

Woman of Feeling II

By the latter part of the 18th century, certain morally irresponsible novels of sensibility which privileged emotion over moral duty, had brought novel writing into disrepute, fuelling traditional arguments about the moral dangers of fiction.

The Preface to Burney's *Evelina* (1778) reveals acute awareness of contemporary debate concerning novel writing but Burney articulates traditional moral rationales for writing fiction with the ironic smile of someone who will accommodate aspects of convention but ultimately intends to do her own thing. She writes: 'Perhaps were it possible to effect the total extirpation of novels our young ladies in general, and boarding-school damsels in particular, might profit from their annihilation: but since the distemper they have spread seems incurable...save...by the slow regimen of Time, and bitter diet of Experience, surely all attempts to contribute to the number of those which may be read, if not with advantage, at least without injury, ought rather to be encouraged than condemned.' The claims she makes for novels are modest - merely that good novels may be read 'without injury'. With respect to the notion that novels may promote romantic ideas about life, she implies that we should get things into perspective - by using extravagant vocabulary like 'extirpation', 'distemper' and 'contagion', she encourages us to smile and to take her common sense point that novels have limited destructive potential and that time and experience will correct any false impressions.

Austen and fiction

Austen, like Burney, read extensively and not just the much admired Richardson, but many women writers. In a well known letter to her sister Austen referred to 'our family, who are great Novel-readers and not ashamed of being so'(18th Dec, 1778). Her defence of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* can be read partly in terms of her own reading experience - far from regarding the novel as intrinsically frivolous and of doubtful moral and literary worth, she recognised its true potential.

She argued famously in ch 5 of *Northanger Abbey*: 'there seems to be a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.' She defines novels as 'works in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language'; such high flown vocabulary is not without its irony but the essential argument remains valid.

One of the reasons novels were trivialised was that women were becoming increasingly involved in writing them. Many of the best selling writers of 18th century novels were women: Eliza Haywood, for eg, was tremendously popular; Frances Sheridan wrote works of equal if not greater literary merit than those written by her son, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and yet you're unlikely to hear of her because she wrote what are often referred to rather dismissively as 'domestic novels'. Mary Shelley has the rather dubious honour of appearing on undergraduate literature courses but when *Frankenstein* was published it was deemed to be so good that it must have been written by a man, presumably her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley (Romantic poet).

Women novelists who were ultimately accepted by the literary establishment, paid the price of being accepted in limited terms, those terms being determined by the male literary elite. We are heirs to this tradition, where women writers are praised for confining themselves to domestic issues, to knowing their limits. Critical attitudes have evolved over the centuries to an extent, but the seeds of earlier attitudes have unfortunately borne fruit, sometimes in unexpected places.

Eva Figs, a feminist, argues concerning Austen: 'Sensing the contradictions involved in a women's fiction which, while preaching prudence and propriety, was struggling to widen imaginative and affective horizons, she came down firmly on the side of prudence and propriety, aligned herself, like most of her contemporaries, on the side of English sense as opposed to foreign sensibility, but at the same time made her texts apparently coherent and consistent by excluding death or sexual passion'(p.78). Figs

views this as 'a self-protective mechanism...What is more ironic, after all, than the lifelong spinster writing of matrimony?' Ooh...bitchy!

Comment on Austen's marital status tells us nothing useful about her writing; it simply reflects the way in which society continues to define women in terms of marital status in a manner which would be unthinkable in relation to men.

Austen's work does not exclude death - witness Mr Dashwood dying in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs Churchill in *Emma* and various characters in the *Juvenilia*. What she does not do is focus on death because it is not really necessary to the narrative enterprise; of course there isn't much death in Fielding either but no-one makes a critical issue of it. Austen's refusal to wallow in sentimental death scenes is a perfectly understandable reaction to the overuse of emotionally charged death scenes in sentimental literature.

