

How objects define the dashwood sisters



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At its core, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is the story of two girls and the differing ideologies by which they live and view the world. Elinor, the oldest of the Dashwood girls, is a calm and rational thinker who always tries her best to be courteous and polite in public situations, while her sister Marianne believes in the open expression of feelings and is dismissive of social rules and expectations. Each girl is also associated with an object related to art: for Elinor it is sketching and the pictures that she draws, while for Marianne it is her beloved pianoforte, which she plays constantly. As a result of their association with these girls, both objects serve to reinforce the basic distinction in characterization between the two sisters that appears throughout the book. While Elinor's artwork reinforces that she is reasonable and logical, it is also possible to learn more about the other characters in the novel from their reactions to her work, an idea which Elinor also puts into practice on her own. In contrast, Marianne's piano represents her desire to get in touch with her emotions as well as her willingness to disregard the outside world due to her preference for her own personal world of sentiment. Upon initial examination, it seems strange that Elinor has any interest or talent in the arts, given her role as the intellectual sister who approaches life with a calm, judicious, and rational approach. Initially it would make more sense that Marianne, who has an emotional and idealistic personality, be the one who possesses the ability to create such expressive and subjective materials as drawings and sketches. Upon closer examination, however, Elinor's pictures and the way she responds to the attention that they receive further reinforce her characterization as level-headed and in command of herself. For her, drawing pictures is a therapeutic exercise, a way for her to express her emotions and relieve stress without attracting the notice or

concern of the rest of the family. Following Edward's departure in Chapter 19 of Volume 1, Elinor finds in sketching a sense of solace as well as a way to avoid broadcasting her sadness: Elinor sat down to her drawing-table as soon as he was out of the house, busily employed herself the whole day, neither sought nor avoided the mention of his name... and if, by this conduct, she did not lessen her own grief, it was at least prevented from unnecessary increase, and her mother and sisters were spared much solicitude on her account (120). These attempts at minimizing or internalizing her emotions appear regularly throughout the novel, whether it is disguising her heartbreak regarding Edward's engagement or veiling her dislike and remaining civil to the various boorish family or friends with whom she must interact. Thus, Elinor's habit of instead expressing herself through other channels, such as the creation of drawings, is another way in which Austen reinforces the difference in the characterization of the two Dashwood sisters: to Marianne, Elinor's lack of emotionality is a "mortifying condition" that is "exactly the reverse of her own," and "appeared no more meritorious... than her own had seemed faulty to her" (121). As they are the creations of a girl who is directing her misery and woe into another, less openly emotional form, Elinor's drawings reflect her innate "sense" by demonstrating her dislike of showing her feelings. By sketching, she is able to channel her sentiments without expressing them in ways she feels to be inappropriate or that would distress those she cares about. Elinor's drawings also help to characterize the other characters in the novel with whom they come into contact. For example, Mrs. Palmer's reactions to them are reflective of her cheery, if superficial nature: she claims that they "are quite charming" and that "I could look forever" — at which point the narrator

notes that “ she very soon forgot that there were any such things in the room” (125). Such a reaction to the drawings is consistent with the other depictions of Mrs. Palmer given in the novel and further help to reinforce the idea that she is unintelligent, shallow, and boorish. In another telling scene, Elinor’s screens are passed around the company assembled at Mr. John Dashwood’s residence, and as a result, a good deal is revealed or reinforced about the persons who look at them. Colonel Brandon, the first to receive them as they are passed around, reacts to them in his typically affable, polite, and respectful manner, telling the crowd that he “ warmly admired the screens, as he would have done anything painted by Miss Dashwood” while at the same time “ disclaiming all pretensions to connoisseurship” (267). Unlike the Colonel, who makes a courteous and thoughtful reply that both praises the work and shows his modesty, Mrs. Ferrars makes unsociable comments when viewing the drawing that are a microcosm of her larger portrayal in the novel. Upon her initial examination, Mrs. Ferrars dismisses Elinor’s art with an air of condescension, calling them “ very pretty” and then promptly handing them back to her daughter, who, in an attempt to diminish her mother’s rudeness, asks her to acknowledge their beauty. At this point, Mrs. Ferrars instead praises the artwork of Miss Morton, her preferred choice for Edward’s wife; in doing so, she is making a not-so-implicit comparison between the two girls themselves. In using a simple drawing to attack Elinor as a person, Mrs. Ferrars is depicted as a nasty and spiteful woman interested in offending those she sees as threats to her plans for her son. That she acts in this fashion during her first appearance further cements her reputation for callousness that will only be bolstered by her later decisions to disown both her sons. Elinor also makes use of the opinions others voice

