

Imagining, Properly:  
Use and Misuse of the Fictive Mind in *Sense and Sensibility*

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel about dichotomous modes of being. In Elinor and Marianne, the two eldest daughters of the Dashwood family, Austen depicts two radically different philosophies. Elinor is the personification of sense: pragmatic in her thinking, prudent in her interactions with others, and self-restrained in her emotional life. Marianne, by contrast, is the embodiment of sensibility. She embraces romanticism and is ruled by her emotions, with little regard for the conventions of polite society. Over the course of the novel, Austen explores the consequences of the sisters' attitudes on their behavior and their interactions with others. Though critics have often focused on the work's most obvious dichotomy—sense versus sensibility—Austen offers a subtler dichotomy, and a much more decisive commentary, in her presentation of each of the Dashwood sisters' fictive minds. Austen critiques both Marianne's overactive imagination—which causes her to become dangerously dissociated from reality—and Elinor's hardened opposition to fantasy—which prevents her from picturing a positive future. In demonstrating the problems of each sister's perspective and depicting a reformation of imagination in both women, Austen presents her belief that, when properly grounded, the fictive mind can be a useful tool for envisioning and working towards a better life.

From the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen emphasizes the fundamental problem of Marianne Dashwood's fanciful imagination: she disregards reality in order to embrace the joy of her fantasies. Perhaps the most obvious example of this tendency comes early in the novel, when Colonel Brandon, a suitor of Marianne, notes that she “does not approve of second attachments” (43). Elinor responds by saying that Mr. Dashwood married their mother after he was widowed, making the Dashwood daughters the products of a second marriage.

Marianne, who in no way seems to doubt that her own parents were in love, thus embraces an untenable contradiction in her views—one that she cannot “define and justify [to] anybody but herself” (43). This early example illustrates the operation of Marianne’s mind: she fantasizes about the primacy of first love and subjugates the reality of her experience in order to fit this fantasy. Yet Marianne’s preference for imagined realities does not only confound her understanding of the past—it also impacts her expectations for the future. As Austen explains, for Marianne, “to wish [is] to hope, and to hope [is] to expect” (18). Her imagination thus leads her to expect positive outcomes in situations when they are not guaranteed. For example, after Elinor forms an attachment to the diffident but kind Edward Ferrars, Marianne’s mind rapidly augments their relationship from an unspoken attraction to a secret engagement. Upon learning that no proposal has taken place, Marianne is “astonished to find how much [her] imagination ... had outstripped the truth” (18).

When Marianne falls in love with the dashing but cruel John Willoughby, her relationship with imagined counter-lives becomes more problematic and dangerous. Though Willoughby never tells Marianne that he loves her or that he intends to marry her, she continually interprets his actions so as to support her fantasy, and thus assumes that his affections are “every day implied” (132). Willoughby soon abandons Marianne, leading her hyperactive imagination to undermine her in two devastating ways. First, Marianne’s fantasies become so manic that they actually supplant her dreams, causing her each morning to “[rise] from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it” (62). In this way, Austen implies that Marianne’s fictive mind actually damages her physical health. Second, Marianne repeatedly transforms her hope for Willoughby’s return into an expectation of his imminent arrival, leaving her crushingly disappointed. In two particularly unsubtle instances, Marianne sees or hears an approaching

figure and assumes Willoughby has come to declare his love for her. Her cries are eerily similar in the two scenes—“It is he; it is indeed;—I know it is!” (64) and “it is Willoughby, indeed it is!” (115)—yet, in the former case, the arriving man is Edward, while in the latter, it is Colonel Brandon. This pattern of expectation and disappointment only compounds Marianne’s misery.

