In Defense of Marianne Dashwood: A Categorization of Language into Principles of Sense and Sensibility

Ashley Bonin
Lee University, Tennessee

2015

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor

Part of the American Literature Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol17/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.
In Defense of Marianne Dashwood: A Categorization of Language into Principles of Sense and Sensibility

Keywords
Sense and Sensibility, Jane Austen, Marianne Dashwood
In Defense of Marianne Dashwood:  
A Categorization of Language into Principles of Sense and Sensibility

Ashley Bonin  
Lee University

Critics of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* often perceive Marianne Dashwood as a character in possession of excessive sensibility, as opposed to her sister’s cool and efficient sense. Matt Fisher advances this view, claiming that Elinor is “the epitome of reason” and Marianne “an idealistic romantic” (216). Critical judgments of the novel treat Elinor and Marianne
as paradigms of sense and sensibility, Elinor almost always emerging as the superior. Michal Dinkler and E.M. Forster, for example, assert that Austen illustrates her admiration of linguistic moderation through the novel’s positive judgment of Elinor (Dinkler 2), and therefore, Elinor becomes the “well-scoured channel through which [Austen’s] comment most readily flows” (Forster 146). In effect, the favor shown to Elinor reduces Marianne to one side of the apparent sense/sensibility dichotomy. This categorization is not as intuitive as it first appears, however, because Austen informs readers early that her titular dichotomy demarcating “sense” and “sensibility” does not directly distinguish between her characters. In addition to Elinor’s “strength of understanding and coolness of judgment,” she has an affectionate disposition and strong feelings; and Marianne, though described as myopic and eager, is “sensible and clever,” and has, according to Austen, abilities that are “in many respects
quite equal to Elinor’s” (6). While I distrust Austen’s dichotomy through her own admission that each sister possesses sense and sensibility, I do not mean to imply that it should be abandoned entirely, as it does in fact still play an important role in the novel. This paper will argue that Austen’s dichotomy suggests a symbiotic relationship between its terms, rather than a sharp hierarchical antithesis.

In Austen’s work, “sense” and “sensibility” roughly correlate to reason and emotion, respectively, a distinction she inherits from the Enlightenment. Myra Stokes explains that “sense” is synonymous in Austen’s work with (good) judgment (126). Coleridge applied this meaning of the term in a 1809 issue of Friend when he wrote about sense as a passive function of the mind, justifying a commonality between Man and animal in the matter of “sensations, and impressions, whether of [Man’s] outward sense, or the inner sense of imagination.” For Austen and Coleridge alike, “sense”
is a faculty that affects the capacity of innate human response. Similarly, Stokes explains that sensibility relates to a capability or faculty for feeling (129), a meaning William Godwin accessed in *Things As They Are* (1794): “My life has been spent in the keenest and most unintermitted sensibility to reputation.” In *Sense and Sensibility*, these associations are supported through the novel’s own language. For example, Austen writes that Margaret “imbibed a good deal of Marianne’s romance, without having much of her sense” (6), and that Marianne often was “urged by a strong impulse of affectionate sensibility” (194). “Sense” and “sensibility” are terms that Austen repeatedly uses to describe the dispositions and tendencies of her characters—a repetition that ostensibly delineates a divide between the two terms.

Though sense and sensibility contrast, they are not mutually exclusive. When exposed through language, they become value-neutral aesthetic principles
that serve as natural predilections, or channels through which virtues or moral strengths are expressed. Language is the only effective medium in which to track the moral qualities of Austen’s characters because their verbal expressions reveal their deeper motivations.

Ideally, Austen would inform her readers directly of the beliefs and motivations that drive her characters—and actually, she does this occasionally with free indirect discourse, which is essentially a merging of perspectives from third person narration and first person dialogue, where the narrator, in effect, takes on the voice of a given character. While Austen’s free indirect discourse is the most trustworthy means of insight, however, she uses it too infrequently and inconsistently for it to be a reliable tool. Yet in a character’s language, emotion and reason must interact in some way; almost always, language requires some degree of amalgamation of cognition and feeling. In other words, the languages of sense and of sensibility each can include both positive
and negative qualities; to say that a character embodies a language of sense or sensibility says nothing intrinsically commendatory or critical about his or her character.

