

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Sense and Sensibility, the earliest of Austen's social comedies, marks the true beginning of Jane Austen's fictional career. It is a mixture of a mature and an immature Jane Austen. Her mature style is most evident in her treatment of individual scenes and her portrayal of some of the secondary characters. Her less mature style is suggested by the melodramatic developments in the plot. *Sense and Sensibility* is Jane Austen's important piece of work which is more thickly populated novel than the simple *Northanger Abbey*. Among Jane Austen's six novels *Sense and Sensibility* is unique in having two heroines, and that in itself posed problems of story-telling.

In the beginning one may find an ironic account of the devices which Mrs. Fanny Dashwood employs in order to deprive her mother-in-law and her three daughters of whatever monetary help her husband John Dashwood wanted to render to them. When John Dashwood tells his wife that he would give three thousand pounds to his step-mother, Fanny does not approve of his intention at all and he says -

"He did not stipulate for any particular sum, my dear Fanny; he only requested me, in general terms, to assist them, and make their situation more comfortable than it was in his power to do."

Here Austen ironically says that to take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy Harry would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree. Fanny begs her husband to reconsider his intention. This ironic account lasts till Fanny is able to convince her husband that no monetary help need be given at all to his step-mother and his step-sisters. At the end of the fact John Dashwood made a decision that it is really not necessary for him to do anything more for his step-mother and step-sisters than such neighbourly acts as have been proposed by his wife.

Austen's ironic mode is noticeable also in her portrayal of Sir John Middleton and Lady Middleton. As for example, there is an obvious use of irony in Jane Austen's telling us that Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother, that he 'hunted and shot', while she 'humoured her children'. Here the irony continues when Jane

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"Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother. He hunted and shot, and she humoured her children; and these were their only resources. Lady Middleton had the advantage of being able to spoil her children all the year round, while Sir John's independent employments were in existence only half the time".²

Critics have opined that *Sense & Sensibility* in comparison with other novels of Jane Austen is far from being perfect both structurally and artistically. However, the design of the novel appears to be more ambitious than that of *Northanger Abbey*. What is more, it has a grave theme to deal with. As W.A. Craik very aptly observes :-

"Her manner is serious, a straight forward retail of facts, and it will soon be plain that, although there are plenty of ironic comments and of humorous characters, there is a serious treatment of a serious theme."³

Although our perusal of Jane Austen's novels is a pleasurable exercise, it is essentially serious as to the purpose of the novel. The

2. Ibid; Ch -; P-19

3. *Jane Austen: The Six Novels* (University Paperbacks): W.A. Craik; P-32; Methuen & Co. Ltd. London.

seriousness of the theme is realized through a systematic use of irony which is an essential instrument in revealing characters and situations. But it is rather curious that the theme of the novel, *Sense and Sensibility* is itself ironic.

Another incisive irony behind Jane Austen's description of flattery by the Steele Sisters is to be found in the portrayal of the Steele sisters. Both the sisters have a natural aptitude for flattery; and they demonstrate this aptitude fully in their relations with Lady Middleton whose children, though very mischievous, naughty and troublesome are admired by the Steele Sisters for being the nicest children in the world –

“And what a charming little family they have! I never saw such fine children in my life. – I declare I quite dote upon them already, and indeed I am always distractedly fond of children”.

“I should guess so”; said Elinor with a smile, “from what I have witnessed this morning”.

"I have a notion", said Lucy, 'you think the little Middletons rather too much indulged; perhaps they may be the outside of enough; but it is so natural in Lady Middleton; and for my part, I love to see children full of life and spirits; I cannot bear them if they are tame and quiet.'"

Lucy Steel shows this aptitude for flattery later in her relations with Mrs. Ferrars too. Indeed she is such an adept in this art that even a harsh and stern lady like Mrs. Ferrars softens towards her in view of her (Lucy) ingratiating manners and blandishment.

