

Spare the rod and  
spoil the child?:  
representations of  
mothers in jane  
austen's s...



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“ I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her suckling child”. Jane Austen wrote these words about her novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, in a letter to her sister Cassandra in 1811. Such a maternal feeling in Austen is interesting to note, particularly because any reader of hers is well aware of a lack of mothers in her novels. Frequently we encounter heroines and other major characters whom, if not motherless, have mothers who are deficient in maturity, showing affection, and/or common sense. Specifically, I would like to look at *Sense and Sensibility*, which, according to Ros Ballaster’s introduction to the novel, “ is full of, indeed over-crowded with, mothers” (vii). By discussing the maternal figures in this work, I hope to illustrate the varying possibilities of what mothering and motherhood can entail in Austen, and what this curious spectrum of strengths and weaknesses means for the heroine involved. When discussing the mothers in *Sense and Sensibility*, it is only logical to begin with Mrs. Dashwood, Elinor and Marianne’s mother. We meet her just a few pages into the novel, and are immediately told of her genuine and unassuming interest in Elinor’s relationship with Edward Ferrars. Unlike most of Austen’s mothers, Mrs. Dashwood is neither calculating nor preoccupied with a particular agenda for her daughters:” Some mothers might have encouraged intimacy from motives of interest...and some might have repressed it from motives of prudence...but Mrs. Dashwood was alike uninfluenced by either consideration. It was enough for her that he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality” (13). As generous as this attitude may be, however, it also illustrated a certain lack of prudence in Mrs. Dashwood. Thus, as a parent, she is not without fault. Like Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood is romantic and whimsical, more prone to act on feelings than reason. Also similar to her <https://assignbuster.com/spare-the-rod-and-spoil-the-child-representations-of-mothers-in-jane-austens-sense-and-sensibility/>

youngest daughter, she often misjudges both the characters and situations of individuals. When Elinor tells Marianne of the difficulties Mrs. Ferrars presents in marrying Edward, “Marianne was astonished to find how much the imagination of her mother and herself had outstripped the truth” (18). Furthermore, Mrs. Dashwood’s reaction to Willoughby is just as naïve as Marianne’s. “In Mrs. Dashwood’s opinion, he was as faultless as in Marianne’s” (43). It is only Elinor, acting with the maternal caution her mother does not possess, who has reservations about Marianne’s suitor. Thus, Mrs. Dashwood clearly fails as an authority figure for her children. She does not discourage them from acting recklessly (such as Marianne’s trip to Miss Smith’s home with Willoughby without a chaperone), nor does she provide the sort of structure or discipline that would prevent such situations from arising in the first place. She does, however, possess the nurturing and affectionate disposition that allows us to see her as, if not always a good mother, at least a loving and well-intentioned one. When Marianne becomes ill, it is only her mother’s presence that can put her at ease: “Marianne’s ideas were still, at intervals, fixed incoherently on her mother” (264). Mrs. Jennings, like Mrs. Dashwood, is a good-natured and kind woman, but fails to supply the maternal protection that might be expected of her. The “good humored, merry, fat elderly woman, who talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar” (29) takes an interest in Elinor and Marianne, and the time they spend together as companions eventually grows into a deeper, more caring mother-daughter type of relationship. Like Mrs. Dashwood, she tends to openly misread events (such as Willoughby’s letter to Marianne), and also like Mrs. Dashwood, she is not entirely successful at keeping Elinor and Marianne under a mother’s watchful eye. Marianne’s sickness is not only

