

# Secrets of sense and sensibility



Sense and Sensibility: Austen's use of secrets to convey meaning The society in which Austen lived in was essentially Victorian and definitely during that period there was a marked movement of sexuality from the public sphere into the domestic sphere. The novel *Sense and Sensibility* was written in the 1790s and was released in 1811, 6 years prior to her death. The reason why I mention the movement of sexual discourse from the public sphere into the domestic sphere is that these are the means in which Jane Austen conveys her meanings through secrets and especially through *Sense and Sensibility* in which the two primary characters, Elinor and Marianne are conveyors of Sense (Marianne) and Sensibility (Elinor). It was essential then that the discourse of meaning in which these two characters appear through the passages within the novel be able to understand discreet measures in which women and women relationships were being censored by society. To show that Elinor and Marianne are able to use secrets as a measure of passing information and meaning to the other characters I have chosen two scenarios from the book to illustrate my point.

The first scene that I would like to explore is when Marianne was having an intense relationship with Willoughby and an attachment so strong between the two of them that in the minds of the adults it was almost an assured attachment that would lead to marriage. However, in the eyes of pre-pubescent Margaret she could not understand that such daily contact between the two could excite into marriage. It was only when she witnessed that Willoughby had taken a lock of Marianne's hair as a sign of fixed attachment did Margaret presume that the two will soon be engaged; Margaret related something to her the next day, which placed this matter in a still clearer light. Willoughby had spend the preceding evening with them,

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and Margaret, by being left some time in the parlour with only him and Marianne, had had opportunity for observations, which with a most important face, she communicated to her eldest sister, when they were next by themselves.

‘ Oh! Elinor,’ she cried, ‘ I have such a secret to tell you about Marianne. I am sure she will be married to Mr. Willoughby very soon.’

The secret in question was the lock of hair obtained by Willoughby from Marianne that signifies their strong attachment from one another. However, we know this to be beside the case when Willoughby has a secret of his own to conceal that he may not marry Marianne. The eyes of a child, in this case, Margaret who’s pre-pubescent and slowly learning the art of conveying meaning without declaring it to the public world allows Marianne to be subtly disgraced without the knowledge of the public sphere thus securing and protecting her honour. The second parallel meaning of the turning point of this secret is that it advances the plot when Willoughby shuns Marianne completely for the hand in marriage of another young lady of higher rank and better financial security.

The next ‘ secret’ scene is when Elinor finds out about the secret of Edward Ferrars and his secret engagement to his ward’s daughter, Lucy Steele. Lucy feigns a walk together with Elinor and asks her whether she was acquainted with her sister in law’s mother Mrs. Ferrars. The walk and the reveal of the secret was intended by Austen to set the scene of despair and discouragement and show the readers as well the actual true character of Elinor’s stoic behaviour when it came to handling difficult problems concerning her emotions (her emotions being closely connected metaphor with sex and procreation, the aftermath of romantic love). Later on, when

Marianne rebukes her for her lack of feeling Elinor will reveal the truth behind her feelings but also the stern control in which her manners were being checked. The other side of the walk scene between Elinor and Lucy Steele was not just that Lucy wanted to show to another person who's the same age as she was that she was engaged but also retain information concerning the family she was about to marry into. It seems that Lucy delegated the secret to Elinor because she thought that anyone who is female and closer to her age would appreciate what she was doing although this was contrary concerning Elinor was an introverted sort of character; ' I dare say you are, and I am sure I do not at all wonder at it. But if I dared tell you all, you would not be so much surprised. Mrs. Ferrars is certainly nothing to me at present, - but the time may come - how soon it will come must depend upon herself - when we may be very intimately connected.'

' Good heavens!' cried Elinor, ' what do you mean?' Are you acquainted with Mr. Robert Ferrars? Can you be -?' And she did not feel much delighted with the idea of such a sister-in-law.

' No;' replied Lucy, ' not to Mr. Robert Ferrars- I never saw him in my life; but,' fixing her eyes upon Elinor, ' to his elder brother.'

Elinor who is more of self-censored person kept her feelings in check without revealing her own personal attachment with Edward Ferrars. This is in contrast to Edward Ferrars' own sister, Mrs. John Dashwood whose character is more openly hostile to anything that would affect her status and position. For example, later on when Lucy reveals her secret to Mrs. John Dashwood after they were more intimately connected, she would scream ' Viper in my bosom!' and attacked Lucy Steele.

In conclusion, Austen's use of secrets to convey meanings is filled in Sense

and Sensibility. Not only do they provide censorship but they also provided a means as to how the plot moves forward in a difficult era where public emotion is not considered as appropriate unless the intention of marriage was cited. They allowed in a situation where women provided dowry to their would-be grooms to wield a certain amount of power in the context of owning information and the ability to act upon information either for their own benefit or like Elinor, to choose to remain and not manipulate it or in the case of Marianne to secure for her own security the choice for Colonel Brandon instead of Willoughby.

References:

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 1998.