgments [which I believe are based in the surface senses] “in common”! They are alike. Subsequently, it even more telling of Marianne’s own character at this point in the novel that she does not *see* this truth. Her sister adores Edward for many reasons, but particularly because she [Elinor] respects her own disciplined evaluations of others which is a quality Edward also owns that Elinor recognizes in him. Marianne has left her evaluation at the front door of judgment, stopping after hearing the man read and frustrated because he

does not admire Elinor's art in the way she thinks he ought too. Her unfurnished subjective impulses have left her with little information on which to base this very important "evaluation" which is whether or not Edward is worthy of Elinor and of course we know, she feels he is not. This is an example of sensory deception as its highest level within this novel.

Interestingly, Austen does not leave Marianne in this predicament of her nature. After all the mistakes Marianne does make by her common misjudgments and surface convictions, she does in fact grow. She does change. In the end, Austen redeems her by all Marianne as a created character has experienced. C.S. Lewis writes that Marianne, "...painfully...discovers that she has been making mistakes about herself and about the world in which she lives. All of her data has to be reinterpreted...she realizes that the cause of the deception lay within; ...that, 'her own feelings have prepared her sufferings'" (Lewis 27). Austen proves to her readers that we are all a little bit like Marianne. We all misinterpret data. We are all deceived by our senses. The aforementioned "point" is exactly this: if we excuse Marianne for her sensory weaknesses blaming it on the immaturity of her youth as Butler suggests, this is exactly what we miss; I believe this to be one of Austen's most important points within this novel.

Nevertheless, because Marianne learns to see and hear more deeply, she is rewarded through her good choice of Colonel Brandon who honors her; this happy result comes from the education she has acquired, to examine herself and others more closely. Marianne tells Elinor of this change in her near the novel's end: she says,

My illness has made me think...long before I was enough recovered to talk, I was perfectly able to reflect. I considered the past; I saw in my own

behavior...nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself...I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings...my illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself. Had I died, it would have self-destruction... (322)

It is important to recognize here that there are severe consequences for Marianne's chosen self-deception even though her story has a "happy ending." Colonel Brandon is an honorable and wonderful man who will indeed make a fabulous husband to her, but there is a piece missing from Marianne. Her illness (a result ultimately of her misjudgments) has taken an edge off from her. In truth, her original wild, emotive self has changed. She now lives in a new reflective and somewhat somber world. Haggerty agrees with this evaluation. He says,

Sense and Sensibility carries us...beyond the dichotomy of the title to a resolution, painful...as it is, that signals growth. The personal intensity is lost, and in its place we have a new kind of self-control, capable of preserving the heroine and earning her a place in the world. Marianne learns the meaning of public responsibility at the expense of her soul. (Haggerty 234)

Indeed, Marianne's original desire to believe in her initial sights and sounds has cost her more than the illness and a broken heart; it has shaved a piece away from her persona and as Haggerty argues, has taken her soul. Those of us who have experienced a trauma of any kind understand this result—we cannot interpret the world in the same way any longer. Either the world has changed or we have changed; for Marianne the outcome is that both have.

Mrs. Henry Dashwood

Subsequently then, we examine the character of Mrs. Henry Dashwood, for although Mrs. Dashwood is not a main character in *Sense and Sensibility*, and certainly not included in the title along with Elinor and Marianne as the introduction has stated, it is important to note that Austen meant to convey, through even her minor characters, that she was enormously concerned with the senses and how most of her characters in this novel fall victim to them, not just the principal characters. Mrs. Dashwood is a character to whom most are sympathetic, given that she is a recent widow, who in her grief is forced out of her own home by her stepson and his wife. Yet, regardless of our sympathy for her, Mrs. Dashwood too has weaknesses with the senses, mostly with respect to how she views Willoughby.

We begin by examining her errors in judgment concerning Willoughby with his first entrance into the cottage as he is carrying Marianne in his arms from her fall in the rain. It is important to understand that her initial positive perception of him remains her *only* perception of him in spite of later evidence to the contrary:

Elinor and her mother rose up in amazement at their entrance, and while the eyes of both were fixed on him with an evident wonder and a secret admiration which equally sprung from his appearance, he apologized for his intrusion by relating its cause, in a manner so frank and so graceful, that his person, which was uncommonly handsome, received additional charms from his voice and expression. Had he been old, ugly, and vulgar, that gratitude and kindness of Mrs. Dashwood would have been secured by any act of attention to her child; but the influence of youth,

beauty, and elegance, gave an interest to the action which came home to her feelings....she thanked him again and again....(79)

Mrs. Dashwood is sold on Willoughby from the first sight and sound; she is just as smitten with him as Marianne is, which is why she is equally deceived. She cannot get past his “youth, beauty, and elegance” to secure a reasonable evaluation. Willoughby is “receiving additional charms” in Mrs. Dashwood’s assessment from “his voice and expression.” Subsequently, he is initially offered a deduction from her that perhaps he has not justly earned. In essence, Mrs. Dashwood *thinks* she knows who he is and what he represents.

In keeping with this truth concerning Mrs. Dashwood’s infatuation, as the novel continues there is another example of her yearnings for Marianne and Willoughby’s romance. In chapter eleven, the narrator explains that suddenly John Willoughby is now included in every family activity, from meals, to balls, and parties; within these meetings, Marianne and Willoughby were always off together, whispering and being publicly more affectionate with one another than is deemed proper. The narrator tells us that “...such conduct made them of course most exceedingly laughed at; but ridicule could not shame, and seemed hardly to provoke them” (89). Subsequently, Marianne and Willoughby’s behavior is not only improper, it is down right “laughable.”

Yet, in spite of such behavior the narrator tells us this about Mrs. Dashwood’s response to them in the very next paragraph: “Mrs. Dashwood entered into all their feelings with warmth which left her no inclination for checking this excessive display of them. To her it was but the natural consequence of a strong affection in a young and ardent mind” (89). Mrs. Dashwood is living her own hopes and dreams vicariously through Marianne and Willoughby. Instead of being embarrassed for them as they are being “exceedingly

laughed” at and “ridiculed,” which would be the normal response for a mother in this society, she is “left” with “no inclination” to a “checked” opinion because she too is captivated with Willoughby. Again, she cannot get past her initial sights and sounds which told her he was “young, beautiful, and elegant.”

Consequently this is why, when he abruptly leaves Barton without a valid explanation, Mrs. Dashwood gives him the benefit of every doubt, formulating a theory that he and Marianne are secretly engaged. Mrs. Dashwood insists upon this explanation to Elinor, when in fact, Willoughby and Marianne are not engaged. Her initial sights and sounds do not permit her to be reasonable. Marianne and Willoughby’s secrecy over the matter is definitely a suspicious entity, yet Mrs. Dashwood cannot bring herself to be at all suspicious because her first sensory information is her only basis for forming her opinion.

