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Sense and Sensibility: A Sermon on Living the Examined Life

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Sense and Sensibility: A Sermon on Living the Examined Life

A Thesis

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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract iv

Introduction 1

Jane Austen and Religion 4

Religious Traditions 8

One: Begin text and make sure it is one which lends itself to simple and fruitful analysis 15

Two: Introduce main headings 19

Three: Provide proof from reason and scripture 24

Four: Allow of inferences, if any 27

Five: Demonstrate exhortations for suitable practice30

Christian Principles 34

Conclusion 38

Works Cited 41

Vita 44

ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's novels remain an essential component of the literary canon, but her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, is frequently neglected. However, in *Sense and Sensibility* is the genesis of Austen's technique through which her major characters cultivate and reveal a strong inner life, demonstrated through the character of Elinor Dashwood. This technique is a characteristic she incorporates in each of her succeeding novels. Her approach to literature centers on the interiority of her characters and their ability to change, but in her first novel Austen takes a unique approach. Following the structure of an eighteenth-century sermon, Austen creates a sermon for lay people that centers on the cultivation of a strong interior life.

Jane Austen; *Sense and Sensibility*; sermon; inner life; interiority; Christian; Christian-principles
Evangelical; Reformation; fiction; didactic

“The way to find the real ‘world’ is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our own inner ground” ~Thomas Merton

Introduction.

Jane Austen's novels are an essential component of the literary canon. Her stories contain a quality that, despite what some call “old-fashioned” content, has withstood the changes of time. In each of her novels, Austen incorporates “lessons,” many of which clearly perpetuate facets of Christian morality. Nevertheless, her popularity, over the past two hundred years, has not waned. Austen’s success results from more than her immaculately crafted stories; rather, her achievement is due to the moral lessons that resonate in the hearts of her readers. Her lessons on morality feature subjects that readers still grapple with, such as duty, loss, and love.

Undoubtedly, certain Austen novels are more popular than others, but her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*,¹ establishes Austen as master of her art. In this book Austen develops her technique through which her major characters cultivate and reveal a strong inner life, a practice Marilyn Butler calls a “real technical achievement” (189). Interior resilience and stability distinguish her heroines from her minor characters. *Sense and Sensibility* is the genesis of this principle, one that Austen maintains in each of her succeeding novels. Inner life or interiority, I will use these terms interchangeably, is built upon biblical tenets established in the prologue to the book of Proverbs. In chapter 1:2-7 are the principles Austen incorporates:

for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight;

for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair;

¹ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, edited by James Kinsley. Oxford University Press, 2008, abbreviated as SS. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.

for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—
let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

For Austen, a strong inner life is a heightened sense of self-awareness and the ability to quietly control, consider, and order one's emotions in a manner that outwardly demonstrates strength, prudence, and morality. This trait is what Austen calls wisdom, an element required by each of Austen's heroines to achieve happiness in all her novels except *Persuasion*. In *Persuasion*, Laura Mooneyham explains, ". . . wisdom no longer make[s] necessary a happy ending" (147), even though Anne Elliot is a model of this concept. Mooneyham's analysis appropriately demonstrates the arc of Austen's growth. If *Persuasion* significantly deviates from Austenian format, then *Sense and Sensibility* establishes it.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen establishes interiority through her two major characters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. Austen maneuvers the Dashwood sisters through challenges that try individual fortitude, resolve, and dignity. Through Elinor and Marianne's responses to challenges, readers learn the value of cultivating an ordered inner life. Not only is Austen's message practical, but her message is rooted in traditional Christianity. The structure of *Sense and Sensibility* reflects eighteenth-century sermons both in content and format. Austen explores how Christianity applies in an individual's life, with grace and tact, and emphasizes the value of an ordered inner life through relationships and its effects on family, community, and friends. By showing how Christianity is lived in "real" life, Austen's novel breaks the barrier of traditionally

passive church attendance and moves readers towards active application, thus demonstrating how to live a moral life in an uncertain world.

Austen's moral lessons move beyond limited and negative associations with religion or the church, and offers realistic instruction for living a prudent life. Through Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Austen demonstrates the process of and struggle in cultivating a strong moral interior that reflects living a Christian life. *Sense and Sensibility*'s didacticism primarily focuses on the individual's relationship to family and community, all the while correlating the individual's character with his or her interior life. While *Sense and Sensibility* primarily focuses on the behavior of the Dashwood sisters, Austen does not limit her focus of individual behavior to women. She also depicts men of merit, such as Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars, and even characters who reject morality, Lucy Steele and Willoughby. With such a range of characters interacting, Austen teaches her readers the best ways themselves to act. Such a morally didactic approach does not often ensure success with readers, for quite often it has the opposite effect, but for Austen it does not diminish her achievement. Despite her moral message, Austen is not overt and she cleverly disguises Christian principles in simple plots about love, family, and community. This masked approach to Christianity is not meant to demean the faith, quite the opposite; this approach expands Austen's audience of readers and encourages their participation in her moral lesson.