For those of you still confused about the term 'sentimental', I would refer you to the bottom of the first handout I gave you. The literature of sensibility was a relatively short-lived phenomenon; by the 1770s, 'sentimentality' had come to be associated with self-indulgent, affected, possibly improper feeling. It's a question of language evolving in the face of cultural change: before Sterne, the term 'sentimental' referred to sentiment; after Sterne, it was applied to sensibility.

Austen lampooned sentimental death scenes brilliantly in 'Plan of a novel according to hints from various quarters': 'the poor father...finding his end approaching, throws himself on the ground, and after four or five hours of tender advice and parental admonition to the miserable child, expires in a fine burst of literary enthusiasm'.

Surely Figs would not want Austen to produce such a scene - the presence of death in a plot is hardly evidence of realism. Far from being unrealistic in not paying more attention to death, Austen is frighteningly realistic - she focuses on the repercussions of death, not in sentimental but in financial and legal terms: in *Sense and Sensibility* the Dashwood women lose their home and most of their income when Mr Dashwood dies and in *Emma*, Frank Churchill, who did not dare to marry on pain of being disinherited by Mrs Churchill, is free to marry Jane Fairfax immediately after Mrs Churchill's death. We may like to think that death always elicits dignified and refined expressions of grief in sentimental mode but the reality is often sadly different.

John Dashwood shows signs of being genuinely affected by the death of his father but his wife's appeal to his materialistic nature does not go unheeded and any feeling he may have had disappears rather quickly. Austen is trying not to make us reject sentiment but to question it - if it is short lived and superficial, as John Dashwood's appears to be, it is at best meaningless and at worst potentially destructive, as it proves to be in this novel. Sentiment divorced from rationality and morality is simply self-indulgence. Far from simplistically castigating emotional responses, Austen criticises John Dashwood here because he isn't feeling enough - his father's dying wish that his son provide decently for his wife and daughters provides a clear moral imperative which sentiment should respect. Austen judges feeling in terms of whether or not it is appropriate and genuine.

Austen advocates moral and rational expression of emotion, for eg in *Emma* (1816) the heroine (the Emma of the title) comments: 'If we feel for the wretched, enough to do all we can for them, the rest is empty sympathy'(ch 10, p.111). She may appear to be unfeeling, certainly if put in the context of sentimental heroines, but her response is morally useful - she doesn't just talk about the needs of the poor - she does something.

Figs's other criticism, that there is no sexual passion in Austen's work, needs no effort on my part to discount - you simply need to read the texts themselves - a radical notion, I grant you but give it a go!

Austen refuses to support the romantic myth that all lives are governed by passion, a myth promulgated by certain sentimental novelists and one which came in for a degree of criticism precisely for its lack of realism in a world where people married with esteem and affection if they were lucky; passion was not regarded as suitable grounds for making a decision as serious and far reaching as that of marriage. Figs is judging Austen by 20th century standards and they simply do not apply.

In the terms of 18th fiction, sexuality is expressed in blushes and confusion. Austen plays with sentimental conventions in *Pride and Prejudice*, with her hero and heroine

tongue tied and confused; two intelligent people are reduced to blushing wrecks. Blushing and confusion may not be dramatic but they are perhaps rather closer to many young people's experiences than the conventions of sentimental literature with its perfect characters uttering perfect speeches and always looking - yes, you've guessed it - perfect; there is no acne in the world of sentiment!

Passion is clearly present in Austen, indeed it is anarchic at times, but she is writing within the context of 18th century fiction and although sexual escapades are a feature of Fielding's *Tom Jones's* adventures (although never of course in any detail), it would be unthinkable for such things to occur in the fiction of the late 18th century, particularly women's fiction - Austen would never have been published if her work had evinced the slightest degree of impropriety.

Austen's presentation of sexuality is determined partly by restrictions of what is socially acceptable but also by her rationalism: she is again brutally realistic - Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* falls for Catherine not because fireworks go off in his head the second he sees her but partly because he is flattered by her obvious interest in him. Austen's heroines may be attracted to characters like Wickham and Willoughby but they ultimately choose intellectual and affective partnerships. I'm sorry if that sounds desperately dull but it is part of Austen's realism that the knee shaking attractions of a Wickham or Willoughby won't last.