Accordingly, the language of sense will be contemplative, restrained, and often pre-meditated, while the language of sensibility will be primarily pathos-driven. As we discern how Austen’s characters naturally appeal to reason and emotion through their language, we will be able to sort them into categories of sense and sensibility. Subsequently, as we understand the moral implications of each character’s use of a language characterized by either “sense” or “sensibility” we will be able to judge their characteristics according to Austen’s moral standard.

Thus, it is fundamentally illogical to say that Marianne Dashwood possesses an excess of sensibility, because sense and sensibility are not evaluated quantitatively. They emerge not as terms of moral judgment but as terms that, for Austen,
enable moral judgment on other criteria. They are aesthetic principles through which moral character exteriorizes itself verbally in the novel, and they serve as the primary intersection between the novel’s aesthetic form and its moral content. This analysis defends Marianne Dashwood by means of the novel’s judgments of its secondary characters, judgments that illuminate Marianne’s own virtues. Marianne emerges as an exemplary character in Austen’s novel not because she converts from sensibility to sense, but because she possesses exclusively positive qualities of both sense and sensibility by the end of the novel.

Reflecting multitudinous critics’ judgments of Marianne as a character in possession of great sensibility, Marianne, more so than any other character, does in fact consistently exhibit an accurate manifestation of her emotions through transparent expressions. Whether she is expressing her thoughts to someone she loves (perhaps Elinor) or someone she has
a particular aversion to (Lady Middleton, for example), Marianne’s language is *never* contrived. Most often, Marianne uses overtly offensive declarations that exhibit transparency. These declarations, while offensive, illustrate Marianne’s sense because they are grounded in logical reasoning. During a party at Barton Park, for example, Marianne displays her capacity for pungent verbal effrontery as she insults several of Sir John’s guests. In the first instance, all the ladies at the party, in succession, offer their opinions about the comparative heights of Lady Middleton and Fanny Dashwood’s sons. Instead of offering judgment like the others, however, Marianne “offended them all, by declaring that she had no opinion to give, as she had never thought about it” (192). Not one of the other ladies had likely thought about the heights of these boys before, either; however, they all find it propitious to offer some sort of opinion, regardless of its insincerity. Conversely, Marianne faithfully abides by her doctrine of transparency and
says what she is truly thinking—that she feels quite indifferent about the matter.

Further supporting an evaluation of her as a character of sensibility, Marianne’s sincerity occasionally reveals itself in sarcasm. Sarcasm often conveys harsh or derisive irony; the irony of Marianne’s sarcasm, however, is that it connotes a sincerity of sentiment that her words do not live up to. In a scene early in the novel, Elinor chides her sister for speaking openly and exhaustively with Willoughby; she predicts that the couple’s acquaintance will be ephemeral due to their “extraordinary despatch of every subject for discourse” (40). Marianne’s response exemplifies sarcasm in its most sincerely caustic use:

‘Elinor,’ cried Marianne, ‘is this fair? is this just? are my ideas so scanty? But I see what you mean. I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place
notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful:—had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared.’ (40)

Instead of simply acquiescing to Elinor’s point of view or submitting to her reprimand, Marianne employs a sarcastic tone that makes her frustration evident; this sarcasm is announced by her statement, “but I see what you mean.” Though she claims to know what Elinor means, Marianne does not actually believe that she was too much at ease, happy, or frank. Marianne’s sarcasm indicates the sincerity of her expression; she is not afraid of offending Elinor, so long as she is honest. Marianne’s intentional commitment to sincerity here exemplifies her natural capacity for reason, or sense, in simultaneity with her sensibility.
Another externalization of Marianne’s sensibility comes through her demonstrations of direct, intentional silence. Later in the novel, Marianne finds herself again at Barton Park, this time in the company of Elinor, Lady Middleton and her children, and the Miss Steeles. While observing the devoted attention Lady Middleton pays to her children, Lucy Steele proclaims, “What a sweet woman Lady Middleton is!” (101). Instead of responding with the statement of approbation Miss Steele was likely expecting, Marianne withholds any comment at all. The narrator explains that “it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, no matter how trivial the occasion was” (101). By withholding language, Marianne is not suppressing her judgment, but rather making it known through her silence, which equally shows her disapproval as it does her capacity for restraint; the careful consideration and control that is required by Marianne’s linguistic restraint further demonstrates her natural proclivity
for sense. Though silence implies a void of language, it is nonetheless a category of expression because it is intentionally inspired. Ultimately, employing deceptive language is never an option for Marianne; henceforth, when she does express herself verbally, there can be no doubt that her words are a mirror of her thoughts. At the heart of Marianne’s language, or lack thereof, is always the presence of sincerity.