The ill effects of Marianne’s fantasy-reality conflation become direr after Marianne is outright rejected by Willoughby. In her subsequent devastation, Marianne’s imaginative visions fully supersede natural dreams, leaving her “faint and giddy from a long want of proper rest” (131). Faced with the choice between the reality of Willoughby’s cruelty and the fantasy of his vindication and love, Marianne opts wholly for the latter. She uses her imagination to deny him agency in his malevolent behavior, convincing herself that he has been “misinformed, or purposely deceived” (134) against her by a rival employing the “blackest art” (135). Marianne also magnifies the pattern of transforming hopes into expectations. In one scene, a friend tells Marianne, “I bring you something that I am sure will do you good,” and Marianne immediately assumes the item will be “a letter from Willoughby, full of tenderness and contrition, explanatory of all that had passed” (143). The realization that it is only a letter from her mother sends Marianne, again, into hysterics. This state of fantasy-fueled desolation reaches its natural climax in a physical sickness that dissociates Marianne fully from reality. Marianne contracts an infection after neglecting her own health, and the resultant fever sends her into a state of “sleepless pain and delirium,” swept up by visions “fixed incoherently on her mother” (221). In painting the harrowing image of a febrile and half-crazed Marianne, Austen deliberately chooses to dramatize the consequences of Marianne’s fanciful imagination. To completely substitute dreams for truth, Austen argues, is to condemn oneself to a state of madness and despair.

Though Austen finds much to criticize in Marianne's relationship with her imagination, she uses the character of Elinor to depict the opposite extreme: the hopelessness that accompanies a life without dreams. Elinor, unlike her sister, operates solely on probabilities, likely realities, and logical consequences. When faced with the potential for an unhappy event, Marianne disappears into fantasies of alternative outcomes, but Elinor refuses to consider disappointment as anything but inevitable. In doing so, she collapses the binary "between the expectation of an unpleasant event...and certainty itself" (252), and prevents herself from envisioning and working towards her own happiness. The most obvious example of this behavior is seen in Elinor's relationship with Edward Ferrars. Though she initially seeks a romantic relationship with Edward, Elinor learns from her acquaintance, Lucy Steele, that Lucy and Edward are secretly engaged. Upon seeing a letter of correspondence between the two, Elinor instantly acknowledges the truth of the engagement and accepts the inevitability of Edward and Lucy's marriage. Though Lucy offers details of the relationship which indicate that Edward is "weary" of the betrothal (108), Elinor "earnestly tries[s] to drive away the notion of it being possible [for the engagement] to end otherwise...than in the marriage of Edward and Lucy" (183). She openly declares, "I have known myself to be divided from Edward forever" (186), and places explicit limitations on her expectations, claiming that "all that she [can] hope for" is to avoid the "repetition of the pain" of her last meeting with Edward (173). This failure of imagination not only prevents Elinor from seeking to improve her own situation—it also leads her to work *against* her own wishes. Elinor, envisioning and acknowledging no other options, helps Edward to secure a job that will "enable him to marry" (200). In the melancholy figure of Elinor, reflecting that "*she*, of all people in the world was fixed on to bestow" (200) the job on

Edward, Austen personifies the problem of hyper-pragmatism and unimaginativeness. Without allowing herself to fantasize about a better life, Elinor is wholly unable to seek her own joy.

Marianne's illness provides an opportunity for both Elinor and Marianne to evolve in their respective views on fantasy, allowing each woman to adopt a healthier relationship with her own imagination. The prospect of losing her beloved sister is simply too devastating for Elinor to accept as inevitable; in order to envision and hope for Marianne's recovery, Elinor is thus forced to "open" the space between expected events and certain events—the space in which one can imagine positive alternatives to the anticipated state of affairs. Yet Austen carefully orchestrates the events of Marianne's recuperation so that Elinor is rewarded for her willingness to engage her fictive mind. The increase in Elinor's hopes lexically and temporally precedes the confirmation of her sister's improvements, allowing Austen to depict the scene as though Elinor's visions of Marianne's recovery are actually causing her convalescence. At first, Elinor begins "but with a caution—a dread of disappointment, which for some time kept her silent, even to her friend—to fancy, to hope she could perceive a slight amendment in her sister's pulse" (222). Unsure of herself, Elinor eventually "ventur[es] to communicate her hopes" (222) about her sister and finds that they are confirmed by her friend Mrs. Jennings. Finally, Elinor gives herself over entirely to faith and optimism: "conning over every injunction of distrust, [she] told herself likewise not to hope. But it was too late. Hope had already entered" (222). This acquiescence to sanguine fantasy heralds Marianne's rapid improvement, and, within half an hour, the younger Dashwood displays "favourable symptom[s]" (222). In constructing the pivotal scene in this way, Austen underscores the significant link between fantasizing about a positive outcome and actually causing the outcome; she indicates that the latter is not possible without the former. Furthermore, Elinor's transformation is not a temporary event, brought on by