However, there is an important reason why she processes him this way which reveals Mrs. Dashwood’s unwillingness to adjust her opinion, even when presented with new sensory information. Critic David Kaufman agrees and helps us understand why: he says that “Mrs. Dashwood makes an important mistake when she takes Willoughby’s actions as a sign of his engagement” (Kaufmann 58). Simply, her perception is invalid. Kaufmann continues by explaining that, “Silence about attachment is one thing, but about commitment in an event of such public importance as marriage, is something else entirely” (Kaufmann 58). Why does Mrs. Dashwood make this mistake? It is because she desperately wants her daughters to marry well because otherwise she and they will have very little for the rest of their lives. Let us not forget the predicament that Mrs. Dashwood has found herself in: the death of her husband has left her homeless and almost penniless, so her heart (her

sensibility) is forcing her eyes to see only what her heart wants. Her heart is allowing her ears to hear only what it wants her to as well.

I do not mean imply through this personification that she is not ultimately responsible for her own heart's beliefs: she is. But it is clear that she does not want to be because for Mrs. Dashwood to be that practical is to admit that they as a family are back to square one when it comes to their homelessness and pennilessness. Subsequently, she turns Willoughby's hasty exit into a positive act instead of a negative one by adhering to the ridiculous conviction that his silence and exodus purports a *noble* quality.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize for those who may argue that we as twenty-first century witnesses are placing our own modern judgments about Willoughby's actions on an eighteenth century figure (that somehow Mrs. Dashwood's assumptions are in actuality, justifiable based on "the times"), Kaufmann warns against such dismissals. He acknowledges the following about the eighteenth century Austen tradition regarding engagement and marriage:

Austen depicts a society in which a woman's identity is determined by familial and marital connection. She presents a world whose organization and reproduction depend on connections maintained by marriage. In such a world, promises made by men to women are of deep social interest.

Propriety in this light upholds the social order and individual dignity: it *shields vulnerable emotion*⁴ from public scrutiny and makes public what is of greatest note for social coherence. (Kaufmann 58)

Kaufmann supports what I have been declaring about Mrs. Dashwood's assumptions: Willoughby, if he were what Mrs. Dashwood believed him to be, would never have kept

⁴ Emphasis mine.

his engagement a secret or asked Marianne to do so because Austen's declared society would not permit such an action as "proper." Willoughby is not what Mrs. Dashwood dreams he is because he is not willing to "dignify" Marianne with an outward verbal commitment that he is "connected" to her, and therefore the Dashwood family. Instead of "shielding" the Dashwoods from "vulnerable emotion" in light of the assumed "public scrutiny," he creates more. Simply, Willoughby places Marianne and therefore Mrs. Dashwood in an impossible situation! [And, Mrs. Dashwood adds to this angst through her own defensive beliefs in him].

Of course this raises the question of why? Austen is the author/creator, so why does she place Willoughby, Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood in this predicament? The answer is that Austen has a motivation here: she is portraying the sensory mistakes of her characters. Willoughby, if engaged to Marianne, is going to tell the society at large, and the fact that he is unwilling to do so, tells us something important about Mrs. Dashwood's sensory intake; the fact that she refuses to accept this obvious truth, knowing full well the propriety of the day and age in which she subsists announces Austen's point: Mrs. Dashwood sees and hears only what she can bear to, because she simply cannot accept the possibility that Willoughby is no longer an option for Marianne. She needs Willoughby to be *her* own hope for the future of her family.

Mrs. Dashwood then is deceived by her own interpretation of her senses regarding this enormous error she makes about the secrecy of an engagement that does not exist. However, it is not the first mistake concerning Willoughby that she makes and this next point is interesting because it depicts the *lengths* to which Austen's characters in this novel will go when deceived by their senses .

Given the previous sections, we understand then that Mrs. Dashwood is clearly infatuated with John Willoughby and we have also recognized why, given her current situation. It is fascinating what happens one evening early in her association with him when Mrs. Dashwood shares her desire to make renovations to Barton cottage. In this particular scene, Willoughby goes on and on about how beautiful he thinks the cottage is in its present state and begs her to promise not to make any alterations to it. He says to her,

You are a good woman...your promise makes me easy. Extend it a little farther, and it will make me happy. Tell me that not only your house will remain the same, but that I shall ever find you and yours unchanged in your dwelling; and that you will always consider me with the kindness which has made everything belonging to you so dear to me. (107)

In the very next paragraph the narrator tells us that “The promise was readily given, and Willoughby’s behavior during the whole evening declared at once his affection and happiness” (107). Here is the bottom line: Willoughby gets whatever he wants because of his outward charm. Again, what Mrs. Dashwood sees and hears of him has her so transfixed, that he charms her right out of her own desires. From a practical standpoint, this raises the question of why would Willoughby care about renovations made to Barton Cottage? He is not going to live there. It is not *his* comfort that is going to be affected by renovations, it is Mrs. Dashwood’s, and yet she is willing to throw away her own comfort because he is good-looking [the visual] and can speak in charming way [the auditory]. We see her willingness to not give his requests a second thought when she says this in response to him: “Depend upon it that whatever unemployed sum may remain, when I make up my

accounts in the spring, I would rather lay it uselessly by than dispose of it in a manner so painful to you” (106).

So, first Mrs. Dashwood desires to make renovations to her home. Secondly, Willoughby, not yet married or knowingly engaged to her daughter disagrees that she should and thirdly, she immediately responds by telling him she would rather throw away the little money she has than to disappoint *him*.

Critic Butler again shares her thoughts: she calls his request here of Mrs. Dashwood “that no alteration be made to Barton cottage” simply because “he has pleasant associations with it as it is...” as “grossly self-indulgent.” Butler also suggests that even when purporting his demands of Mrs. Dashwood in his charming manner, he is actually being “selfish” and “unattractively arrogant” (Butler, “War Of Ideas” 4). I agree. Interestingly, this is before we know for certain he is a scoundrel. This is Willoughby supposedly at his best and yet, Mrs. Dashwood is willing to dismiss her own comfort for his righteously indignant demands simply because he asks it of her with a smile on his face. This woman is not only deceived by what she sees and hears from him—she is so to the point of losing herself; she is transfixed. When one considers what Mrs. Dashwood is willing to forgo for the intoxicating Willoughby, it is no wonder Marianne has not considered him beyond the initial sights and sounds he communicated. Simply put, for Mrs. Dashwood, Willoughby will always be the debonair hero who scooped up Marianne in the rain and carried her to safety: he will be perceived as the knight in shining armor gallivanting in on a white horse even when he is “grossly self-indulgent,” even when he is “selfish and arrogant,” and even when he leaves.