regarding her artwork to find out more about their personalities, most notably in her interactions with Edward. She uses it as a test and as a way of measuring her compatibility with him that also appeals to her rational nature, as she knows that she will only be happy with a man who can relate to her and her passions. Although he does not sketch himself, Edward satisfies her requirements because she feels that “ he has great pleasure in seeing the performances of other people” and that “ he is by no means deficient in natural taste” — that is, he can appreciate art for its own sake. This attitude towards drawing signals to Elinor his “ innate propriety and simplicity of taste,” and that is all she needs to view Edward as a suitable match for herself — unlike Marianne, who feels that Edward is a bad match because “ in spite of his frequent attention to her while she draws, he knows nothing of the matter” and because “ he admires as a lover, not as a connoisseur” (20). Once again, Elinor’s drawings represent a difference in ideology between herself and her sister: in contrast to Elinor, Marianne has the unrealistic wish of finding a beau who exactly shares her tastes in music and literature, telling her mother that “ I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own” (20). Elinor is realistic enough to know that finding someone that compatible is difficult and so is content in knowing that Edward likes her and thus enjoys her art as well. Like Elinor’s sketches, Marianne’s interest in her pianoforte further reflects her characterization as the more emotional, passionate, and sensitive of the Dashwood girls. However, unlike the drawings her sister makes, Marianne plays an instrument in order to express her emotions, not to hide them by channeling them into a different area. Following her rejection by Willoughby, she turns to music to get in touch with her feelings:

She spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by her tears. In books too, as well as in music, she courted the misery which a contrast between the past and present was certain of giving (96). The combination of musical performance and crying reveals an interesting facet of Marianne's personality: namely, that she views melody and song as an ideal way of communicating her deepest and most heartfelt sentiments. It also emphasizes her belief in the public nature of emotions: she believes that they are meant to be expressed openly, and she voices her feelings by playing a piano, an instrument designed to be performed and heard by others. She wants her feelings to be known, which is why she is so strongly associated with a piano: the instrument allows her to do just that. Another important aspect of Marianne's persona is her lack of manners as well as her inability to show the appropriate amount of decorum in social encounters. Whereas Elinor always strives to mask her dislike or displeasure with others through politeness and respect, Marianne continually irritates others by flouting the rules for acceptable behavior by making inappropriate comments and statements. In one particularly memorable scene, she abruptly excuses herself from a group activity she has no interest in by telling Lady Middleton that, "you know I detest cards. I shall go to the pianoforte; I have not touched it since it was tuned," with the narrator noting that "without further ceremony, she turned away and walked to the instrument" (164). Here the pianoforte is the vehicle by which Marianne escapes a social obligation she finds uninteresting, and that she is willing to irritate a large group of people by not doing what is publically expected of her reveals what she prioritizes and values. She is more interested in her thoughts and emotions, the interior realm of her own personality, than in

what is going on in the outside world. In that way, the piano becomes both a symbol of her preference for the selfish, sentimental world as well as the device through which she gets in touch with that inner realm. It is at the piano where she is “ wrapped up in her own music and her own thoughts, and had by this time forgotten that any body was in the room besides herself” (166), thus reinforcing the role the instrument plays in helping Marianne drift into her own private universe. As a figure associated with emotion and feeling, it is an inherent part of her personality that she be drawn to personal experiences over interactions with a wider world in which she places no value. By looking at the significant objects most closely associated with the two Dashwood sisters, it is possible to detect how each item reinforces their categorization as girls who possess either “ sense” or “ sensibility.” For Elinor, her drawings serve as a way to channel her emotions out into another form in a way that will escape the notice of others and maintain her reputation as a level-headed and logical individual. In addition, her artwork attracts the opinions of others in the novel, in the process revealing more about their characters — a fact that does not escape Elinor’s notice, who uses her work in this fashion to gather information on Edward’s personality in order to gauge his compatibility with herself. Just as Elinor’s illustrations echo and emphasize her intelligent and calm nature, Marianne’s love of the pianoforte represents her self-centered, emotional temperament. She employs the instrument both to communicate and share her feelings with the world as well to escape that world by getting caught up in her own playing to the point where she is completely unaware of anyone or anything else but herself. Ultimately, both things are symbolic of the differing ways

the girls carry themselves throughout the novel. Works Cited Austen, Jane.
Sense and Sensibility. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.