Sense and Sensibility, though it deals at length with tearful and sentimental girls, has an unmistakable streak of irony. One example will suffice in this regard. Colonel Barndon who is thirty five, has been considered by Marianne as a most unromantic man beyond 'all possibility of love'. But there is a deep irony in her thinking so. As Ian Jack observes -

*"By neat stroke of irony, it is Colonel Barndon whom she herself is destined to marry, not because his 'taste in every point coincides with her own' but because (by the end of the book) she has begun to grow up."*⁵

4. *Sense and Sensibility*; Ch-21; P-73.

5. *Sense and Sensibility*: Ian Jack; Notes on Literature, P-3; British Council, London.

Sense and Sensibility, despite its being a production of Jane Austen's early period, has got some intrinsic qualities characteristic of her mature art. The characters are studied with subtlety. Elinor may seem to be priggish by nature, but eventually she comes out as a sober and altruistic woman posing a sharp contrast to Marianne who is essentially imprudent and lacking in common sense.

That Jane Austen is acquiring a sureness of touch in writing prose is evident from the extract which describes Mrs. Ferrars very strikingly. Here her prose has the sparkle of Pope's satiric poetry –

*"(Mrs. Ferrar's) features are small, without beauty, and naturally without expression; but a lucky contraction of the brow had rescued her countenance from the disgrace of insipidity, by giving it the strong features of Pride and ill nature. She was not a woman of many words; for, unlike people in general, she proportioned them to the number of her ideas."*⁶

Austen's ironic mode in *Sense and Sensibility* is perhaps at its best in the episode of Robert's marriage to Lucy Steel. Mrs. Ferrars has strongly been opposed to receiving Lucy as a daughter-in-law.

6. *Sense and Sensibility*; Ch-34; P-139

Robert, because of his concern about his family prestige, has been pleading with Lucy to withdraw her claim to marry Edward:-

“Perhaps you mean – my brother – you mean Mrs. – Mrs. Robert Ferrars’.

“Mrs. Robert Ferrars!’ – was repeated by Marianne and her mother, in an accent of the utmost amazement; - and though Elinor could not speak, even her eyes were fixed on him with the same impatient wonder. He rose from his seat and walked to the window, apparently from not knowing what to do; took up a pair of scissors that lay there, and while spoiling both them and their sheath by cutting the latter to pieces as he spoke, said, in an hurried voice’.

“Perhaps you do not know – you may not have heard that my brother is lately married to – to the youngest – to Miss Lucy Steele.”

In this connection, Robert has held a number of meetings with Lucy in order to urge her to give up long-standing claim to marry

7. Ibid; Ch-48; P-215.

Edward; and she has been giving Robert the impression that she would try to accede to his request. But Lucy has been talking to Robert in such a cunning manner that at the end Robert finds himself trapped by her as her would-be husband. At this turn of events our mirth reaches its height when we learn that the two have got married without the knowledge of Mrs. Ferrars, and that they had eloped in order to get themselves married. The irony here arises from the glaring contrast between what was expected by everybody, and even by us, and what actually happens.

An example of insipid irony is to be found in John Dashwood's talk with his sister Elinor, when he explains how hard it is to meet all the demands upon his large income, is almost as good as the famous debate with his wife already cited -

"We must live at a great expense while we are here".

'He paused for her assent and Compassion; and she forced herself to say, 'your expenses both in town and country must certainly be considerable, but your income is a large one.'⁸

8. Ibid; Ch-33; P-134

on the other hand, the irony becomes tragic in Marianne's:-

"Happy, happy Elinor, you cannot have an idea of what I suffer".⁹

-to her whom she fondly thinks providentially immune from the miseries of her own lot.

When Elinor's false situation as the beloved but not the betrothed of Edward, and the bleeding heart that she has ^{been} nursing through all Marianne's woes, may no longer be hid, Jane Austen can hardly bring herself to write more than a line or two of dialogue:-

"Four months! - Have you known of this four months?" - Elinor confirmed it.

"What! - While attending me in all my misery, has this been on your heart?"

and I have reproached you for being happy!"¹⁰

And then she falls back on cold prose.

