

Colonel Brandon (in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*) **conscientious**

Overview In her first of her six major novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Jane Austen confronts us with a pair of sisters, Marianne ('sensibility') and Elinor ('sense') whose marital searches and complex interrelations are the triggers of the book. Colonel Brandon, a friend of John Middleton—the Dashwood family's host—falls in love with Marianne at first sight, but remains reserved and dignified, no competitor for the dashing Willoughby. Brandon's trusted kindness to the whole Dashwood family renders him a rock of stability throughout the romantic dramas of Marianne, whom in the end he marries. In none of Austen's remaining novels did she so sharply concentrate on a single pair of women, or on male figures as opposed as Brandon and Willoughby. But as her expanding canvas took her through writings, from 1775-1817, which have become standard classics, like *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Emma* (1815), she remained consistently sensitive to the type of Brandon, quiet, honest, and moral.

Character Colonel Brandon is by nature honest and reserved, and yet it is his sudden infatuation with Marianne Dashwood that draws him out into society. Fascinated with Marianne—who is thinking only of Willoughby—Brandon seems lost in his search for a mate; and only slowly reveals himself as romantically unhappy, and complexly still involved with a cousin whom he had loved—and who resembled Marianne—and who had gone south on him, leaving with a child to care for. The grave and saddened Colonel comes on a lucky conclusion, by ultimately marrying the Marianne who had earlier been flighty and dismissive of him. His honesty and reliability prove compelling to Marianne, as she matures.

Parallels Colonel Brandon, reserved and honest, wounded by his past, comes on quiet, but by the end of the novel, after having impacted the lives of all the characters with his generosity and long sightedness, emerges as the husband of the very Marianne, his junior, who had at the novel's opening found him unmarriageably old. Both his honesty and his staunchness ally him with a figure like Colonel Pargiter in Virginia Woolf's *The Years*, 1937, or even with the old Professor, *Uncle Vanya*, 1897, in Chekhov's play of the same name. There is a bit of Shakespeare's Polonius in Brandon, venial but chugging along on wise saws. Sophocles' Creon (in *Antigone*, 441 B.C.) shares with Brandon an avuncular grumpiness, grounded in accumulated wounds, and a well earned honesty about the human condition.

Illustrative moments

Reserved At the get acquainted party for the Dashwoods, Marianne is asked to sing for the group after dinner. Her performance was 'highly applauded,' by all but Colonel Brandon. He was the only person who heard her 'without being in raptures.' He paid Marianne the respect of reserved attention, unlike the guests who applauded perfunctorily, or the boisterous Sir John who was loud in his admiration.' The Colonel's 'pleasure in music...was estimable when contrasted against the horrible insensitivity of the others.' We are not yet aware of that personal sadness, which adds to the Colonel's 'gravity,' but we sense that his honest readiness to 'pay her only the compliment of attention' has its roots in his private life.

Serious During the frequent social evenings, that bring the Dashwoods together with Sir John and the Colonel, Marianne and Willoughby talk incessantly together, leaving Elinor in conversation with Colonel Brandon. The Colonel, who is smitten with Marianne, asks Elinor about her sister's opposition to 'second attachments.' Elinor replies, in essence, that Marianne believes in love at first sight and forever—she is a young romantic. We are not yet aware of the Colonel's hidden concern, his own previous love affair with his father's ward, and its disastrous outcome. The colonel is surrounded by a mysterious sadness, which adds to his gravity.

Responsible The Middletons, Brandon, the Dashwoods and Willoughby plan an outing to Whitwell, which is interrupted by an unexpected letter which arrives in the post for Colonel Brandon. 'While they were at breakfast the letters were brought in. ..there was one for Colonel Brandon—he took it, looked at the direction, changed color, and immediately left the room.' Nothing could persuade him to change his immediate decision, to leave at once on an urgent matter of business. The group will soon learn, after the Colonel leaves, that the matter of business concerns Brandon's 'natural daughter,' but of that the Colonel will say nothing. He leaves in a rush, clouded (still) in mystery.

Emotional As Marianne is recovering from a serious illness—brought on by her misery at hearing of Willoughby's marriage—she receives a visit from Colonel Brandon—to whom she wishes to express her gratitude for having brought her mother to her. On seeing her his 'emotion was such as, in Elinor's conjecture, must arise from something more than his affection for Marianne.' The narrator helps us appreciate that Brandon is deeply saddened by the resemblance between Marianne and Eliza, Brandon's former love, from whom his father had separated him, and who had died in lamentable circumstances.

Discussion questions

Does the eventual marriage, between Marianne and Brandon, seem convincing to you? Does it surprise you to learn that Marianne, at the time of her marriage, is only nineteen years old? Is her maturing convincing, or too quick?

What enables Brandon eventually to disengage himself from his earlier love and loss? Does Austen walk us through the changes of development in Brandon?

How does Brandon act during Marianne's illness? Is he in character, as a distraught lover?

Is Brandon the most admirable character in this novel?