

JASNA – NC discussion of *Sense and Sensibility*

August 2022 – Mary Jane Curry, discussion leader

Text: R. W. Chapman’s Oxford edition. For our discussion, for those who have other editions, I’ll also give volume and chapter.

For at least part of our discussion of *Sense and Sensibility* (abbreviated below *SandS*) please think about passages in which Elinor and Marianne respond to nature—trees, the Devonshire countryside, farms and estates such as Delaford and Norland, the “wilderness” at Cleveland (the Parkers’ estate), and so on. What does Marianne do just before she, her sisters and mother leave Norland Park?

How do Marianne and Elinor feel about nature? What do their opinions imply about their personalities, morality/ethics, or tastes?

Do Elinor and Edward Ferrars agree in their attitude toward nature—landscape, what they consider most attractive, pleasing?

Do Marianne and Willoughby?

The first chapter of my book (manuscript) explains how Jane Austen remade the plot and tropes of European classical pastoral (basically, literature showing love of nature and country life as good, urban materialism as bad). In the process, I explain, she transformed the romance or courtship novel (eighteenth into early nineteenth century), which often contrasts a good, sometimes naïve young woman from rural England with corrupt, greedy people who identify with London society and the social snobbery it represented.

Austen’s sister novelists Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane West; and Oliver Goldsmith, Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson incorporated pastoral elements, too, but not, I argue, in the realistic way that she did. Austen deployed pastoral tropes and themes to develop the psychological realism that defines the nineteenth century novel.¹

Classical pastoral literature is centrally concerned with the individual’s relationship to the natural world. The protagonist loses his or her beloved home in a rural setting when a greedy person takes it. In Austen’s novels this “dis-location” is either a present (*SandS*) or a future threat (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*): the law of primogeniture is enforced: a Mr. Collins will move in when Mr. Bennet dies, or a John Dashwood and his wife Fanny take over when his father dies. The usurper also fails to provide for the displaced protagonist. In *SandS*, Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret lose Norland Park to John, son of their deceased father by his first marriage. As a result, the protagonist (and her family) suffer grief, sometimes called nostalgia—a painful, lasting sadness over losing a cherished home. In response, the protagonist seeks comfort from nature, which she already loves.

(In *Persuasion*, Mr. Elliot will eventually inherit Kellynch—if Sir Walter hasn’t already lost it to pay his massive debts. *Mansfield Park* is a more complex situation; thanks to Tom’s

¹ A. Walton Litz writes that Austen’s novels take us “into the familiar world of the Nineteenth Century novel,” which shows the “movements of an individual imagination.”

reform after his serious illness, the estate won't be gambled away, and second son Edward will have a secure living for himself and Fanny. Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland's future is secure thanks to his mother's legacy).

In Austen's novels, pastoral dislocation can be emotional or psychological: The Dashwood women mourn their displacement. Although financially secure, Emma is emotionally "dislocated" when her governess marries Mr. Weston.

Serious as all this is, we do laugh or smile throughout *SandS*. **Austen's wit is deployed primarily against the anti-pastoral antagonists.** These characters are identified with materialistic urban upper-class society. Their selfishness is so transparent that readers must laugh at them—that conversation in which Fanny wheedles and manipulates John into giving his step-mother and sisters essentially nothing is comic brilliance! This novel has several such villains: Fanny and John Dashwood; Mrs. Ferrars, mother of Fanny, Edward, and Robert, the second son; Robert himself; Lucy Steele; and of course John Willoughby.

Austen makes pastoral displacement from home and the protagonist's ensuing grief central to our understanding of *SandS*. As with all her novels, she grafts a comic romance conclusion, (in *SandS* and *PandP* two marriages) onto her pastoral plot. The conclusion shows Elinor achieving a more satisfying home in a pastoral setting, the vicarage at Delaford, with Edward; after Marianne's marriage to Col. Brandon, owner of the Delaford estate, who confers the living on Edward.

Adding complexity that Austen characteristically weaves into her pastoralism, however, the "happy ending" is undermined by several uncomfortable truths.ⁱ What are they?

Do you agree with Joan Klingel Ray that Edward is morally flawed?

That Willoughby is a sociopath?

That the real hero of this novel is Col. Brandon?

Finally, if we have time and you'd like to discuss it, what are some ways Austen's female protagonists differ from one another in their responses to, or relationship to nature? (What do they notice, enjoy? What gives them comfort?)

ⁱ Joan Klingel Ray analyzes Edward's moral shortcomings and Col. Brandon's character as an authentic "sentimental hero," along with Willoughby as sociopath, most cogently in her essay, "'The Amiable Prejudices of a Young [Writer's] Mind': The Problems of *Sense and Sensibility*," in *Persuasions On-line* Vol. 26, No.1 (Winter 2005).