

ELINOR

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Elinor (in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*) Rational

Overview In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), her first of six novels, devoted largely to the complexities of marriage and social relations in early Victorian England, Jane Austen confronts us with a pair of sisters, Marianne ('sensibility') and Elinor ('sense') whose marital searches and complex interrelations are the protagonists. Marianne is the lady of sensibility—emotion, vivacity, impulsiveness, empathy--while Elinor, her sister, is the 'sensible' lady, prudent, careful in what she says, analytic in the care she gives to interpreting situations and making decisions. In none of her remaining novels—she wrote six major works—did she so sharply concentrate on a single pair of women. Her expanding canvas took her through writings, from 1775-1817, which have become standard classics, like *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Emma* (1815).

Character *Sense and Sensibility* opens on a dilemma facing Mrs. Dashwood, the mother of Elinor and Marianne. The father of Mrs. Dashwood's husband has just passed away, and in his will and the ensuing negotiations insufficient provision—as Mrs. Dashwood sees it—has been made for her three daughters. Mrs. Dashwood is infuriated. However it is Elinor, in a role she is ready to play, who urges caution and carefulness on her mother, and induces her to moderate her anger and cancel her impetuous desire to flee. 'Elinor, this eldest daughter whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counselor of her mother...' Elinor is eminently sensible.

Parallels

From ancient times one thinks of models like Andromache (Homer's *Iliad*); Ismene (Sophocles' *Antigone*); Ruth (*Old Testament*); Monica (Saint Augustine's mother); The patient Griselda (Boccaccio, *Decameron*): all of them models of intelligent endurance, sometimes saintly, sometimes simply secular and stable. In Renaissance, and more recent, literature one might think of Sonya (in *Crime and Punishment*) or Cordelia (*King Lear*), and yet none of these parallels is a complete fit. Core traits—integrity, good sense, intuitiveness link the above female characters. Yet Elinor is not only the sum of such traits, but is also fully engaged in life; she is good sense at work in the affairs of the world.

Illustrative moments

1 Realistic

Marianne and Willoughby appear to be deeply in love, early in the tale, and yet as it turns out they are only infatuated with one another. Elinor and her mother return from a walk to find a disturbed Willoughby waiting in the parlor to say good bye, and Marianne upstairs crying. Elinor's senses go straight to the truth, and assume a romantic break-up. She defies her mother's more optimistic reading, that Willoughby's protectress, a dominating older lady, has urgent need of him. Elinor notes that 'suspicion of something unpleasant is the inevitable consequence of such an alteration as we have just witnessed in him (Willoughby).' When asked whether she thinks Willoughby was just playing around with Marianne, Eleanor replies: 'I want no proof of their affection, but of their engagement I do.' One can hardly imagine a crisper formulation of what before long we know will be obvious.

2 Empathetic

Edward, Elinor's suitor, has returned from a walk in the hills, which he has found delightful, but when asked by Marianne why he is unable to find the words to describe his experience, he apologizes, saying that he lacks the necessary gift. When her sister Marianne criticizes Edward about his statement, Elinor intervenes. 'I suspect,' she says, 'that to avoid one kind of affectation Edward here falls into another.' She goes on to explain that because most people tend to ooh and aah about nature, without knowing what they are saying, Edward refuses to adopt such trite and socially required exaggerations, and 'affects

greater indifference and less discrimination in viewing them (the beauties of nature) than he himself possesses.'

3 Self-commanding

Midway through the novel, Edward parts from Elinor and the whole Dashwood family is pained—as they had been, for Marianne, when Willoughby left. The parting 'left an uncomfortable impression on Elinor's feelings especially, which required some trouble and time to subdue.'

She was, however, *determined* to subdue her feelings—not just to cope with them—to prevent herself from appearing to suffer more than what all her family suffered on his going away.' As the days pass, shows that by sticking to routine, and maintaining balance in her small family society, Elinor was able, if not to 'lessen her grief' to 'keep it from increasing,' and to see to it that 'her mother and sisters were spared much solicitude on her account.' Her actions were both 'moral' and self-controlling.

4 Self-analytical

When Edward broke with Elinor, and left her, Elinor used mind games to cope with her own loss. She acted to retain the freedom of her mind, so that rather than being inwardly chained by the obsession of loss—especially of a loss which she was not in a position to understand—she could assure that 'the past and the future, on a subject so interesting (Edward's departure), must be before her, must force her attention, and engross her memory, her reflection, and her fancy.' Elinor's reflection takes her into waters where her mind sorts through its own history: she found 'every day afforded her leisure enough to think of Edward, and of Edward's behavior, in every possible variety—with tenderness, pity, approbation, censure and doubt...her mind was inevitably at liberty.'

Reading <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/161>

Discussion questions

Sensible can mean several things: just plain ordinary, with good sense; reasonable, as of good judgment; practical. Which particular tweak seems to you to fit Elinor?

The 'mind games' Elinor adopts, in order to overcome the pain of Edward's leaving her, resemble those of meditative or other spiritual reflective practices. Does Jane Austen seem to you to be attuned to such self-awareness in her characters?

Why does Elinor seem so insightful into the relation of Willoughby to Marianne? Does she use reason? Does she intuit the nature of Willoughby? Is she an 'intellectual'?