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due to her own carelessness, but also the negligence of her guardian. Even though Mrs. Jennings is a good-hearted woman, as a mother she seems to falter, both while overseeing Elinor and Marianne, and, more apparently, with her two daughters who are more like caricatures than intelligent, well-rounded individuals. Fanny Dashwood and Lady Middleton are less generous portraits of motherhood. I mention them together because they are inexorably linked in Austen's view, both depicted as self-serving and corrupt forms of mothering. Lady Middleton, "though perfectly well bred...was reserved, cold, and had nothing to say for herself beyond the most commonplace enquiry or remark" (26). She dotes on her children who, despite being described as "noisy" and "troublesome", remain conspicuously anonymous. They are rarely named, or even given a gender, as if their individuality is not what is important, but rather, their ability to serve as their mother's pet or prop. Her role as mother is the defining factor in Lady Middleton's identity, and she seems to take interest in little else. Ironically, this particular brand of devotion comes across as being detrimental to everyone involved; it reduces her to a shallow and limited individual, and creates children that are spoiled brats. Like Lady Middleton, Fanny Dashwood is rendered as having a "cold hearted selfishness" (194), and uses her son (who, interestingly enough, is never actually present in the novel) to rationalize her greedy disposition. She convinces her husband John to give Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters considerably less than he had originally intended, with the reasoning that, "to take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy, would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree" (7). Aside from a chat with Lady Middleton that focused on comparing their son's heights, this is only this instance when we see Fanny even feign interest in her son, and <https://assignbuster.com/spare-the-rod-and-spoil-the-child-representations-of-mothers-in-jane-austens-sense-and-sensibility/>

later we discover that she intends to spend some of “ poor little Harry’s” (7) money on a new green-house for the backyard. Both of these women’s interests in their children strive to reach a specific goal; Lady Middleton craves compliments and attention, Fanny Dashwood desires money. Their poor mothering skills, however, are not surprising, but merely reflect Austen’s clear portrayal of them as shallow individuals with unbalanced values. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s now-classic *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they discuss a strange breed of women in Austen novels that, unlike the heroines, are angry, ruthless, and powerful. Often, “ they are mothers or surrogate mothers who seek to destroy their docile children” (170). Such a description cannot help but bring to mind Edward’s mother, Mrs. Ferrars. “ A little, thin woman, upright, even to formality, in her figure, and serious, even to sourness” (196), she appears to use her sons to fulfill her own narrow goals and reward her own pride. Mrs. Ferrars makes it common knowledge that Edward and Robert are to marry well and chose a career she considers ambitious and prestigious, such as going into law or politics. Elinor’s wariness of Mrs. Ferrars’s “ disposition and designs” (88) leads her to fear the impossibility of marrying Edward, and even when they do marry, Mrs. Ferrars cannot entirely forgive Edward for the previous incident with Lucy Steele, and consequently makes every effort to show that Robert is the favored child. Interestingly, despite her lack of physical presence in the novel (we only meet Mrs. Ferrars for one brief encounter in the novel, and even then, Austen does not create dialogue for her that would allow us to witness what we’ve heard of her firsthand), there is a feeling that she is always looming (and disapproving), as if her methods of mothering are so suffocating and tyrannical that they are not contained within Edward, but <https://assignbuster.com/spare-the-rod-and-spoil-the-child-representations-of-mothers-in-jane-austens-sense-and-sensibility/>

appear to threaten others as well. In *The Improvement of the Estate*, Alastair Duckworth states “ the need for ‘employment’, ‘ duty’, ‘ responsibility’, is sounded again and again in Austen’s novels, as her heroines all learn the act of living itself is a profession” (34). This “ resounding” in *Sense and Sensibility* is in part fueled by the lack of an ideal mother figure. Although Elinor loves her mother, she is also aware of her shortcomings. Ironically, Elinor, surrounded by negative examples of mothers, seems to successfully take on a maternal role, both watching out for her loved ones and keeping everything around her in check. This seems to suggest that the faults Elinor witnesses and endures in others allow her to become more mature. This line of thinking makes perfect sense when we consider Jane Austen’s tendency, particularly in *Sense and Sensibility*, to use her writing as a vehicle for not only entertainment but also instruction. We may view the varying representations of mothers then, not only as examples for Elinor to learn from, but for us as readers as well. Bibliography Ballaster, Ros. “ Introduction to *Sense and Sensibility*”. *Sense and Sensibility*. Jane Austen. New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Duckworth, Alastair. *The Improvement of the Estate*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972. Gilbert, Susan, and Sandra Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1979. Le Faye, Deirdre, ed. *Jane Austen’s letters*, 3rd. ed. Oxford University Press, 1995.