Finally, it is important to revisit the scene of Willoughby's abrupt departure from Barton, because it is perhaps the most convincing argument to Mrs. Dashwood's bewitched nature concerning him. There is a telling conversation between Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor in which Mrs. Dashwood refuses to admit that Willoughby's behavior is strange and she gives him every excuse to have done this. Elinor says to her mother,

It is all very strange. So suddenly to be gone! It seems but the work of the moment. And last night he was with us so happy, so cheerful, so affectionate--And now only after 10 minutes notice—Gone too without intending to return! –Something more than what he owed to us must have happened. He did not *speak*, he did not behave like himself. *You* must have *seen*⁵ the difference as well as I...(110)

It is interesting to note here that when Willoughby is unable to speak or throw off his charms because he is not present, that he appears to be a completely different person at least to Elinor. Regardless, Mrs. Dashwood has grown to accept him for the smooth talker that he is and her response to Elinor in this moment is defensive. She responds to Elinor by saying, "It was not inclination that he wanted, Elinor....I have thought it all over I assure you, and I can perfectly account for every thing that at first seemed strange to me as well as you" (110). Mrs. Dashwood cannot see the truth, but what is more troubling than this is that she does not want to see. She defends her position further here by going on to say:

Yes, I have explained it to myself in the most satisfactory way:--but you, Elinor, who love to doubt what you can---It will not satisfy you, I know; but you shall not talk me out of my trust in it....I will listen to

⁵ Emphasis Mine

no cavil, unless you can point out any other method of understanding
the affair satisfactory as this... (111)

Mrs. Dashwood reiterates that she will only see and hear what she desires to hear and believe, not what her own daughter may suggest as truth. Elinor is not trying to completely discredit Willoughby here, but is merely pointing out that there is something strange about his behavior which indicates something else must be going on. However, Mrs. Dashwood will not allow herself to recognize even this because she is so deceived by her senses, as she ignores any new sensory information.

Critic Claudia Johnson articulates the following point about this scene:

Sense and Sensibility has at its starting point...epistemological
problems—problems of knowing and assent...that baffle...[its]
characters [who] themselves often formulate its problem explicitly.
When Elinor argues with her mother about Willoughby's suspicious
abrupt departure and the possibility of his bad faith towards Marianne,
Mrs. Dashwood indignantly responds, 'Are there not probabilities to be
accepted, merely because they are not certainties' (111) ... (Johnson 15)

Why is Mrs. Dashwood so "indignant" about an uncertainty? I submit that it is not only because of the previously established point that her heart cannot afford to lose the hope that Willoughby represents for her family, but also because the idea that her senses have deceived her regarding John Willoughby is a truth that she is ignoring altogether.

Where Mrs. Dashwood accuses Elinor of being doubtful and heartless, Elinor is merely being practical. Elinor is asking Mrs. Dashwood to reserve her judgment, raising the possibility that she has been "epistemologically" deceived. Mrs. Dashwood, at the mention

of this, will not even accept this as a possibility. Yet given the situation, Elinor's doubts of Willoughby are absolutely fair. Conversely, Mrs. Dashwood is committed to her original opinions of Willoughby based on what she *saw* [handsome] and *heard* [charming], that she cannot bring herself to an even reasonable doubt of the situation. Mrs. Dashwood is "baffled" by her own senses, but will not recognize this fact.

I close these two sections (Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood) with Austen critic Tony Tanner. Regarding the importance of the senses in *Sense and Sensibility*, he remits the following:

The...vocabulary of vision is much in evidence throughout, indicating just how much goes on in that most sensitive organ which both connects and separates consciousness and world. And in a world of so many secrets and imposed suppressions the eyes have to be unusually busy, not only encountering surfaces but having to penetrate them, not only deciphering the signs but interpreting them. (Tanner, "Appendix" 367)

It appears as though Tanner is giving Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood an excuse in this passage: although his point is not specific to them as characters but to all characters in the novel in this article, he raises an important point that seems to bring reasoning behind their mishaps with surface convictions. The bottom line is this: neither Marianne nor Mrs. Dashwood are good at "penetrating" the surfaces through that which they see. Not only do they incorrectly "decipher" the signs, they fail altogether at "interpreting" them correctly. Tanner regards this as a probable mistake because their eyes and ears are over stimulated due to what was acceptable within the confines of the social code; simply, one could not ask clarifying questions when uncertain about a particular "sign."

To a certain degree, I agree with Tanner. However, I still maintain that Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood believed what they did at every turn especially regarding Willoughby because they had too much at stake emotionally and financially to believe anything else. Subsequently, they could not afford to decipher the signs as they should be or penetrate the surfaces in order to correctly interpret these signs. In each circumstance, their hearts were the only “organ” that maintained any “vocabulary of vision.”

Elinor Dashwood

Finally concerning character analysis, we move to the examination of Elinor Dashwood and the deception that even she faces through the senses of sight and sound. However, Elinor’s experience with this is quite different from Marianne’s and Mrs. Dashwood’s. Marianne gets into trouble because of her inclination towards sensibility, her rush to an emotional response. Mrs. Dashwood’s weakness focuses on wanting to see and hear what her beloved daughter sees and hears; instead of checking the situation for herself, she rides the coattails of Marianne’s euphoria.

Conversely, Elinor is committed to sense, to having good judgment and to that of propriety, and one would assume that because of this, she does not make the same mistakes. Most of the time this exhibits itself as a positive quality that Elinor possesses and one that Marianne realizes she should emulate; she admits this to Elinor at the end of the novel when Elinor asks her if she compares her conduct to Willoughby’s. Marianne responds by saying, “No. I compare it with what it ought to have been; I compare it with yours” (350). Marianne has learned this lesson as well, that Elinor’s approach is healthier and usually more accurate.

Further explained, Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood's mistake is indicative of what one sees if one stands too close to a painting; in this situation, one cannot judge then what is contained in that portrait, whether it is a jungle scene, a seascape, or a still life, or even something else. Determining the portrait's subject comes from standing back far enough to view its image as a whole. In this same way, while Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood stand too close to the picture of Willoughby making them unable to see its breadth, width, height and subject, Elinor is at an advantage because she stands at enough of a distance [because she chooses to collect data before forming her opinions] allowing her a different vantage point: this distance enables her to see, hear, and discern at least part of the truth, that there is simply something "strange" going on with Willoughby and of course she turns out to be right.

However, despite her typical propensity for discernment and good judgment, Elinor has her own struggle with the deception of the higher senses where she stands too close to her own picture/situation. It is necessary to understand that although Austen is juxtaposing Elinor and Marianne, her point is that misunderstanding the images we see and the words we hear can happen to even those among us who inhabit a wealth of "practical soundness of good judgment." Therefore, we understand that Elinor too has a weakness in this area; Edward is her weakness. Edward is where she too has trouble seeing.