Austen doesn't simply condemn aspects of sensibility - she has fun with them, lampooning them throughout her work on a variety of grounds.

1. Sentimental women

One of the staple motifs of sentimental fiction is heroines having confidantes to discuss love and literature with. Austen reveals the absurdity in *Love and Friendship*: 'She was all Sensibility and Feeling. We flew into each other's arms and after having exchanged vows of mutual Friendship for the rest of our Lives, instantly unfolded to each other the most inward Secrets of her Hearts'. Lucy Steele behaves not dissimilarly when she approaches Elinor with the secrets of her heart in ch 22, masking her manipulative cruelty by professions of sensibility; it is this superficial and potentially destructive display which Austen is attacking.

2. Sentimental men

Think of the aptly named Joseph Surface in Sheridan's *School for Scandal* who, like Willoughby, hides his true personality behind an attractive veneer. The delightfully named Lady Sneerwell describes him as 'artful, selfish, and malicious - in short, a sentimental knave'(Act I, sci) - provides an interesting comment on the likes of Willoughby.

3. Austen questions notions of sensibility, equating sensibility with selfishness.

The heroine of *Love and Friendship* has 'A sensibility too tremblingly alive to every affliction of my Friends, my Acquaintance and particularly to every affliction of my own'.

Sensibility, with its emphasis on the self and individual desires, was inherently potentially anarchic; Austen opposes this with notions of 'sense', moving beyond the rather uninspiring notion of obedience for obedience's sake, to advocating rationality and duty in individuals within the family, that microcosm of the state, and thus society itself. Rational, moral people will integrate to form cohesive, stable families; good families will cohere to form good local communities and this will filter outwards.

As Marilyn Butler notes, 'Elinor's sense (stemming from the Christian tradition that man's nature is fallible) [comes] into conflict with the sentimentalist's tendency to idealize human nature'(pp.187-8). Elinor and Marianne embody different modes of perception: Marianne's 'is subjective, intuitive, implying confidence in the natural goodness of human nature when untrammelled by convention'; Elinor, however, mistrusts her intuitive responses and submits her judgement to objective evidence; she is in one sense the moral fulcrum of the novel, rather like Anne Elliott in *Persuasion*.

Marianne's individuality ultimately proves to be innocent; she comes to see the value of caution and submitting to reason. Yet in the first half of the novel she comes

dangerously close to notions of human self-sufficiency and complacency which Austen as a Christian rejected. Marianne is so confident that her ways are right that she fails to consider her behaviour in relation to Christian moral standards; her concern is always with what will make her happy, as opposed to what is right - hence her lack of concern for the feelings of others such as Mrs Jennings, the Middletons and of course Colonel Brandon. Marilyn Butler notes usefully that Elinor is not intended to be infallible but to represent the 'active, struggling Christian in a difficult world...a struggle waged daily with our natural disposition to err'(p.192).

Elinor stands for objective morality and, as Butler notes, Willoughby embodies a relativist subjective moral code, one which sees evil as the result of social conditioning, impersonal forces the individual cannot withstand. Again, think of Rousseau's arguments concerning the inherent goodness of human nature. Elinor herself considers Willoughby in this light when her sympathies almost get the better of her, noting 'The world had made him extravagant and vain'(end ch 44). But she then considers his behaviour to Marianne and particularly Eliza; she later tells Marianne, he 'would soon have learned to rank the innumerable comforts of a clear estate and good income as of far more importance, even to domestic happiness, than the mere temper of a wife' and Marianne admits, 'I have not a doubt of it...and I have nothing to regret, nothing but my own folly'(ch 47).

Sense is a social, not a selfish ideal. In *Love and Friendship* we read about Augustus and Sophia, 'as their Happiness centered wholly in themselves, they wished for no other society'; precisely the sort of relationship Marianne and Willoughby have.