Through this method, she disarms readers who resist didactic literature and offers a story that concentrates on "normal" people doing "normal" things. Austen's approach to literature involves the characters' reactions, their behavior, and ultimately their ability to change that, overall, show the best ways to act. Through her novels, but specifically in *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen creates a new type of fiction. This novel invites all readers to participate and enjoy

relatable stories. Austen's purposeful combination of style and content culminates in an innovative kind of apologetic approach, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "a formal defence [sic] or justification of a theory or doctrine." *Sense and Sensibility* is Austen's sermon, a defense of the value of traditionally Christian practices actively lived.

Jane Austen and Religion.

Oliver MacDonagh, in his book *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds* (1991), writes that Austen was a devout and traditional Christian, a deeply religious person who faithfully observed and practiced Anglicanism. Rooted in morality, her beliefs directed her life and she faithfully and regularly attended divine service, said and composed prayers, and read sermons (MacDonagh 4). Such observations are consistently challenged; biographers Claire Tomalin and John Halperin, for example, advocate for a secular Austen, one who does not rely upon Christian tradition for anything more than custom. In *Jane Austen: A Life* (1999), Tomalin specifically challenges Austen's association with Christianity, calling it unfounded or exaggerated (141), whereas in *The Life of Jane Austen* (1984), Halperin suggests that Austen's outlook, especially in *Sense and Sensibility*, ". . . is bleak and black and nasty" (84), traits that, if indicative of her faith, paint a dark picture.

Although all biographers rely upon Austen's novels, her personal letters, and Austen family history to support their suppositions, neither seems to demonstrate Austen's relationship to Christianity adequately. Tomalin's suppositions are built upon Austen's silences. She writes that in Austen's novels, "no one prays" (141), and that readers are not shown Marianne's "religion in action" (141), that Austen has "nothing to say" concerning "inner spiritual struggles" (142), and that the Christian components of Austen's life are nothing more than social

obligations and niceties (141). Halperin suggests that Christianity was more than custom, but writes of Austen as “. . . always a believing Christian, though rarely an aggressive one” (245). However, Tomalin and Halperin’s belief that Austen was not interested in “inner spiritual struggles” nor “aggressive” in her faith is contradicted by the material of her novels. Austen’s novels are uniquely Christian because they particularly focus on the relationship of the individual with the community.

In 1999 Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, succinctly explained how such relationships are indicative of Christianity. He said, the “Christian faith is not based on poetry and politics . . . but on knowledge.” This “knowledge” is founded in “stoic moral[ity] . . .” and “. . . is manifest[ed] in Pauline texts, in the Letter to the Philippians.” Austen’s characters work to maintain this “knowledge” through quiet reflection or, as in the case of Marianne Dashwood, develop an awareness of the knowledge. The “moral *praxis*” of Christianity is “. . . lived as a community and rendered concrete in which the philosophical perspective [is] transcended to become real action, especially because of the concentration of all morals in the twofold commandment to love God and others.” Therefore, “Christianity, it might be said more simply, [is] convincing because of faith’s bond with reason and because action [is] oriented to *caritas*, to caring.” The central component to Pope Benedict’s defense of the faith is an attainable knowledge that is lived in the community and exhibited through care to others. All of Austen’s stories exemplify these principles.

Other critics recognize Austen as a Christian writer. Laura Mooneyham agrees, “Austen is a Christian stoic” (152); Gary Kelly notes in “Education and accomplishments” that religious instruction was considered indispensable to young females (256), Alistair Duckworth in “Prospects and Retrospects” explains that for Austen, faith’s ultimate origin is religious (21), and

nineteenth-century critic Richard Whately claimed in 1821 that Austen is “. . . evidently a Christian writer” (95). Ultimately, one must rely upon tradition and Austen’s own words and actions to determine her faith, and an examination of Austen’s personal practices is necessary. Elton E. Smith believes that not only was Austen a Christian, but she was a Christian who actively lived her faith throughout her life. Smith examines the prayers Austen composed and believes they reveal a lifelong interest in Christianity and Christian expression (283). Furthermore, her religious practice was not limited to composing prayers, but showed also in her daily meditations in which she read published sermons, a practice common in the eighteenth century (MacDonagh 2).

In the introduction to the *The Eighteenth Century Pulpit: A Study of the Sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield, and Wesley*, James Downey examines the culture of sermons in print. He writes, “. . . the sermon in the eighteenth century was still a power to be reckoned with. Throughout the period it continued to be a best-seller” (Downey 4). As a devout and practicing Christian, Austen devoted a portion of her time to reading and studying the contents of published sermons. In fact, Austen read many sermons, among her favorites being sermons by Bishop Sherlock (MacDonagh 4). Her devotion to reading sermons and sacred scripture reflects an understanding of her own need for quiet contemplation, a characteristic she incorporates in her strongest heroines. In *Sense and Sensibility*, this attribute is given to Elinor Dashwood and learned by Marianne Dashwood.

