

Sense and sensibility: the impact of portrayal



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Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* and Ang Lee's film interpretation of the same name share many key similarities. Important transferred elements and cardinal functions are sustained in the jump from novel to film, rendering the plot, atmosphere and characters familiar to the reader.

However, the overall impact of the same underlying story is vastly different when told utilizing these two independent mediums. While both book and film explore the life and loves of the Dashwood sisters, main narrative and character elements of Austen's novel leave readers with the sentiment that sense is the better of the two options, as it emphasizes the stability and happiness found in contented relationships, like that of Elinor and Edward's, over the wild and dangerous nature of impassioned love, like that which leaves Marianne deathly ill and nearly kills her. The film, on the other hand, utilizes characterization, portrayal, and cinematic enunciation through visual elements to impart viewers with the notion that sensibility is the more desirable quality of the two, going so far as to alter elements of both girls' relationships in order to present them in a more romanticized, idyllic light.

One of the most evident reasons that the film and novel differ in impact is that their overall portrayal of the Dashwoods' love interests, Edward and Colonel Brandon, is so starkly different. Much is left to be desired from the reader's first impression of Edward in the novel, as he is described to be "not handsome", with his manners requiring "intimacy to make them pleasing" (14). Despite his constrained nature however, Edward has moments when he is able to overcome his often paralyzing shyness and gives the Dashwoods "every indication of an open affectionate heart" (14). Colonel Brandon does not fare well by way of first impressions either, as both

Marianne and Elinor dismiss him as a suitor due to his “ advanced years” and “ forlorn condition as an old bachelor” (29). But his heart is also ultimately in the right place as he demonstrates through repeated mindfulness and care for others in difficult situations, from diverting attention from Elinor’s love life at a dinner party to offering Edward a home after his fall from family grace. The impact of this characterization is reader satisfaction in knowing that, while neither Dashwood sister ends up in an impassioned or intensely romantic relationship, they will be happy and well cared for by settling down with two very kind and pragmatic men. Both men’s portrayal provides further evidence of the novel’s significance in deeming sense a superior option to sensibility. Despite their plain and unremarkable personalities, Edward and Brandon end up well matched with the Dashwood sisters, while Willoughby, a character who Marianne enjoyed a more passionate relationship with, was almost the death of her.

In direct contrast to the novel, the film adaptation adds more dimension and personality to Edward’s and Brandon’s characters. While the reader is only able to catch small glimpses into Edward’s character by way of the Dashwood’s conversations about him, film viewers get to see a newly imagined and fully fleshed out Edward; one who is charming, witty, and considerate. From scenes where he sword fights playfully with Margaret, to those depicting long walks with Elinor around Norland, it’s clear that the film intends for us to view him as an ideal romantic partner rather than just a nice man. Even choosing actor Hugh Grant, who is classically handsome and naturally charming, to play Edward was a conscious decision made to sway viewer interpretation of his character. Like Edward, Colonel Brandon receives

a similar character reimagining in order to take on the role of a dashing suitor. He rescues and carries in Marianne from the freezing cold, reads to her lovingly from a book of sonnets, and is wed to her in a grand ceremony towards the end of the film – all scenes that were fully contrived by novel adaptors in an attempt to show his character in a different light. It's also worth noting the mirroring of Willoughby's romantic gestures by Brandon in the film – a decision that was likely made in an effort to subconsciously establish Brandon as a possible suitor for Marianne early on before he becomes a more viable option later. The highly romanticized view of both characters impacts film viewers in that they are more emotionally attached to and firmly believe in the importance of affection in relationships. Edward and Colonel Brandon are no longer just pragmatic choices for the Dashwood girls as emphasized by the novel – through the eyes of cinema both couples now fit into highly picturesque and classical version of what love should look like. This difference in portrayal further adds to the film's significance in showing sensibility as the better option of the two, as it recommends passion in romance over practicality.

Aside from the portrayal of male characters in the film and novel, another great difference between the two is in their visual and narrative portrayal of each sister's relationship. Many of Edward and Elinor's interactions in the film are staged so that the couple is constricted in tight, close-up shots with pillars or doorways often framing them. A great of example of this happens early on in the movie in a sequence where Edward walks through a hall of doors to find Elinor, also framed by a door, silently weeping at her family's misfortune of being forced from Norland. Though the moment they share as

Edward attempts to console Elinor is sweet, it feels as though they are restricting their speech and holding back their true feelings from one another – a sentiment that is echoed by the aforementioned restrictive setup of the scene and camera shots. Marianne and Colonel Brandon, on the other hand, partake in a passionate and idealized romance – especially in comparison to the reserved nature of Edward and Elinor's relationship. Their slowly growing affection for one another is complemented by dramatic scenes of Brandon rescuing Marianne in the pouring rain, him reading to her against the backdrop of an idyllic pastoral scene, and a final grand wedding between the two where Edward and Elinor play second fiddle to the bride and groom as part of the wedding party. The impact of using these sharply contrasting cinematic visual elements is felt strongly by the viewer, who is left with the notion that a classic romance like that of Marianne and Brandon's is highly preferable to a cautious one like Elinor and Edward's. While both couples are happy, the film is clear in using cinematic enunciation to portray Marianne and Brandon as the more fulfilled pair, ultimately signifying that sensibility makes for purer and better relationships than sense.