Jane Austen is a novelist who delights also in satire. Satire is an element in which she lives and enjoys her real life; but there is no

9. Ibid; Ch-29; P-109

10. Ibid; Ch-37; P-155

trace of the savage indignation in her writing. Her attitude as a satirist is best exposed in the words of Elizabeth when she says-

*"I hope, I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and non-sense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can."*¹¹

Each novel of Jane Austen has a motive covert as well as overt. *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* satirise that romantic philosophy which was sweeping the world in the early 19th. Century and which relied on the instinctive movements of heart and imagination. In these novels, satire is all- pervading. It mainly takes the form of being able to copy the voice of the sentimental novelist's peculiar phraseology. *Sense and Sensibility* is satirical in tone. With subdued irony Jane Austen ridicules sentimentalists. Elinor represents sense and her sister ^{er} ~~Mariane~~ [^] stands for sensibility. The satire is mostly directed against sensibility and sentimentality depicted in the characters of the Dashwood sisters. Jane Austen also ridicules the selfishness and worldly wisdom of Mrs. Dashwood and her henpecked husband, John.

11. *Pride and Prejudice*; Ch-11; P-265

The portrayal of the Palmers has its share of irony too. Mrs. Palmer came with a smile, smiled all the time of her visit, except when she laughed, and smiled when she went away. Mr. Palmer is described as entering the room with a look of self-importance slightly bowing to the ladies without speaking a word, and after briefly surveying them, picking up a newspaper from the table and reading it as long as he stayed in the room. And Jane Austen's portrayal of Mrs. Jennings is even more ironic. She pokes fun at Mrs. Jennings's loquacity, her propensity to idle gossip and her habit of match-making as if she thought it her foremost duty to unite all the unmarried people in marriage. In connection with her habit of proposing matrimonial alliances, the author says that she missed no opportunity of projecting marriages among all the young people of her acquaintance. Having seen both her daughters respectably married, she had now nothing to do but to marry all the rest of the world and in the promotion of this subject, she was 'zealously active'.

One of the most conspicuous examples of irony occurs in the situation in which Mrs. Jennings thinks that Colonel Brandon is proposing marriage to Elinor when actually he is telling Elinor that he has decided to offer the Delaford living to Edward Ferrars. Mrs.

Jennings has overheard only a few concluding words of the conversation between Colonel Brandon and Elinor; and those few words are completely misunderstood by her. After Colonel Brandon has left, Mrs. Jennings congratulates Elinor on what that gentleman had been saying to her. Now Elinor wrongly thinks that Mrs. Jennings has congratulated her on Colonel Brandon's generous offer of the Delaford living to Edward through her (Elinor). Thus there is a double misunderstanding here. The reader, of course, knows the real situation and the irony here arises from the contrast between the reality as known to the reader and the wrong notions of it which both Mrs. Jennings and Elinor have formed. Subsequently when the misunderstanding is cleared, both the ladies enjoy a hearty laugh, as we too do.

We have another example of the use of irony when Jane Austen speaks of a certain resemblance between Lady Middleton and Mrs. Fanny Dashwood. Here we are told that there was a kind of 'cold-hearted selfishness on both sides' which mutually attracted them. Of course, there is no irony in this remark; but irony occurs in the next remark which reads as follows: "And they sympathized with each other in an insipid propriety of demeanour and a general want of

understanding". And then we have irony in Lucy's presumption that Mrs. Ferrars's politeness towards her at the previous night's party was a sure sign of Mrs. Ferrars's being kindly disposed towards her. Here the irony arises from what Lucy thinks is the case and what we know to be really the case. Lucy is, of course, mistaken in her interpretation of Mrs. Ferrars's politeness towards her because at the time Mrs. Ferrars does not know that Lucy is a candidate for the position of her (Mrs. Ferrars's) daughter-in-law.