Critic June Frazer submits that Elinor has trouble seeing what is accurate concerning Edward not specifically because of Edward himself. This critic shares that it is because Austen could not have made Elinor completely perfect, because Elinor would not have been believable otherwise; she communicates that "Elinor's character is...flawless, but we tend to forget that she is still a young and inexperienced girl with her own apprenticeship to

serve...she is not perfectly formed at the beginning of the novel...she has to suffer through error and experience” (Frazer 8) just as all of Austen’s characters do. Although I agree with Frazer’s assessment, I maintain that Austen’s intention runs deeper than this analysis regarding Elinor: Austen’s deeper point is to depict through Elinor’s love for Edward that allowing oneself to be deceived by the senses is a tendency owned by even the most sensible of people.

Still, it is certain that Elinor does have just cause to believe in Edward’s affection for her, especially given his rather blatant attentions paid to her while still at Norland. However, her accurate read on the situation comes to a crossroads with what her heart wants to see, versus that which is actually true about this situation.

This crossroads of what is accurate versus that which Elinor’s heart desires to visualize is referred to in a discussion during tea at Barton Cottage between Marianne and Edward. Elinor is also present. This is where Marianne notices the ring Edward is wearing, containing a tress of hair. When Marianne asks him if it is indeed Fanny’s hair, remembering that Fanny had promised a lock to Edward and yet noticing at the same time that the color of the hair in Edward’s ring seemed different than Fanny’s, he responds by saying, “Yes; it is my sister’s hair. The setting always casts a different shade on it, you know” (128). It is what happens next however, that fascinates the reader interested in the power of the visual sense:

Elinor had met his eye, and looked conscious likewise. That the hair was her own, she instantaneously felt as well satisfied as Marianne; the only difference in their conclusions was, that what Marianne

considered as a free gift of her sister, Elinor was conscious must have been procured by some theft or contrivance unknown to herself. (128)

Really, this is comical: Elinor normally encapsulates the definition of one who has propriety and good sense, one who does not rush to judgment and one who is always reasonable. This is the same Elinor who chastised Marianne for being too publicly overt in her affections towards Willoughby; the same Elinor who keeps Lucy's secret regarding Lucy's engagement to Edward, the very man she loves, to the detriment of herself in order that she may respect her commitment to propriety and sense. Yet when it comes to the vision of her own heart, she sees what she wants to see, not what is accurate.

For Elinor to assume that the lock of hair in Edward's ring is hers is a ridiculous notion, because it means that Edward would have had to remove it from her person or clothing without her knowledge or permission which is completely out of character for Edward, who also embodies sense and propriety. In addition, the idea that he would "sneak" to pick a hair off from her shoulder or a chair that she had been sitting in, waiting around until no one was looking, as the narrator suggests through the use of the words "contrivance" and "theft," is not in keeping with who Edward is either: Edward is not intentionally sneaky, devious, or underhanded. However, Elinor is willing to abandon what she knows to be true about Edward's character because of the literal and figurative interpretation of what she senses here through her sight: she literally sees the hair, but that literal sighting leads to a figurative misrepresentation, as she rushes to judgment based on what her heart wants to see, which is that Edward's ring definitely contains her hair.

Critic Samuel Burchell has an interesting description of this type of misunderstanding in *Sense and Sensibility*. He asserts that

...much of human misery and comedy exists because of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and mistrust...all of our attention is focused upon gaps that do exist between people and are forever being widened;...greater psychological misconceptions are based on mere scraps of what should be the full flow of human communication. Such lapses in contact make the characters appear as broken bits of paper on a windy street, whirling forever farther and farther apart. (Burchell 148)

In keeping with Burchell's point, it is Austen's goal to use this scene to intentionally "widen the gap" between Edward and Elinor. Elinor's typical inclination to be sensible is abandoned here; she does not use what Burchell asserts is her fully available tool, "the full flow of communication." In other words according to Burchell, why doesn't Elinor simply *ask* Edward if the hair is hers? In this scene, Marianne states (not asks) that it is Fanny's, when she says "I never saw you wear a ring before Edward...is that Fanny's?" (128). Edward simply agrees that it is Fanny's and Elinor then goes on to believe it is hers, justifying her assumption through a rationale that believes Edward is being considerate of her in front of Marianne and anyone else who may overhear their conversation. It is Marianne who tries to glean clarification, not Elinor. So again, why doesn't she just ask him?

Austen critic Julie Shaffer explains the answer as to why Elinor simply cannot ask Edward straightaway. She says that

Elinor and Edward's love story consists of their having to wait, give up hope, and...master their ...love for one another. There is no appropriate

action either of them can take to bring them together...Elinor could tell Edward that Lucy [for example] is scheming, spiteful and money hungry, but doing so would not help her situation....And Edward can do little more than Elinor. For most of the story he does not know Lucy is manipulative and malicious so for him to leave her would make him appear fickle and irresponsible rather than heroic. (Shaffer 141)

What Shaffer is showing rather than telling is that again, there is a social code by which these characters exist within. Subsequently where Burchell feels the ring incident is completely Elinor's own fault for not simply asking Edward to clarify whether or not the hair belongs to her, Shaffer suggests that she cannot ask because it would be socially inappropriate. In addition, it is my estimation that it would be in keeping then with Elinor's true nature as a woman of sense to not ask, which is to abide by the appropriate social code.

This then raises a predicament: if Elinor is so sensible that she will not ask for clarification and in so doing remains true to herself as someone who embodies sense, does not the exact same thing discredit her because she wrongly assumes the hair is her own? Truthfully, yes, I believe that it does. The truth is somewhere in the middle between Burchell and Shaffer. Yes, Elinor would be wise to make certain the hair is her own before jumping to the conclusion that it is; at the same time, she does not have the "full flow of human communication" at her disposal as Burchell suggests. She needed to be certain, but she does exist in a social situation that has its rules and where Marianne feels free to break those rules and blurt out the supposed ownership of the hair within Edward's ring, Elinor simply cannot.

However, when all of this is measured against itself in the end, it does portray that Elinor's heart does see what it desires to see. Critic Tanner offers what I feel is the happy medium between Burchell and Shaffer's points: Tanner asserts that

...if rules and forms of society inhibit much expressive action, particularly uncensored passion gestures so that the eyes move more than the hands, that does not mean that action has been curtailed or completely banished to the inner world. It means rather that much of it has shifted to the more abstract but no less intense realm of language. Of all the defining structures erected by society, language is the most important...because it is with language that we give shape to our feelings and identity to our values. (Tanner, "Appendix" 369)

Subsequently then, where Tanner would disagree with Burchell that Elinor did not have the "full flow of communication" available to her, he also disagrees with Shafer, explaining that at some point she needed to clarify the truth about the hair, if not publicly, at least to herself. Elinor's complete "banishment" of language here keeps the truth "curtailed." Certainly the society of her time does "inhibit" her not only some, but much. However, because of Tanner's important point, I believe that she cannot be excused: she uses no "language" here. Could she have asked Edward outright due to social constraints? Probably not. But, she could have reserved judgment by using "abstract" language to her own advantage by waiting and gathering more information—this is what would have given her feelings their proper "identity" and "value."