Yet, Marianne’s tendency to use the conditional tense to create hypothetical realities that provide her with premises to justify her actions makes clear that her sensibility is potentially inhibiting. For example, after Marianne returns from a solitary excursion with Willoughby to Allenham, Elinor informs her of the impropriety of traveling in an open carriage with an unmarried gentleman as one’s only companion. In response, Marianne contends, “if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we
are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure” (57, italics mine). Marianne uses the conditional here to prove that the loveliness of her experiences equate to the decency of her actions. Adam Smith believes that judgment of one’s actions ought to come through a conditional idealization of the situation—that people might judge their actions by imagining themselves fair and impartial spectators (128-129). Marianne, however, fails to position herself as this “fair and impartial spectator.” Instead, her judgments are based on the pleasantness of her emotions. Accordingly, her language here is imaginative and contrary to what is reasonable and factual, elucidating her sensibility.

However, Marianne’s irrational language marked with sensibility reveals an important idiosyncratic facet of her character: that she is a verbal processor. Especially in conversation, Marianne immediately translates her thoughts into words rather than taking
time for reflection. Thus, her language does not immediately feature consideration of others. Marianne’s inclination to determine a situation’s impact on herself first, before considering others, is not unforgivable, or even extraordinary. Characters whose language is more exemplary of the principle of sense might conduct this process of reflection internally so that by the time they verbalize their thoughts, others are included. Marianne’s language, however, is dense with use of the first person; this tendency is exemplified in the monologue she gives in response to Willoughby’s heartless letter:

‘No, no’ cried Marianne, ‘misery such as mine has no pride. I care not who knows that I am wretched. The triumph of seeing me so may be open to all the world . . . But to appear happy when I am miserable—oh, who can require it? . . . Whom did I ever hear him talk
of as young and attractive among his female acquaintance?—oh, no one, no one:—he talked to me only of myself . . . Elinor, I must go home . . . Why should I stay here? I came only for Willoughby’s sake—and now who cares for me? Who regards me? (154-155)

Presumably our first response to this passage is to fault Marianne for her selfishness; Marianne’s excessive use of the first person certainly inspires such a perception, and she is being selfish here. Because of the rawness of this unprocessed language, however, her first-person usage is not sufficient evidence for selfishness as one of Marianne’s dominant characteristics. Instead, we might consider that Marianne’s use of the first person only indicates a nuance in her personality that requires the verbal processing of new information.

Accordingly, as evidenced by this particular monologue, the language that follows Marianne’s initial
verbal processing will be a more accurate indication of her mature motivations. Although Marianne mistakenly forgets to consider other people in her hasty language, she is not selfish in her intentions. While in the passage quoted above she fails to consider the wishes of others, the following passage indicates that she does indeed have the capability to be selfless:

Marianne had promised to be guided by her mother’s opinion, and she submitted to it, therefore, without opposition, though it proved perfectly different from what she wished and expected, though she felt it to be entirely wrong, formed on mistaken grounds; and that, by requiring her longer continuance in London, it deprived her of the only possible alleviation of her wretchedness, the personal sympathy of her mother, and doomed her to such society and such
scenes as must prevent her ever knowing a moment’s rest.

But it was a matter of great consolation to her, that what brought evil to herself would bring good to her sister.

(175)
The difference between this passage and the former is not that Marianne no longer considers her situation to be wretched or pitiable; in fact, her desire to leave London immediately and return home is still as strong as ever. Her selflessness is evident, however, in her reasons for staying; Marianne remains in London because she knows it will promote her mother’s wishes and Elinor’s well being. Marianne does not have a selfish heart. Her use of first person language, then, portrays a self-centeredness that does not actually exist.