There is a lot of irony in the way in which the relationship between the two brothers, Edward and Robert, has been depicted in the way in which the relationship between Mrs. Ferrars and her two sons has been presented, and in the way the relationship, which develops between Robert and Lucy, is depicted. Mrs. Ferrars's treatment of her two sons, and her over indulgence towards Robert and her quick forgiveness towards Lucy have ironically been described by the author; and the two relationships have also been dealt with in the same way. In the closing stages of the novel, we are told that, at one point, after John Dashwood has left the room, Elinor is left alone with Robert Ferrars "to improve her acquaintance with that young man"; and here we are also told of Robert's gay unconcern, and his

happy self-complacency of manner while enjoying an unfair division of his mother's love and generosity to the prejudice of his banished brother. We are also here told that Robert had earned his mother's favour through his dissipated course of life, and at the cost of his brother's integrity. There is obvious irony in the manner in which the traits of Robert's character have been specified here because these are not "qualities" but "defects" in the nature of apparent virtues.

One of the distinguishing marks of excellence of Austen's novels is the comic mode. In fact, the comic spirit is all-pervasive in her novels though some of the situations and events in them are too sad and even painful to allow any intrusion of humour and wit. A keen eye was always active for the absurdities and oddities of human beings, and comedy almost always proceeds from human absurdities and singularities. It may here be pointed out also that comedy in her novels is mostly of the ironic kind, and this is amply illustrated in *Sense and Sensibility* despite the fact that the plot of this novel is, on the whole, serious and sad. While the five leading characters, namely Elinor, ⁿMa~~r~~ianne, Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon and even John Willoughby, have been treated with a high degree of seriousness and earnestness almost all the other characters have been portrayed in

the ironic mode so as to bring to our notice their absurdities, follies, and oddities, and thus to amuse us. There is hardly any person among these figures at whom we do not laugh up our sleeves. In other words, one is all the time secretly amused at the limitations of these characters. Such a character at the centre of the novel is Mrs. Jennings, an extremely loquacious person who is never short of subjects and topics to speak on, and who is never short of words. Every event and every incident provokes some comment ^{from} ~~form~~ her, and her comments are often a never-failing source of sheer amusement. As for example, it does not matter to her whether a particular person would suit her most admirably as a husband. At this stage, she does not realize that Colonel Brandon is seventeen years older than ~~Mafriane~~^W_λ, and that ~~Mafriane~~^W_λ would rather not marry at all than marry this elderly man who wears a flannel waistcoat.

Then there is John Middleton. He amuses us by his excessive hospitality and his excessive desire to have guests whom he can entertain to dinner or to lunch at his house. He is either fond of hunting or of holding dinner and lunches at his house and inviting all sorts of persons, especially women and young girls to his house. He welcomes the Steele Sisters as heartily as he welcomes the

Dashwood sisters. He is fond of fun and sport and his mirth and laughter are boisterous. In this respect, he closely ^eresembles his mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings. If sir John amuses us by his excessive hospitality and high spirits, Lady Middleton amuses us by her sullenness and ill-temper. Her chief interest in life is her children. She is a mother par excellence.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, there are other two other characters who are equally important so far as they go on to exemplify Austen's comic mode. They are Mr. and Mrs. Palmer. Mrs. Palmer is somewhat a stupid woman, and stupidity is certainly something comic. Mr. Palmer is well aware of his wife's stupidity and often snubs her. The way, in which he ^ssnubs her, is quite amusing and he snubs her wife's mother, Mrs. Jennings, too. He does not hesitate to say that his wife's mother is an ill-bred woman. On the other hand, the way in which Mrs. Palmer is first introduced to us by the author, is particularly amusing.

Jane Austen often makes use of comic irony and she has a genius for it. Her description of the devices employed by Fanny Dashwood to deprive her mother-in-law and the latter's three

daughters of whatever John Dashwood wanted to give them has ironically been presented. This description is among the most amusing portions of the novel. A conspicuous example of comic irony is to be found in the situation in which Mrs. Jennings imagines that Colonel Brandon is proposing marriage to Elinor when actually he is telling Elinor about his decision to offer the Delaford living to Edward Ferrars. Perhaps even more striking is the irony in the situation in which Robert is trapped by Lucy as a husband for herself when she was originally engaged to marry Robert's elder brother, Edward. Here the irony arises from the fact that Robert gets trapped precisely when he is trying to dissuade Lucy from marrying Edward on the ground that she does not have the necessary social background and the necessary financial status to marry a young man of the Ferrars family, who is both wealthy and holds ^{an} important position in the society.