4. Sentimental notions of love.

Marianne and Willoughby meet in suitably romantic style, when she falls and twists her ankle and he carries her home. We read, 'His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story'(ch 9). We learn in ch 10 that 'Their taste was strikingly alike', a sentimental convention which is immediately undercut by the common sense explanation that 'He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm' essentially because of 'the brightness of her eyes'(p.64 for me).

Austen is exploring the conventions of sensibility, showing two young people deceiving themselves about the nature of their personalities and feelings. Blinded by the initial attraction, they each bend their thoughts and opinions to fit the other's. The conventions of sensibility demand that lovers agree about everything immediately. Such things are still part of social interaction - you needn't feel too superior - how many women go and watch a group of scruffy sweaty men chasing a ball around a muddy field - this temporary suspension of mental faculties is routinely explained by the notion of 'love'.

Marianne initially judges Willoughby and their relationship in terms of sentimental ideals of openness, spontaneity and the intrinsic goodness of feeling. She defends her embarrassingly obvious enthusiasm for Willoughby's company by criticising social mores in their least attractive form: 'I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful'(p.65 for me). Superficially, her argument is attractive but it does lead her into compromising situations for eg when she subsequently writes to Willoughby in London, which implies an intimacy which could only be acceptable in engaged couples - see ch 29.

Elinor foresees such problems when she warns Marianne, 'the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety' but Marianne insists, 'if there had been any 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'(end ch 13). Marianne is articulating a sentimental view of human nature as fundamentally good and emotion as an appropriate guide for moral conduct.

Marianne conducts herself with Willoughby as a sentimental heroine; ch 15 closes with her 'violent oppression of spirits' due to her being 'without any desire of command over herself' and in ch 16 we read that she 'would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby'. It is not until ch 28, when Marianne is publicly rejected by Willoughby, and ch 29, when she receives his cruel letter, that her sentimental illusions shatter. It's worth having a look at ch 44

where Willoughby explains his side of the situation to Elinor.

Austen's criticism of Marianne's excesses is generally expressed in terms of affectionate amusement but her attitude to Willoughby is somewhat more critical because he cannot stand the same moral scrutiny that Marianne can. 20th century readers tend to focus on the affective values of the novel but Austen's approach is broader, considering the social ramifications of personal relationships.

Edward in Austen's early narrative *Love and Friendship* defies parental opposition to his marriage plans, articulating the traditional platitudes of the sentimental world: 'Can you not conceive the Luxury of living in every Distress that Poverty can inflict, with the object of your tenderest Affection?' The irony here is evident but compare Marianne Dashwood's comment in ch 17: 'money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction'; the irony here lies in her definition of a 'competence': £2000; Elinor responds, 'Two thousand a year! One is my wealth!'(p.97 in my ed)

Behind the humour, the text shows clear awareness of the financial as well as moral imperatives for obeying parental wishes with respect to choice of marriage partner. Young people who angered older relations could face disinheritance which could wreck their futures. In ch 19 we read that the shortness of Edward's visit 'originated in the same fettered inclination, the same inevitable necessity of temporising with his mother. The old well-established grievance of duty against will, parent against child, was the cause of all'(p.105 in my ed). Austen is conscious that such issues have become cliches in sentimental novels but they are nonetheless real considerations in her world. Hence we are given specific details about Edward's finances - see beginning ch 24 and chs 49 and 50.

Marianne's marriage to Colonel Brandon

There has been considerable critical disquiet over the years concerning this marriage. Figs argues that 'Marianne has been made to 'fit', that she is the unwilling victim of a process of socialisation which all young girls undergo'(p.96). Let's look at what Austen actually says (ch 50, p.309 for me):

'Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another'.

Figs argues that 'in a sense all women are 'born to discover the falsehood of their own opinions' when those opinions are at variance with the social consensus'(p.96), which implies that the opinions of a 17 year old are unerringly right and would not evolve naturally with experience but, if kept free from the imposition of social restraints, would remain as an absolute, pure and free - something akin to sentimental ideals, that is, the extent to which society influences the development of our characters.