Critic Jan Fergus suggests that Austen is intentional and deliberate in depicting her characters as ones who rush to judgment through what they see and hear: she says, "In

Sense and Sensibility ...Jane Austen elicits and manipulates the responses of judgment and sympathy, with a moral intention: to exercise, to develop, and finally to educate these responses in her readers” (Fergus 110). I agree with Fergus’ analysis of Austen’s intent that Austen is putting her characters in these situations on purpose [and in this case, Elinor, typically the most sensible one], so that we as her readers will see ourselves in them. It is simply *human nature* to misinterpret what we see and hear based on the desires of our own hearts, and Austen’s point in this situation with the hair is to depict that no one, not even the most prudent among us are immune to making such errors.

Furthermore, it is not until Elinor’s first exchange with Lucy Steele that she realizes that her heart’s sight has wronged her. Lucy says to Elinor, after she has confirmed that she is indeed engaged to the same Edward Ferrars whom Elinor privately loves, “I gave him a lock of my hair set in a ring when he was at Longstaple last....Perhaps you might notice the ring when you saw him?” (161). Elinor does acknowledge that she noticed it in a composed voice, “...under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond any thing she had ever felt before. She was mortified, shocked, confounded” (161). Certainly some of Elinor’s mortification and shock is due to the entirety of what she has learned about Edward and Lucy in these moments, but I submit that she is equally shocked and mortified at her own heart’s eye’s misrepresentation of the truth. No, she was not wrong to assume Edward had feelings for her, but her assumption that the hair in the ring was her own was a reach at best that permitted her heart to see and hear more affection from Edward than he intended to convey at that time, given his situation with Lucy.

However, Fergus again wants to remind us that we need to be sympathetic to judgments in *Sense and Sensibility* made by the characters because we have all fallen into this trap ourselves:

As literary responses, judgment and sympathy differ from suspense and distress principally by engaging and implicating a reader more formidably: exercising judgment and sympathy challenges and tests a reader's perceptions, emotions, intelligence, and moral sense...(Fergus 111)

Fergus means to ask here, are we as readers intelligent, emotional, and moral enough to see that there is an element of the weakness that leads to Elinor's misjudgment in all of us? Fergus finishes by adding that, "Austen learns to obtain these effects almost entirely by constructing elaborate parallels and contrasts between characters" (Fergus 111).

Therefore we see Austen's intent again through this horribly uncomfortable exchange between Lucy and Elinor, an "elaborate parallel and contrast" between these two characters, to point out the depth to which Elinor has allowed herself to have been deceived about the hair. We squirm with her. We wince with her because we know we are capable of the same mistake. This goes back to Jackson's earlier point, that we as Austen's readers must come to terms with this "fiction" that Elinor has put herself through because it can or could just as easily be us in the situation, desiring truth to be where there is no truth, our hearts manufacturing it based on what our hearts think they have seen and heard.

In Elinor's case, this self deception has lasting damage because it leads to her questioning of whether Edward did actually ever return her feelings and her confusion about his present intentions and it also points to how disgusted she is with herself for abandoning her original propriety, (her normal commitment to what is sensible), for what

her heart desires to see. Moreover, it is the “parallel” that Elinor has here with Marianne’s persona to always see with her heart instead of her mind which Fergus points out is Austen’s trick to ensure her reader’s culpability for the same mishap. It is Austen’s original severe contrast between the two that drives her point home even more: no one is free to get it right all of the time. We will allow our senses to deceive us no matter how careful we think we are. We want to *think* we know. We want to believe we are right because owning the truth of being wrong is unsettling and in Elinor’s situation here, is frighteningly so.

There are several critics who comment on Elinor’s character overall as it relates to her journey with Edward and the mistakes she has made regarding him. The first is Ian Watt who confirms Elinor’s original predisposition for doing what is prudent when he says that, “Almost the whole course of the book, in fact, presents us with a picture of the everyday heroism of Elinor struggling to control the anguish of disappointed love so that she can fulfill her obligations as a daughter, a sister, and a member of society” (Watt 49). Watt’s point is that she embodies that which is sensible.

Yet it is what [the second critic] Gross contrasts this with, which is what I think shows Elinor as a truer and deeper heroine: Gross argues that, “...ultimately she [Elinor] develops a less stoical view of life. Though she early rationalizes Edward’s dishonesty, once worked over by the consummately cunning Lucy, she is struck by novel sensations” (Gross 65). Elinor’s view, her sight, changes. Once a full soldier abandoned to protect the fight against sensibility, she finds that by her own weakness she is human like everyone else. Her response to the realization that Edward is not in fact married to Lucy (near the novel’s end) leaving him open to marry her confirms her humanity: she runs from the room upon the news and “...as soon as the door was closed, burst in to tears of joy, which

at first she thought would never cease” (363); soldiers for the fight to protect propriety do not run from rooms while bursting into tears.

It is important to pause here to grasp one more significant point concerning Elinor’s commitment to sense; it is this commitment throughout the entire novel which is why she bursts into tears at the end. She is so pent up with denied emotions that the river damn finally breaks, and her sobbing continues and continues. A further point I believe Austen means to convey through this scene having established Elinor’s denial of her own emotional needs throughout the novel, is that there is a danger to adopting too much “stoicism.” Does Austen clearly convey that too much sensibility is dangerous? She absolutely does. But, she is also communicating that Elinor is in an equal amount of pain for her own extremes in the other direction. Critic Donald Stone makes an important yet “often over-looked” point. He affirms that the novel “asks us to choose sense *and* sensibility...not sense *or* sensibility...Also the book demands that we discriminate between real sense or real sensibility,” not a “cliché version of either...Jane Austen’s assault is ...upon the hardening of either view” (Stone 40). Stone and I agree that Elinor’s “hard” stoic view of sense is just as problematic as Marianne’s opposite “hard” view.

Tanner has some helpful insights concerning Elinor in her predicament of stoicism. He says that “the stress of being involved in private and social realities at the same time means that a lot of the important activity takes place in that small area where the inner and outer realities meet-the eyes” (Tanner, “Appendix” 367). Plain English would suggest Tanner is saying that Elinor is on sensory overload because her sensibleness confines her to an isolated existence and I agree. Although she feels it prudent and proper, Elinor

emotionally isolates herself from everyone in the novel. She is the strong one when her father dies, she loves Edward from afar, she keeps Lucy's secrets, she bears all of Marianne's pain over Willoughby along with her, and she does all of this without so much as a word of her own pain to anyone. When Marianne finds out the truth regarding Edward's engagement to Lucy, as they are nearing the end of their London trip, Elinor says the following:

For four months...I have had all of this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature;...it was told to me,-- in a manner forced on me by the very person herself whose prior engagement ruined all my prospects...if I had not been bound to silence...nothing could have kept me...from openly shewing that I was *very* unhappy. (277)

What is interesting is that that now that the secret is out, Elinor still is not "showing" that she was and is "*very* unhappy." She goes from this very conversation to Marianne's bedside when Marianne falls ill with a life-threatening sickness and never leaves her until Marianne is finally well again. For Elinor, it is always about someone else and never about her taking care of her own heart or situation. So, although she says that she would have portrayed her broken heart openly for the world to see had she been at liberty to do so, I doubt that she would have because Elinor has always introverted every emotion up until this point. This is what makes her as an isolated being.