In comparison to the film, Austen's novel goes in the opposite direction when portraying both couples. In the last few chapters of the book, Elinor and Edward's relationship is brought to the forefront as readers are concerned about when and how their love will, if ever, come to fruition. Their patience throughout the novel is rewarded as readers get to see a fleshed out ending to the couple's prolonged love story and even get a peek into their idyllic married life. In contrast to this nicely wrapped up ending is Marianne and Brandon's relationship, which is rushed together within the last page or so of

the novel. Their relationship seems almost like an afterthought to the narrator who, after noting the “ great confederacy against” Marianne, asks “ what could she do?” in regards to doing anything but marrying Brandon (267). The voice behind this question sounds flippant and almost a bit mocking, as though Marianne has no other option than to be paired off with Brandon because of his expressed interest in her, and that her marrying him isn’t so much a product of their mutual affection as it is due to the outside pressure from other characters. The narrator’s tone in depicting Marianne and Brandon’s quickly formed relationship, and portrayal of Elinor and Edward’s idyllic marriage leaves the viewer with the notion that proceeding through life with level-headed sense is a far better option to acting impulsively upon feeling, as Elinor seems to have ended up with the better partner. This directly contrasts the film, which depicts Marianne and Brandon as the more fulfilled couple, and ultimately shows the difference in significance between the two mediums, where film and novel each work to portray sensibility and sense, respectively, as the better of the two.

Differences in portrayal of Elinor’s reserved character is another element that affect the impact and significance of both the novel and film. Whenever Elinor is upset in the novel the reader is directly informed of her inner turmoil through Austen’s use of free indirect discourse. Because of this third-person narration, the reader knows of Elinor’s true feelings while other characters in the book itself are unaware of her suffering. In seeing her conceal her emotions so as not to burden those around her with her own heartache, the reader is impacted and left with the notion that Elinor is highly in control of what she feels and how she acts, especially in comparison to the perpetually

weepy Marianne. This ability to exercise such great discipline, and ultimately act as the rock of the family, is further significant in that it recommends the usefulness of sense to readers to the paralyzing effects of sensibility, as seen through Marianne.

Because free indirect discourse is a main non-transferable element of the novel that must be subject to adaptation proper, viewers are informed of Elinor's struggles through the actor's performance. In this case the actor, Emma Thompson, chooses to express slight distress through facial expressions upon learning bad news before quickly shutting down to other characters and putting up a steely facade. While this attempts to portray Elinor's reserved nature in a way similar to the book, the communication and ultimate impact through the two mediums could not have more different effects. In learning about Elinor's true emotions through free indirect discourse, readers view her as a silent but strong type who always keeps herself together for the greater good of her family. In the film, however, Elinor's brief emotional state and subsequent shut out of others make her seem as though she is the one in need of a change of heart rather than Marianne, as ascertained by the novel. Why? Because while Marianne is emotional by nature, she is portrayed as being better off because she is able to express her emotion to others and do something about her unresolved feelings. Elinor, on the other hand, is left throughout the film to cope on her own in silent misery. This impact of these differences has the overall effect of depicting sensibility as being superior to sense, as the former allows expression while the latter results in distress by isolation.

Through differences in the portrayal of love interests, relationships, and Elinor's character overall, the impact and significance of the film and novel *Sense and Sensibility* differ in that the former recommends sensibility while the latter recommends sense. The film's emphasis on sensibility is clear from the start, as characters are reimagined and worked into more well-spoken, charming versions of their novel counterparts and prove to be more worthy partners in relationships that are equally, if not more, romanticized through narrative, tone and cinematic enunciation. Conversely, the novel maintains a more modest depiction of characters and relationships, and emphasizes the importance of practicality and contentedness in choosing a partner over the wild and unruly passions that come from relationships governed by sensibility. Aside from the romantic aspects of both film and novel, Elinor's portrayal in itself advocates for sensibility in the former, as she is depicted to be the sister suffering the most out of the two due to her inability to express her feelings like Marianne. The novel, however, utilizes free indirect discourse to show Elinor's reserved nature to be one of her great strengths, as she is able to stay composed and make rational decisions – especially in comparison to Marianne, who is often a victim of her overactive emotions and easily attached heart.