This is one side of the nature versus nurture argument, popular in Austen's day; it is attractive in some ways but ultimately flawed: we are not born with an innate sense of wisdom which deteriorates as we age. Society, presented consistently by Figs as a negative power of restraint, can also act as a refining force, where people define themselves in terms of their experience - either we adopt values we encounter or we oppose them but in so doing, we evolve one way or another. That's what Austen is presenting in her novels.

Figs perversely ignores the ironic element in Austen's writing because it doesn't fit her insistence on all women as constant victims of society. This is one of the many problems facing academics trying to read works in their historical context: the 18th century, and indeed the 19th, was inequitable in many respects in terms of marriage and inheritance laws in particular. We should not underestimate how difficult life was - indeed I would argue that one of the functions of the novel in any period but particularly the 18th and 19th centuries, was to provide a critique of society and its inequities.

However, we must not oversimplify and assume that all women were victims and that all men were privileged. In fact the majority of people were disadvantaged in some form or another and only white, wealthy, land owning males were truly privileged. It is

true that women were disadvantaged even more than men but there were some wealthy and influential women who were well educated and respected. Austen was disadvantaged to an extent because her family, though well born, was not wealthy, and had she had a tyrannical father (she didn't!) or if she'd married a wife beater, the law would not have protected her. However, she was no victim.

We need to differentiate between people as victims because of lack of opportunities in terms of work and education, and people who are victimised in a very personal sense; both kinds of victimisation were sadly relevant to 18th century life but if one defines someone simply as a victim, there is a danger of being rather patronising, seeing them as nothing but victims - it can be very limiting.

It can, in particular, give one an unfortunate humour-bypass. Austen writes that Marianne had 'a confederacy against her', that is, her mother and sister want her to marry. Figs interprets this rather earnestly as an example of oppression. Yet surely this is simply a humorous example of what most people experience - families ganging together to try to marry the younger members off. It's an example of the social comedy Austen is so well known for.

You may agree with Figs that 'The modern reader tends to be shocked by the way the delightful Marianne Dashwood, so spontaneous and natural, is crushed by events and the lessons the author forces her to learn through them'(p.97). It strikes me that she simply grows up - it's a painful process and perhaps a sad one in some respects. Growing up involves giving up certain things, in Marianne's case, the rather selfish insistence on seeing the world entirely in terms of her own emotional response. But growing up also brings new freedoms - Marianne, as Brandon's wife, will have greater opportunities in life than she had before.

20th century readers often seem to get the impression that Marianne is marrying a decrepit old man and thus feel sorry for her. Colonel Brandon is a well educated, witty man who understands the world but has not been overly contaminated by it; he is in Austen's terms a 'gentleman', which refers to considerably more than his land and fortune. He respects Marianne, in spite of her effectively penniless status and, far from exploiting the laws which, as a rich man give him tremendous advantages, he uses his privileges to help others for eg by presenting the clerical living to Edward in ch 39 - such things were normally decided by highly personalised politics, depending on bribery and sycophancy (boot licking for those of you for whom English is not your first language). John Dashwood comments early in ch 41: 'this is very astonishing! No relationship! No connection between them! And now that livings fetch such a price...he might have got dare I say - fourteen hundred pounds'(p.246 for me). Brandon has the good moral sense to move beyond such practices and give the living to someone who deserves it; in so doing he shows respect for what he believes to be Edward's feelings for Lucy Steele, a further example of his lack of snobbery.

The primary objection to Brandon appears to be his age - all 35 years of it. This perception of Brandon comes from Marianne's complaint but one needs to be aware that she is speaking out of pique - she wants to be associated with the glamorous Willoughby and the irrepressible Mrs Jennings is trying to marry her off to the Colonel. Mrs Dashwood and Elinor provide a more reliable account of the man. I realise that most of you think 35 is terrifyingly old - all I can say is that life begins at 30!