Interestingly, Austen was not the only author concerned with the theme of isolationism during the Romantic period: Mary Shelley who came after Austen in the British writing community, also found the theme an imperative one. In her classic novel,

Frankenstein, she conveys the necessity that man remain accountable to his community at large. She bravely portrays through her own protagonist the dangers of what can happen when one cuts himself off from his own community. It is Shelley's assertion as well as Austen's that man was never meant to live in isolation but in kinship with others, which she portrays through the tragic tale of Victor Frankenstein's creature whom he neglects. Therefore Victor lives and dies experiencing all of the revenge brought about because of his choices and decisions made in isolation. Through these events in her novel, Shelley has her readers wondering, what if Victor Frankenstein had told someone, anyone about his intentions to build this creature? Would he have been able to go through with it? Would his friends/family intervened and saved him from himself? Of course this is not what happens in Shelley's novel, so the point may be not worth debating but one point is certain: Shelley and Austen agree that man, [and in Elinor's case, "woman"] was never meant to live a secluded existence stripped of neighboring humanity, physically or emotionally.

It is intriguing that Victor's isolation is what brings about more than one life threatening physical illness for him, whereas in Austen's novel, it is not the sister in emotional isolation that becomes physically ill, it is the overtly emotional one. However, Elinor's outburst at the novel's end during Edward's proposal does illustrate that she has in fact suffered from an illness of her own. She has been squelching all the sounds and images she has taken in up until this point; it now all comes pouring forth because her "ill" heart has been harmed for this chosen isolation. It is this "less stoical view of life," the willingness to finally be overt with her emotion, that is in keeping with Gross' earlier point; this less "stoical adoption" serves to make her complete, bringing her out of

isolation. It is more heroic to have weaknesses which one learns from than to not have had those weaknesses at all. Austen shows us through Elinor's original self-deceived view of the ring and the subsequent lesson learned, that Elinor's label as a "heroine" is deserved and believable.

Dichotomy versus Dialectic

Because Jane Austen juxtaposes Elinor and Marianne throughout this novel, many critics are convinced that this novel is a simple dichotomy. It is understandable how this conclusion is one easily arrived at: after all, the title of the novel itself implies a static separation. However, we remember that critic Donald Stone offered an analysis earlier when he asserted that "...the book asks us to choose sense *and* sensibility...not sense *or* sensibility" (Stone 40) and I agree. However, it is an overall examination of the sisters that leads him to further discharge them as a straightforward dichotomy. He says that

In the course of the novel Marianne Dashwood, the romantic sister, learns to be more reasonable, and her sister Elinor, who is overtly reasonable to the point of becoming overtly reserved, learns to express herself emotionally as well as rationally. It is the sisters' growth—and their ability to grow—that the novel is... about. (Stone 40)

Admittedly, everything Stone says here is true; Marianne does, by the novel's end, realize the importance of owning "good judgment" and Elinor does learn not to isolate herself as she allows emotion to finally infiltrate her heart and express it openly.

However, for a novelist as brilliant as Austen, even this determination is perhaps small-minded thinking. She really couldn't be this predictable, could she? This is a question that leaves one troubled because yes, the novel *is* called "Sense and Sensibility";

we know the original title for it was “Elinor and Marianne.” It is fair to assume that at the novel’s onset, Elinor represents “sense” and Marianne, “sensibility.” It is also fair, because of their individual experiences to actually see them morphing into one another by the novel’s end, so that they are no longer distinctive and frankly, after long and tiring analysis, it is tempting to leave it at that. After all, if this were true, it would be somewhat creative and it would be a relief to hang on our hats on the hook of this conclusion and call it a day. Yet, there is something still lacking within this dismissal.

Certainly the sister’s learn from watching the other operate in their respective situations to a degree. However, I submit that it is not merely “growth” as Stone asserts. It is reaping the consequences for one’s actions. Understandably this appears judgmental, but that is not the intent: simply, what is intended here is that every action or non-action one takes in life has a consequence, either positive or negative. What has happened to Marianne and Elinor is that they are deeply affected by their choices and decisions [as all human beings are], and therefore suffer accordingly. This then, does not allow them to be a true dichotomy because a dichotomy assumes the simplicity that a juxtaposing author needs, which is to have two concepts diametrically opposed with an absolute division that we as readers can compare and contrast. We want that simplicity; we beg the narrator for it, because Elinor and Marianne’s journey has indeed been a strenuous one.

Nevertheless, Austen desires for us to take away something deeper: Elinor and Marianne have suffered, not only because of cruel people, such as Lucy Steele, Robert Ferrars, Fanny Dashwood, and Mrs. Ferrars; they also have suffered because they chose to be misled by what they saw and heard. Their sensory perceptions were miscalculations.

Subsequently they are and have been affected by these miscalculations which means that Elinor and Marianne are not a static dichotomy. They are instead the epitome of dialectic.

A dichotomy assumes a satisfactory explanation: it leads to loose ends being tied up and an ending we feel comfortable with. And, although Austen indeed redeems Elinor and Marianne, rescuing their futures, it is not without a price that each pays. Certainly, according to Stone, they “learn” and “grow” but they also hurt and heal. Wounds leave scars. Pain scabs over. So too do Elinor and Marianne live with new realities, not because they look at each other and say, “Wow, have I ever learned something by watching the way you do it,” but because life demands it. Pain erects a new vision. Consequences dictate a new order of things.

For example, when Elinor finally bursts into tears when Edward proposes to her, she is not thinking, “...this is the way Marianne responds and I have learned by watching her that this response has value, therefore I choose to grow...”. Simply, it is the consequence of stifled, buried pain that can no longer be put down: it is immense relief that causes Elinor’s tearful response. Indeed later on, she recognizes that Marianne’s way does have some merit, but it is not a presupposed response based on watching and learning.