We realize through this analysis that the analytical problem of Marianne’s character is her sensibility causes her language and intentions to not
always align. While her language is often perceived as offensive, selfish, and imaginative, her expressions are undoubtedly sincere and her intentions are altruistic. Considering that sense and sensibility exist on a continuum of positive and negative qualities, we must establish where along that spectrum Marianne exists according to the moral standards intrinsic to the novel. Conveniently, Austen’s protagonists in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne, establish their opinions of others primarily through language, as they recognize that it is a means through which to understand people more deeply. By analyzing these secondary characters whose languages exhibit the same qualities as Marianne’s (offensiveness, imaginativeness, selfishness, sincerity, and selfless intentions), and by using the novel’s judgments of them to determine whether those qualities are positive or negative, we will be able to determine Marianne’s position with reference to sense and sensibility.
Perhaps the character in *Sense and Sensibility* whom the novel judges most harshly is Fanny Dashwood, whose imaginative language exemplifies sensibility. The most striking quality of Fanny’s language is her use of the future tense, through which she imagines speculative circumstances, but asserts them as true in a way that necessitates the plausibility of her reasoning. Fanny expertly achieves her ends because she knows how to manipulate the people around her through her language. She uses her language skilfully, creating a framework of theoretical reasons and circumstances that encourage her husband John to enter into her point of view; she makes unrealistic consequences sound equitable and pressing, which allows her to slowly, slyly sway her husband to execute her biddings. Her case to John concerning his father’s dying wish to provide for his sisters is saturated with future verbs: “Altogether, they will have five hundred a year amongst them, and what
on earth can four women want for more than that? They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be” (10, italics mine). Of course, Fanny Dashwood cannot actually know the accuracy of any of these assurances; they are all speculation. Fanny’s constant use of the future tense makes her blind to the present reality. She does not understand (or care to understand) the financial support that John’s sisters need because she is always thinking about the future and how to secure the best situation for herself; Fanny’s idealistic mindset makes it impossible for her to have sincere intentions toward others in the present. While Fanny rarely speaks directly to Elinor and Marianne, the narrator implies that her treatment of them parallels the cunning language she uses with her husband: “Mrs. John Dashwood [Fanny] now installed herself mistress
of Norland; and her mother and sisters-in-law were degraded to the condition of visitors. As such, however, they were treated by her with quiet civility” (7). Marianne and Elinor dislike Fanny because of the “quiet civility”—the false sincerity—with which she regards them. Their pejorative opinion of Fanny tells us that imaginative language (whether it be Fanny’s futurism or Marianne’s conditionalization) is problematic because it breeds an unawareness of reality, which cultivates insincerity.

Sir John Middleton also exemplifies such imaginative language of sensibility, yet the novel judges him less harshly. His greatest weakness is that he sometimes becomes so fixated on certain ends that he disregards the feelings or wishes of others in his attempt to achieve them. The most striking occasion of this language occurs when Colonel Brandon is required to leave abruptly for town, and thus to cancel the excursion to Whitwell. Observing the disappointment of the rest
of the party, Sir John Middleton proclaims, “We must go; it shall not be put off when we are so near it. You cannot go to town till to-morrow, Brandon, that is all” (54, italics mine). Where Fanny uses the future tense, Sir John uses imperatives. Furthermore, Sir John was often blind to Marianne’s and Elinor’s polite rejections of his invitations to Barton Park: “Sir John had been very urgent with them all to spend the next day at the Park. Mrs. Dashwood . . . absolutely refused on her own account; her daughters might do as they pleased . . . They attempted, therefore, likewise to excuse themselves . . . But Sir John would not be satisfied,—the carriage should be sent for them, and they must come” (90). In contrast to Fanny, Sir John’s persistence and intransigence seems, at least in part, intended to ensure the happiness of others. Still, Sir John’s language often lacks elegance and restraint. On first meeting the Dashwoods, the narrator describes Sir John’s entreaties as being “carried to a point of civility” (26). Ultimately,
there seems to be incongruence between the enthusiasm and brashness of Sir John’s language, and the sentiment behind it; there is clear evidence of this in his response to Marianne’s performance on the piano-forte: “Sir John was loud in his admiration at the end of every song, and as loud in his conversation with the others while every song lasted” (30). Sir John’s zealous language connotes, rather than denotes, his sincerity. Thus, despite the apparent self-centeredness and disregard that marks his language, Elinor and Marianne find him redeemed by his kindness. Even in his forcefulness, his unarguably good intentions justify clemency.