the crisis of Marianne's illness. After Marianne's recovery, Elinor is mistakenly informed that Edward has married Lucy, and she allows herself to admit to a seemingly unrealistic fantasy: "the hope, while Edward remained single, that something would occur to prevent his marrying Lucy" (252). Again, Elinor is ultimately rewarded: shortly after this admission, she learns that Lucy actually married Edward's brother, Robert Ferrars, leaving Edward free to marry Elinor. In Elinor's reformation and her subsequent happiness, Austen demonstrates that, when used properly, imagination can be a powerful force for improving one's life.

In her openness to the fictive mind, Elinor gains a newfound ability to assist Marianne's recovery and, in doing, so, she provides the novel's first concrete example of the correct use of imagination. After Marianne is restored to physical health, she expresses a desire to moderate her passions, but also admits, "[It] would be idle...to say that I shall soon or that I shall ever forget [Willoughby]" (246). Elinor aids Marianne in moving past her first love by offering an imagined vision of the unhappy life she would have led with him:

Had you married, you must have always been poor...his whole conduct declares that self-denial is a word hardly understood by him. His demands and your inexperience together on a small, very small income, must have brought on distresses...Beyond *that*, had you endeavoured, however reasonably, to abridge *his* enjoyments, is it not to be feared, that instead of prevailing on feelings so selfish to consent to it, you would have lessened your own influence on his heart, and made him regret the connection which had [given] such difficulties? (248)

In this passage, Elinor is not only telling her sister that she is better off without Willoughby. She is also encouraging Marianne to appropriate her imagination in a new way: rather than use it as a conduit for unfounded hopes, she can use it as a tool for comfort and closure. This method of convalescence is especially resonant for Marianne, who is naturally fanciful but whose investment in her own fantasies has proved devastating. In this speech, Elinor directly demonstrates Austen's proper mode of imagining. If a fantasy is grounded in basic truth (like the reality of Willoughby's cruelty), if it is not conflated with reality, and if it is used as a tool to

improve one's life, then it passes muster. Austen further underscores the efficacy of this mode of dreaming by showing the immediate effect of Elinor's speech on Marianne. In perhaps her most sincere criticism of Willoughby offered in the novel, Marianne responds to Elinor by acknowledging, "My happiness never was [Willoughby's] object" (248). Though this realization takes a toll on Marianne—she "does not continue to gain strength" (249) for a few days after the conversation—the change it produces is ultimately both long-lasting and positive. Marianne soon weds Colonel Brandon, despite the fact that they are mutually each other's second love. In disregarding the fantasy of the primacy of first love, and thus subjugating her imagination to the reality of her experience, Marianne demonstrates that she has, at last, developed a healthy relationship with her own fictive mind.

Given that *Sense and Sensibility* was Austen's first published novel, the commentary that she offers on the fictive mind can be read as not only the presentation of a worldview, but also as Austen staking out her position at the literary intersection of enlightenment thought and romanticism. Yet, intriguingly, Austen establishes her authorial voice not primarily through endorsement, but rather through exclusion. Her rejection of Marianne's hyperactive imagination can be read as a critique of the overwrought emotionalism of some of her romantic contemporaries. Austen seems to believe that literature based entirely on the notion of transcendence and imagination must, like Marianne, become dissociated from the reality of human experience. Similarly, her critique of the Elinor's dreamless rationalism seems to indicate distaste for the unimaginativeness of enlightenment literature. In the eventual reformation of the Dashwood sisters' fictive minds, Austen endorses a hybrid of the movements. The best fiction, Austen argues, draws on the reality of experience and the felicity of dreams in order to both relate to readers and encourage them to envision a positive alternative world.