What exactly does Marianne 'submit' to then? To marrying an active, intelligent man who loves and respects her, a man fit to provide intellectual and affective partnership. Too make matters worse, he is rich, and she will be forced to live in comfort with the means to support people in the community financially and to use her influence to get things changed. She is thus condemned to live with a man she comes to love deeply, in a community she feels at home in and in which she can play an active role.

5. Domestic ideals

Austen lampoons sentimental notions of love but also sentimental ideals of family life, simply by submitting such ideas to common sense and the experience of real life. Take for eg the sentimental view of children as innocent cherubs who bring joy to their parents'

lives - you won't find squalling infants and dirty nappies in sentimental portrayals of children.

Fielding's *Amelia* (1751) portrays a perfect mother who focuses her attention totally on her husband and children. The narrator comments, clearly aware that some may object to the idealisation of the domestic role: 'if I may speak a bold truth, I question whether it be possible to view this fine creature in a more amiable light, than while she was dressing her husband's supper with her little children playing round her'(Bk 11, ch 8, p.496).

Pamela's approach to Mr B's illegitimate child is appropriate to her sentimental status, although potentially controversial because the child is illegitimate and so would normally be sidelined, not invited to live with them as Pamela wants.

Austen's attitude to children and in particular their parents' obsession with them, is rather more down to earth. Women were defined in terms of their domestic role, the only sphere in which they could express their sensibility appropriately. In ch 6 of *Sense and Sensibility* Austen exposes the limitations of this domestic role, the absurdity of mothers having nothing to talk about except their children: 'On every formal visit a child ought to be of the party, by way of provision for discourse'. Again in ch 34 we have an amusing but rather pathetic scene where there is 'no poverty of any kind, save of conversation' and where we are subjected to the sort of conversation Austen had clearly had to endure herself - an excessively long discussion on the heights of 2 young boys.

6. Picturesque

Austen also addresses the all important notion of the picturesque, a term which refers to an ideal of beauty, associated with a sentimental view of the world; it was principally used of landscape and gardens, found in both painting and literature, particularly in the latter part of the 18th century and the early 19th. It celebrated that which was wild and disordered, even decayed, evaluating in terms of 'taste' as opposed to simple feeling and led to increased interest in the wild scenery of Wales and Scotland, the Lake District and Gothic ruins.

Edward Ferrars's response to the fashionable precepts of the picturesque, is perhaps akin to Austen's: 'I like a fine prospect, but not on picturesque principles'. He teases Marianne, 'I shall offend you by my ignorance and want of taste if we come to particulars. I shall call hills steep which ought to be bold... You must be satisfied with such admiration as I can honestly give. I call it a very fine country'. Elinor recognises what he's up to: 'Because he believes many people pretend to more admiration of the beauties of nature than they really feel and is disgusted with such pretensions, he affects greater indifference and less discrimination in viewing them himself than he possesses'(ch 18). Perhaps the same may be said of Austen herself.

Marianne admits, 'the admiration of landscape scenery is become a mere jargon...sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning'. This proves that Marianne's feeling is genuine, not affected but also that she is capable of discernment; she recognises here that there are times when it is appropriate to choose not to express feeling - this is what Austen is arguing for in other areas of the affective life - not that it should be repressed but that one should exercise common sense, even 'taste' in its expression.

Austen approaches the issue again in ch 10 of *Persuasion* (1818), where we have the description of 'the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges'; this is sometimes regarded as evidence of Romantic influence but it's difficult to determine to what extent Austen herself is influenced by it; here it is Anne who is 'repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn', not Austen herself.

Persuasion deals with many of the issues which concerned Austen when writing *Sense and Sensibility* - which might have something to do with the fact that you're studying them together on this course.