Willoughby also demonstrates sensibility, but not in the same way that Fanny and Sir John Middleton do; where their languages are imaginative, Willoughby’s is ebullient. Where Fanny and Sir John use the language of sensibility to escape the unfavorable consequences of reality, Willoughby’s language is problematic in its haste. He is so driven by his own thoughts that he lacks
consideration or compassion for others. Still, Marianne likes him. They read, talk, and sing together, and, like Marianne, “his musical talents were considerable” (41). Willoughby and Marianne express themselves similarly, and this seems to be what forms an instant camaraderie between them. Willoughby’s language is almost the exact opposite of Edward’s in its fluency; considering how frustrated Marianne initially is about Edward’s “reserved conversation,” it is not surprising that she finds great value in Willoughby’s easy company in comparison.

Elinor, however, finds Willoughby’s often and candid verbalization of his thoughts disagreeable; he is too hasty, and thus unfair, in forming his opinions of other people. In fact, during a conversation about Brandon, Willoughby proves the correctness of Elinor’s observations; he asserts, “[he] is just the kind of man whom every body speaks well of, and nobody cares about; whom all are delighted to see, and nobody remembers to talk to” (42). Later in the
same conversation, when Elinor asks Willoughby why he should dislike Brandon, he clarifies, “I do not dislike him. I consider him, on the contrary, as a very respectable man, who has every body’s good word, and nobody’s notice; who has more money than he can spend, more time than he knows how to employ, and two new coats every year” (43). Through this rebuttal, we must recognize certain qualities of Willoughby’s language: that his judgments are quick, but insightful and reasonable; he is harsh in pointing out the negative, but nondiscriminatory in his concessions to the positive; he might be offensive, but he is sincere. Willoughby’s language is grounded in cognition as much as it is charged with pathos. The fact that Marianne is so drawn to Willoughby is representative of the value she places in one’s ability to be unreservedly forthright; conversely, Elinor’s mistrust of Willoughby’s language is indicative of her preference for contrived compassion to offensive honesty. This distinction between Elinor and Marianne is one we might consider,
as does critic Sarah Emsley, to be a reflection of Austen’s Aristotelian tendency to value truthfulness, not modesty, as the virtuous mean. Indeed, Austen uses her characterizations of the Dashwood sisters to illuminate the mean—what we might call the middle ground—that always exists between two extremes; in this case, the extremes relate to her characters’ perceptions and judgments. Together, Marianne and Elinor’s judgments of Willoughby promote the idea that it is possible to be both reasonable and emotional, and it is certainly possible to use both of those qualities as channels for positive perceptions and expressions.

Sharply contrasting with Willoughby’s language of sensibility, Lady Middleton’s rational and premeditated language exemplifies sense. Interestingly, Lady Middleton possesses all the graces and manners that one might consider advantageous; her language, however, conflicts with these promising characteristics. The narrator states, “Her visit [to Elinor and Marianne] was long enough to detract something from their first
admiration, by showing that, though perfectly well bred, she was reserved, cold, and had nothing to say for herself beyond the most commonplace enquiry or remark” (26). Lady Middleton proves that silence is often the most potent language a person can employ; her silence, however, is almost always an indication of polite but forceful indifference. Rather than expressing sincere concern for Marianne after Willoughby’s pusillanimous rejection, Lady Middleton repeatedly proclaims whenever appropriate, “It is very shocking, indeed!” which she feels is just enough to “support the dignity of her sex” (177). Then, as soon as a day passed without reference to Marianne’s situation, the narrator informs us that she “thought herself at liberty to attend to the interest of her own assemblies, and therefore determined that as Mrs. Willoughby would at once be a woman of elegance and fortune, to leave her card with her as soon as she married” (177). Though Lady Middleton speaks when it is socially expected or
considered proper for her to do so, Marianne and Elinor still dislike her self-centeredness that manifests through a disinterested tone and lack of emotional investment.

The last secondary character we must look at is Colonel Brandon, who voices the language of sense with the same restraint that Lady Middleton exhibits; unlike her, however, he is compassionate, considerate, and more selfless than most people. These traits are especially evident in his reception of Marianne’s piano performance at Barton Park. Austen writes, “Colonel Brandon alone, of all the party, heard her without being in raptures” (30). Juxtaposed to the garrulous responses of Sir John and Lady Middleton, the greatest advantage of Colonel Brandon’s language in this scene is that it is withheld. He exercises commitment to meditative and intentional silence with success that no other secondary character achieves. Marianne recognizes this, and accordingly respects him for it: “He paid her only the compliment of attention; and she felt a respect for
him on the occasion, which the others had reasonably forfeited by their shameless want of taste” (30).