Critic Ruth ApRoberts has her own opinion of Austen’s intent; she says the following:

Jane Austen starts with a fictive dichotomy but warns us against it from the beginning. In the first description of the two girls, Elinor though obviously representing sense has feelings that are strong, and Marianne, through obviously representing sensibility, has a distinguished intellect. It is not a case where the author finds she must modify her theme in the course of the novel; she knows what she is

about from the first. This is not going to be a morality play...not a simplistic cautionary tale. But with the title in front of us we are certainly first invited to test the characters on its polarity. (Roberts 355)

I accept Roberts's analysis because I do agree that Austen does begin with a dichotomy for the reasons Roberts states. However, she certainly does not end with one. As Roberts suggests, this is not a simple "happy-go-lucky" story; absolutely, we should "test the character's polarity"; absolutely we are set up to compare them because they are so wittingly juxtaposed for us. However, the truth remains that to leave Elinor and Marianne in the simplicity of that place is to deny the brilliance of Jane Austen. Accordingly, Roberts goes on to state that, "Austen is too often connected only with novelists, and we might have the courage to connect her with the poets, her contemporaries. Blake characteristically forthright, asserts: 'To generalize is to be an idiot' " (Roberts 365). Subsequently, Jane Austen does not idiotically dichotomize Elinor and Marianne as her critics do; she uses dialecticism instead.

Given this truth, there are two questions that need to be answered: how does Austen establish this dialectic and more importantly, why does she do this? We will begin with how Austen accomplishes this goal: Austen dismisses the typical dichotomy by establishing the strengths and weaknesses of both characters through the depiction of their mis-seeings and mis-hearings. As previously established, Elinor and Marianne see and hear through the social code through which they exist and in doing so, miscalculate their own experiences. Previously mentioned critic Butler incorrectly sees this novel as didactic: she says in regards to *Sense and Sensibility* that "...the didactic

novel...compares the beliefs of and conduct of two protagonists—with the object of finding one invariably right and one invariably wrong...” (Butler, “War Of Ideas” 2). Subsequently, Butler arrives at this conclusion because she knows this novel is not a dichotomy therefore incorrectly dismissing these two protagonists as a value-based comparison. According to Butler, by the novel’s end, it will be established that one sister’s way of seeing and hearing their world is the “right” way and the other, “wrong.” Furthermore, it is interesting that some fifteen years after this original article quoted from above, Butler still had not changed her estimation. In 2002, her opening line in an article about Marianne’s sensibility reads, “It is the role of Marianne Dashwood, who begins with the wrong ideology, to learn the *right*⁶ one” (Butler, “Worship Of Self” 336).

However, I submit that Austen does *not* see either Elinor *or* Marianne as “invariably right or invariably wrong”; she sees them both as both being right *and* both being wrong. Why is this a certainty? It is certain because the action through which Elinor and Marianne fail is one they have *in common*. They *both* make mistakes through sensory inaccuracy.

Yet, Butler goes on to say that “...all novelists who choose the contrast format do so in order to make an explicit ideological point” and I comply with that. However, it is my conviction that although Butler is correct about why novelists choose a “contrast format,” Jane Austen is not concerned with what is ideological: she is concerned with what is natural human error, which is why *she* chooses a non-dichotomized format. Human beings are never in and of themselves idealistic beings. Austen knows this. She portrays her characters as fallible and vulnerable to what they see and hear, and therefore does not put much stock in idealism or ideology. Through Elinor and Marianne, she is not

⁶ Emphasis Mine.

communicating that they need to become each other or completely respect each other's differences either. Rather, she is championing the fact that through the consequences of their circumstances that they shave a piece off from the other with which to then own.

Subsequently, as to the "How" of this dialectic accomplishment, one must consider this: a dichotomy is two separate entities; it is two circles side by side, yet with some distance between them, Marianne being one circle and Elinor the other, for the simple sake of juxtaposition, or the recognition of what is different and separate. A didactic implies that one circle is "invariably" correct and the other incorrect. A dialectic, however, brings the two circles not only closer to each other, but slightly intersects them on their inner borders. A dialectic is not a complete morphing of one circle moving on top of the other; rather, it is an extreme subtlety of *slight* overlapping.

Most critics dismiss *Sense and Sensibility* and subsequently, Marianne and Elinor as a dichotomy, a didactic novel, or the opposite extreme of a complete morphing of personas. For example, Critic Kathleen Lundeen quotes Austen critic G.H. Lewes from an 1859 review of *Sense and Sensibility*:

G.H. Lewes contends that Jane Austen is deficient in rendering human passion: [He purports that] "She has little or no sympathy with what is picturesque and passionate. This prevents her from painting what the popular eye can see, and the popular heart can feel." (Lundeen 65)

Lundeen goes on to suggest that Lewes' opinion is one that is lacking in *his* "subtlety as a reader" rather than a lacking in "Austen's artistic competence" (Lundeen 65). I propose Lundeen feels this way for a simple reason: Lewes desires an outcome that is typically "Romantic" in nature. After all, Jane Austen was a novelist of Romanticism. Certainly it

is more romantic (figuratively, not literally) to see the sisters morph into one another than to admit they are actually only taking a small piece from each other and exchanging those small pieces. The dialectic is dissatisfying to a critic that desires something *passionate*. A complete interchange of personas is an exciting explanation which is why Lewes desires this climax. Indeed it is more “subtle” to see this as a slight exchange rather than an overt, obvious one. Lewes does not deem this dialectic as “passionate” and therefore feels let down.

Fittingly critic Lloyd Brown analyzes it from an even different perspective, yet also missing this subtlety: he asserts that

...the role of marriage...in Jane Austen as a whole is not merely some predefined goal for which education and the individual will must be molded. Instead it celebrates the union or compatibility of personalities that have been freed from...the perceptual and moral failings of their individual selves [such as] Marianne Dashwood’s emotionalism.

(Brown 338)

But, is Marianne really “freed” when she marries Colonel Brandon, or is she simply “*free-er*?” Again, I profess it is the latter because the former implies she is no longer herself. The former implies she is completely rid of her “emotionalism.” I disagree with this conclusion entirely. Marianne’s choices [her sensory mistakes] have indeed stripped her of some of herself, but absolutely not all. To agree with Lloyd is to believe she has become Elinor and this is inaccurate. The text says at the novel’s very end regarding Marianne’s attachment to her new husband, Colonel Brandon, that “Marianne could never love by halves; her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband,

as it had once been to Willoughby” (380). This quote perfectly explains Austen dialectic: Marianne still owns her whole self which is [specific] to not “love by halves.” Yet, the subtlety of change is in the words “in time” she becomes devoted to Brandon. Before she was immediately immersed in the falsity of Willoughby’s overt charm. Now, she is taking more time to come around to complete devotion. This subtlety has often been misinterpreted as Marianne’s “settling.” I put forth rather that just because she now has some patience with her emotions doesn’t mean she is not still herself; Marianne is still the whole lover, not now a stoic “half” lover as Elinor has been throughout the novel. [Certainly it was argued earlier that Marianne lost a piece of her soul through her devotion to Willoughby, which raises a question of, how can she be a “whole lover” or whole at anything once she has lost a piece of herself? It is a fair question. But, I believe that the soul is a living organism; that much like the human liver, so too does the soul regenerate itself over time, allowing Marianne at this juncture to love wholly again].