Anne, like Elinor, advocates 'the duty and benefit of struggling against affliction'

rather than indulging it, as we see in her conversation with Captain Benwick in ch 11. Anne clearly appreciates poetry but decides after a long session of Benwick focusing solely on poetry which appears to reflect his morose disposition, that 'it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly'. It is with this in mind that she amusingly suggests 'a larger allowance of prose in his daily study'(vol 1 ch11). Austen's characters have to learn to approach life and literature in a mature manner.

Eva Figs comments that *Persuasion* 'reads...like a personal recantation of the assumed philosophy of sense and prudence which Austen, along with her contemporaries, had preached for so long', pointing out 'The sad autumnal quality of the novel' and 'the overwhelming mood of regret, that one can only conclude that the author is reassessing the philosophy of sense so forcefully fed to the young women readers of her day, and that she finds it sadly inadequate'(pp.110-11).

In ch 4 we read that Anne, who was of course persuaded to give up Wentworth, 'had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older - the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning'.

Anne, like Elinor, has strong feelings but governs them; in ch 19 when she sees Cpt Wentworth again in Bath, her feelings are 'overpowering, blinding, bewildering'. Anne ultimately articulates an apparently romantic notion of 'loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone'(ch 23) but it is not a love based on superficial attraction but one which endures hardship and separation; it stands the test of both reason and time. We come closest to a subjective vision when Anne is so deeply in the grip of emotion that she fails to notice her environment (ch 20) and when she and Wentworth walk together through Bath and we have the impression that the rest of the world doesn't matter (ch 23). Austen is not advocating youthful passion in a simplistic sense, nor is she rejecting it; she is promoting mature responses to life, what we would term self-knowledge.

Anne may have been right in 18th century terms to submit her judgement to that of Lady Russell but Austen reveals the problems inherent within automatic submission to one's elders: they aren't always right. Lady Russell 'had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little'(OUP, ch 2, p.17). She objects to Wentworth because of his birth. Sir Walter objects to the navy 'as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction'(ch 3, p.24); in this novel, as has often been remarked, the sailors are precisely the people who deserve such distinction, unlike Sir Walter, who serves no useful social purpose.

Anne debates the past in vol 2, ch 10 (ch 23in Penguin?): 'I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong'. She recognises, 'If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk'. She decides that although Lady Russell 'err[ed] in her advice', Ann was right to submit to her judgement because 'she was in the place of a parent' and Wentworth's social and financial situation was somewhat precarious.

Wentworth is generous enough to admit that he is also to blame for their misunderstandings because his pride would not let him renew his addresses when he was in a more secure financial position. When Ann finally accepts him, 'with the advantage of maturity of mind, consciousness of right'(ch 12), he has £25,000 and is 'as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him'; as Austen puts it succinctly, he 'was no longer nobody'. There is still disparity in terms of birth but Austen reveals the absurdity of such attitudes: Wentworth 'was now esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him'.

The autumnal feel of *Persuasion* has been variously interpreted as being an expression of Austen's feelings as she faced terminal illness, or a reflection of the current Romantic interest in psychology. This interest is hardly new in Austen's work - think of Marianne's illness. Tanner argues interestingly in his intro to the 1986 Penguin edition

(which I would strongly recommend), 'Marianne's illness is clearly psychosomatic and in many of its symptoms - the incoherence of mind, the catatonic trances alternating with restless[ness]...her behaviour is pathological in a way which for the late 18th century could have been construed as madness', noting the increase in nervous disorders in the late 18th century. He cites Foucault's argument that 'It is not only knowledge that detaches man from feeling; it is sensibility itself: a sensibility that is no longer controlled by the movements of nature, but by all the habits, all the demands of social life'.

Both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* explore the ways in which society restricts and puts pressure on people; hence the focus on manners and propriety, the concern with possible hypocrisy. Byron commented in 1821, 'In England the only homage which they pay to Virtue - is hypocrisy'(letter, 11th May, 1821).

Horace Walpole wrote in 1776, 'This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel'(letter to Anne, Countess of Upper Ossory) which perhaps tells us something about our own world as well as Jane Austen's.

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