

Lori Jackson
English 332
Sister Willburn
9 March 2011

Sense and Sensibility

An important element in Jane Austen's work is the way in which she blends the emotional, physical and intellectual aspects of the complete human relationship. Somewhat limited because of the standard of propriety in early nineteenth century fiction, Austen uses propriety itself to create much of the tension within her novels. The film version of *Sense and Sensibility* creates the same tension in the contrast between Marianne and Elinor. Directed by Ang Lee, the film took that important element in Austen's work and created an entertaining appeal for its Hollywood audiences.

The characters all demonstrated a certain amount of wit that is common in Austen's novels, but even with all that mental acumen they still are caught in the trap of miscommunication because of what are considered socially acceptable topics of conversation and discussion. As the title implies, there is a balance to be found between sense and sensibility.

What is appropriate for common conversation is subtly mentioned in several scenes. Margaret, after meeting Mrs. Jennings, comments "I like her, she talks." This comment alludes to the fact that it is not appropriate to speak freely, as does Mrs. Jennings, of things that are of a personal nature. Later Margaret tries to do the proper thing, when she responds to an awkward social circumstance by talking about the weather. Propriety required conversation to be general in content and was limited to literature, nature and the weather.

Elinor Dashwood, model of propriety and symbolic of the neoclassic period, demonstrates constraint, moderation, rationality and perspective. She is very conscious of what is proper. In contrast, Marianne Dashwood is a character that exhibits all that the romantic period was made of; full of passion, imagination and free feeling excitement. The exchanges between these two sisters establish the contrast in their behaviors. While in London, and after the ball, Marianne says to Elinor: "Reproach from you who confides in no one." Elinor responds: "I have nothing to tell." To which Marianne makes the impactful statement of their contrast: "Nor do I. I because I conceal nothing and you because you communicate nothing." Marianne conceals nothing because of her "sensibility," in embracing all that she feels passion and beauty in. Elinor on the other hand communicates nothing because of her "sense" in following propriety.

Later, when Marianne has had time to come to terms with her behavior compared to Elinor's she says: "I compare my conduct with what it ought to have been. I compare it to yours." This is toward the end of the film and at a point where both Elinor and Marianne are realizing the need for a balance between "sense" and "sensibility" between reason and passion. The tension that develops throughout the plot helps the audience come to the same conclusion, that together these sisters have learned how to feel and express those feelings while also preserving their decorum and discipline, their propriety.