Furthermore, Marianne’s “emotionalism” is not a “moral failing” as Brown suggests. Instead, it is a propensity that she learns to keep in check and keeping it in check is the piece she indirectly takes from Elinor through experiences of her own; it is where the two circles slightly intersect. If Austen deemed Marianne’s emotionalism as a moral failing, why would she give some of that emotionalism to Elinor at the novel’s end? Instead she brings Marianne to a place of being “free-er” from the excessive pain her rushes to judgment have caused her, but she does not make her Elinor.

This brings us to the wonderment of why Austen sets Elinor and Marianne up as a dialectic. Tanner’s assessment perhaps explains this best. In regards to the whole of Austen’s novels, he says the following:

For Jane Austen's book[s] are...about prejudging and rejudging. [They are] drama[s] of recognition and re-cognition, that act by which the mind can look again at a thing and if necessary make revisions and amendments until it sees the thing as it really is. (Tanner, "Knowledge and Opinion" 125)

Accordingly we understand that Jane Austen's dialectic between Elinor and Marianne is accomplished because she was fascinated with how the mind's eye and ear interpret and reinterpret and continue reinterpreting until fact is known. It is the journey of knowing and unknowing. Austen's dialectic is a shaving off; it is not simply growing and learning, but surviving, and treading water, and trying to get what life is or who a person *is* rather than what that person portrays to the world. Austen's dialectic is her message that human beings were born with the desire to seek truth, but that allowing truth to infiltrate the mind sometimes gets caught in the net of a sensory haze. This is when the mind needs to rejudge or "amend" as Tanner contends is Austen's message.

One last critic, Mary Poovey, helps the comprehension of what Austen desires her readers absorb as a dialectic truth. She says

...the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* undermines the complacent assumption that...principles [are] generally held or practically effective. Almost every action in the novel suggests that...individual will triumphs over principle and individual desire is more compelling than moral law. (Poovey 339)

According to Austen then, what Marianne wants, she wants, even if means a broken heart. She will not listen to Elinor's "principles" to go slow and be careful with Willoughby

because Marianne's "will" wins out over that which is "principled." Likewise, if "moral law" suggests Elinor lean on someone for anything at some point in her journey so she will not implode, her "desire" not to surpasses this "law" or guideline.

The bottom line is that the human heart's desire is to visualize and listen to what it desires to, not what some "principle" or "law" suggests is safe or accurate. No one, not even the most careful at obeying these laws and principles among us, is capable of getting it right every time. Human beings are fallible, errant creatures. Austen dialectic then isn't necessarily a statement on how life should be lived, for I agree with Roberts' earlier assumption that *Sense and Sensibility* is not a "morality play" or "a simple cautionary tale." It is Austen's recognition of the fact that the senses deceive and that in and of itself just *is*. Does it get Elinor and Marianne in trouble? It absolutely does. But Austen's point is that this is true, not that we necessarily have the power to change it unless we travel through some pain that in its own shaving off process teaches us how to.

Reflection

How is it then that people know what they know, or how is it that people know what they *think* they know? The answer is that people, both fictitious and real, process knowledge through sensory intake and because the senses are not inerrant, sometimes the information is inaccurate or incomplete. We see in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* that this is certainly true, yet what is the source of error that the senses stumble on? Austen suggests through her character's choices and decisions that sensory information is not deemed inaccurate or incomplete simply because people or characters do not pay close enough attention: sometimes the inaccuracy is steeped in what the heart wills. When the heart is afraid, the human eye sees what it needs to see, not what is what is actually

present. When the heart loves, the human ear does not always hear what has actually been said.

Austen's fascination is understandable: simply put, she recognizes that the truth at face value, often hurts. We understand she was deeply concerned with the heart's deception of itself despite the information presented to it through sights and sounds, because *Sense and Sensibility* was not the only novel where she examined this theme. Truly, we find the exact same sensory mistakes within the confines of the novel for which she was most famous, *Pride and Prejudice*.

Elisabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy also see and hear what their heart wills them to see and hear. When they seek to protect themselves, they make wrong assumptions about each other based on too little information just as Marianne does. Or, they refuse to believe the truth about each other when presented with more than enough sensory information because their hearts' eyes and ears are already set in their opinions (their "prides and prejudices" for one another) just as Mrs. Dashwood does. In addition, Elizabeth *and* Darcy both emulate the stoic qualities that are Elinor. It is not until they *beg* each other to believe what is actually true about them as individuals that this changes.

Critic Tanner points to the struggle of Elizabeth's inability to fairly process what she has seen and heard in regards to Darcy. He says that

...in Darcy's case her observation proves to be too quick...she had formed a fixed 'idea' of the whole Darcy on insufficient data, and in believing Wickham's account of the man—a purely verbal fabrication—she is putting too much confidence in unverified and, as it

turns out, completely false evidence. (Tanner, “Knowledge and Opinion” 131)

It proves interesting therefore to note that Austen’s original title for *Pride and Prejudice* was “*First Impressions*.” Elizabeth, rightfully offended at her first meeting Darcy given his coldness and rudeness, forms a first impression that cannot be cracked, and so she is eager to believe Wickham’s “verbal fabrication.” As Tanner says however, Darcy is “whole” and she does not take the time to investigate the other sides of him. What she knows she *thinks* she knows.

Subsequently, it is not until Darcy writes Lizzie a letter explaining the truths about his family, Wickham, his involvement with Bingley and Jane’s romance and his desire to love Elizabeth in spite of what he has initially wrongly assumed, does the wall between them begin to break down. Her heart has to *see* it written in Darcy’s own penmanship, before it will consider something different.

Conversely, Darcy has to get past what he has initially wrongly assumed about Elizabeth’s worth, as he struggles to appropriately place her in his heart; he is caught between what his heart desires which is to be with this smart, engaging woman and what is “socially acceptable.” It is only through this struggle that he realizes he is momentarily unscrupulous as he seeks to measure up to society’s expectations (that he not marry a penniless woman or one whose family is not culturally groomed to behave appropriately at every turn or any turn for that matter, considering the antics of Mrs. Bennett and Lydia). He is redeemed when he accepts that his own happiness is more important than measuring up to the judgments of society.

The heart is a complicated entity, is it not? This is why again, I do not believe that *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice* are tales of “morality” or “caution”: they are tales of knowledge processed through the fallibility of one’s eyes and ears and the heart’s filter through which they become truth or untruth. It is Austen’s concern that more often than not, the untruth prevails and it is our job as the processors of that information to reserve judgment, sense, sensibility, pride, and prejudice until certainty can be established when at all possible, because this way the human heart may endure less pain.

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