Marianne seems to have no objections to Brandon’s language; in fact, she values the principles of sense that he embodies. Instead, she objects to the aesthetical qualities of his character: “Colonel Brandon is certainly younger than Mrs. Jennings, but he is old enough to be my father; and if he were ever animated enough to be in love, must have long outlived every sensation of the kind. It is too ridiculous! When is a man to be safe from such wit, if age and infirmity will not protect him?” (31). Marianne’s harsh judgment of Colonel Brandon throughout the novel is not due to her dislike of the virtues he possesses, but dislike of his age and lack of physical attractiveness. Thus, her changed opinion of him at the end of the novel has nothing to do with a renewed perception of his character and everything to do with a reevaluation of her aesthetic priorities.

Akin to Brandon’s opportune silence, his
language is often pragmatic, carefully contemplated, and thus almost always deliberate and purposeful. He begins a conversation with Elinor, for example, with a statement that implies a question he has already spent time considering on his own: “Your sister, I understand, does not approve of second attachments” (47).

Representative of the majority of Brandon's language, this statement is unhindered by an interference of capricious emotions. Most of all, Elinor appreciates this intentionality of his language, as evident in her explanation to Willoughby: “I can only pronounce him to be a sensible man, well-bred, well-informed, of gentle address, and, I believe, possessing an amiable heart” (44). Elinor’s favorable opinion of Brandon aligns with the novel’s positive judgment of him, as she appreciates the intentionality of his concise language.

Ultimately, we can use the novel’s judgments of each of these secondary characters to place the qualities of sense and sensibility Marianne possesses onto a
moral continuum. First, her imaginative language is driven by qualities that resonate with both Sir John Middleton and Fanny Dashwood’s; while her use of the conditional is accompanied by selfless, sincere intentions—a positive characteristic of the language of sensibility—she use theoretical premises to escape the consequences of reality. Furthermore, her use of the first person exemplifies a selfishness paralleled by Willoughby’s hasty language. These two latter tendencies are both negative characteristics of the language of sensibility. On the other hand, Marianne’s intentionally offensive declarations, sarcasm, and silence resonate with the control and sincerity that marks Brandon’s language, which are positive characteristics of sensible language. Accordingly, then, to say Marianne possesses an excess of sensibility is to simplify her character unfairly, considering that for the majority of the novel, Marianne possesses felicitous qualities of both sense and sensibility.
Willoughby’s avarice and insincerity cause Marianne deep heartbreak and lassitude that lead to self-negligence and a subsequent illness, throughout which she finds herself seriously reflecting on the faults of her past behavior. With specific application to Austen’s novels, C.S. Lewis coins this process of reflection and insight “undeception,” in which Austen’s heroines become aware of mistakes they have been making about themselves and about the world in which they live (27). Lewis maintains that undeception is significant for Austen’s characters specifically because it creates a distinct turning point in their stories (28). Marianne’s discovery of Willoughby’s deeply flawed character inspires a painful reevaluation of her own. That Marianne’s undeception is inspired by her grief over Willoughby is ironically felicitous; just as he played a part in cultivating negative qualities in her, so too does he, though unknowingly, enable her transformation.

Initially, Marianne becomes aware that her
priority of aesthetic qualities as a basis for her judgment and treatment of other characters is misplaced. The first part of her undeception is realizing how problematic Willoughby’s influence was on her. Marianne admits, “I saw in my own behavior, since the beginning of our acquaintance with him last autumn, nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others” (284). Rather than focusing on deeply rooted qualities of sense and sensibility in other people, Marianne judged according to shallow aesthetic principles. In consequence of this propensity, Marianne realizes that she had been injudicious, rash, and careless in her perceptions of others, which ultimately caused her to regard those she disliked with a lack of empathy and mercy. Marianne’s aesthetic priorities directly relate to her hasty, selfish language. Because aesthetic judgments are pathos-driven, Marianne’s language also became emotionally charged, dense with the first person. As Marianne becomes more contemplative and unbiased in her judgments of others, perceiving
qualities deeper than mere aesthetics, she no longer needs to process her thoughts verbally. Her hasty, selfish language, then, transforms into language that is considerate and reserved.

Secondly, Marianne recognizes the indecorum of justifying her decisions through conditional ideation that uses her personal sensibilities as its premises. This process of justification dictates nearly all of her language, and is the basis for several of the principles she lives by from the beginning of the novel through the time of her undeception—that silence is more commendable than dishonesty, that insincerity should be a more debilitating fear than offensiveness, and that one's conscience is an infallibly trustworthy guide through society. Through reflection, however, Marianne realizes that these maxims have misled her, and in a fit of regret and self-loathing, she reveals all of her insights to Elinor:

I cannot express my own abhorrence
of myself. Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged. Every body seemed injured by me. The kindness, the unceasing kindness, of Mrs. Jennings, I had repaid with ungrateful contempt. To the Middletons, the Palmers, the Steeles, to every common acquaintance even, I had been insolent and unjust; with a heart hardened against their merits, and a temper irritated by their very attention.

(284)

Marianne finally realizes that when she often consulted her imagination and feelings, she should have recognized the prescriptions of social propriety; not until her undeception does she understand that duty does not require conformity. In her disregard for socially correct language, she has often expressed herself with contempt, bias, and petulance that did not actually
match her sincere and selfless intentions.

Marianne’s undeception is followed by a declaration of reconsidered beliefs and reformed priorities that theoretically transform her negative qualities of verbal haste and conditional ideation into positive qualities of introspection and recognition of social propriety. With resolve and determination, Marianne declares to Elinor,

The future must be my proof. I have laid down my plan, and if I am capable of adhering to it, my feelings shall be governed and my temper altered. They shall no longer worry others, nor torture myself. I shall now live solely for my family. You, my mother, and Margaret, must henceforth be all the world to me; you will share my affections entirely between you. From you, from my home, I shall never again have the smallest
incitement to move; and if I do mix in other society, it will be only to show that my spirit is humbled, my heart amended, and that I can practice the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness and forbearance. (285)

With this proclamation, Marianne’s undeception is complete. Where she neglected civilities, duty will now inform her behavior; where the sincerity of her language often caused offense, it will now be directed with greater gentleness; where her judgments were impetuous, they will now be patient.

Several critics view Marianne’s marriage to Brandon as problematic; Folsom, for example, finds the happiness of the ending diminished by the possibility that “since Brandon loves Marianne almost as a reincarnation of his first love, perhaps in essence he remains true to his first attachment” (38). On the contrary, I argue that the love between Marianne and
Brandon is ultimately what proves the longevity and sincerity of Marianne’s transformation; as Austen proclaims, “Her regard and her society restored his mind to animation, and his spirits to cheerfulness; and that Marianne found her own happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend. Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband as it had once been to Willoughby” (312). That Marianne marries Brandon is evidence that she recognizes the necessity of seeing past aesthetic qualities, as well as the duty to treat others with conscientiousness and equitability; that Marianne loves Brandon, however, is evidence that her mind and heart have truly been altered.

By the end of the novel, Marianne Dashwood admirably exemplifies exclusively positive qualities of sense and sensibility. Perhaps through her, Austen is redefining the way her society viewed the ideas of
sense and sensibility as absolutely positive or negative based on the proportions in which they exist. As illuminated through Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*, Austen’s society was inundated with Enlightenment notions that it was *always* good to base one’s decisions on reason (sense), and *sometimes* good to base them on one’s emotions (sensibility), depending on its proportion to reason. Considering this, we realize that the apparent dichotomy established in Austen’s title represents her society’s view of sense and sensibility as overarching ideas that inform one’s decisions.

Instead, however, Austen presents her society with a new perspective on sense and sensibility—one that diverges from the way Enlightenment thinkers present the relationship between reason and sentiment, that declares sense and sensibility to be channels through which deeper qualities or virtues are expressed, and that rejects the tendency to view sense and sensibility quantitatively and competitively. Through Marianne,
Austen shows us that possessing an ideal character is not about having a certain amount of sense, or a certain amount of sensibility because ultimately, neither sense nor sensibility are innately “good.” Ideally, then, Austen might be saying that the essential goal of one’s character should be to cultivate simply positive aesthetic qualities that exemplify the moral attributes of each “sense” and “sensibility.”
Works Cited