As both an active Christian and novelist, Austen possessed a unique opportunity to write convincingly about her beliefs without turning away her readers. Through her writing, she expands the Christian message beyond the parameters of the church and shares it across denominations. Her success reflects a new approach to sermon-making that adheres to the

rhetoric and theology of the Church of England while reaching people who have moved away from the church. From 1775-1817, the length of Austen's life, the Church of England experienced an extended period of church reform (MacDonagh 2). With the rise of new denominations in particular, Evangelicalism, Anglican expectations of the church began to shift (MacDonagh 2). As a result of these changes, parishioners left the Established Church, some entirely and others for different congregations. The turmoil occasioned by this reform is best depicted in one of Austen's later novels, *Mansfield Park*. It primarily focuses on the relationship of the clergyman with his parish, while characters like Mary Crawford and her resistance to the church represent the rise of secularism in the English culture. Even though it would be many years before Austen wrote a book primarily focused on the issue of religion, at the time she was writing *Sense and Sensibility* she would have been aware of the changes taking place in her community. Robert Wheeler, in a discussion of religion in the eighteenth century, writes that despite the religious tension of the era, religion was important to Austen and her family (Wheeler 406).

Austen's focus in *Sense and Sensibility* is primarily concerned with living a good and "proper" life. Traditionally, in the seventeenth century and continuing into the eighteenth century, lessons of morality and behavior were heard at Sunday service (Downey 10). The gathering of the community at Sunday church was not only a communion of Christians, but also a gathering of the community. At these services, the distinguishing feature of the Church's sermon was that its content was distinctly pragmatic (Downey 10). Sermon pragmatism was a feature, Wheeler believes, that threatened to marginalize the Established Church and its role as a "quiet moral presence, rather than a dynamic body which lived out a radical gospel message" (Wheeler 406). Wheeler notes that the pull of the pathos-enriched Evangelicalism often

overshadowed the simple and orthodox message of the Established Church (Wheeler 406). The concern, therefore, was the continued relevance of the traditional Church and its message within the lives of the community in the face of the pressures to follow in the fervor of Evangelical pathos.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen offers a message of “quiet morality” in life. Margaret Anne Doody writes that “[t]he novel is treated as offering a simple and satisfactory moral, in representing ‘the effects on the conduct of life, of discreet quiet good sense on the one hand, and an overrefined and excessive susceptibility on the other’” (Doody viii). While I agree with Doody’s assertion, I think Austen demonstrates more than the ‘effects on the conduct of life.’ This novel goes to the heart of how and why readers should apply “moral” behavior in their lives. Through Elinor and Marianne Dashwood and their interactions with the community at Barton, Austen shows her readers how and why they should live morally despite or in spite of obstacles, heartbreak, and uncertainties. In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen seamlessly folds strong didactic principles into a novel that reflects the message and traditions of eighteenth century sermons. Her ideas validate the Church and its teachings, and offer a secular method of disseminating Christian moral principles that were traditionally shared from the pulpit.

Religious Traditions.

Both MacDonagh and Wheeler demonstrate that Austen was well versed in the tradition of the sermon as literature in the English culture, often reading sermons in her private devotions. James Downey, in *The Eighteenth Century Pulpit*, examines the English sermon tradition, and writes that it was not only a means to convey traditional Christian principles, but the church became a center for political and social discourse (2). After the Reformation, written discourse

became a favorite for the Protestants “. . . because . . . [it] was essential if the principles and beliefs of the Reformation were to be handed down to future generations” (Downey 3).

Originally, in the seventeenth century, sermons were a means of conveying important information, a custom continued into the eighteenth century. Downey relies heavily on W. Fraser Mitchell’s book, published in 1932, titled *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrews to Tillotson*. It remains the foremost treatise on the evolution of the sermon from the seventeenth century. Mitchell explains that the sermon was more than a mode of religious teaching and that “. . . besides its strictly religious function, [it] took in large measure the place of the journalistic press of the present day, and enjoyed the enormous influence, reinforced by a tremendous sanctity of authority, of a modern broadcasting company” (Mitchell 5).

He believes by studying the sermon one can properly understand that period because the sermon provides “. . . [a] medium in which to study the changing tastes of a period, especially where, as is the case with the English sermon in the seventeenth-century, a sufficiently wide range of theological interests is represented, each making a direct contribution to the change and modification of content or structure” (Mitchell 5). Sermons were “. . . something more solemn by virtue of [their] theme but less impressive in point of thought or style . . . and something much less important and far less calling for public attention than a University lecture or the address of a prominent scientist” (Mitchell 42). The sermon was not “. . . only a message of the utmost consequence, but the vehicle by which it was conveyed was of a venerable antiquity, and neither religious Reformation nor ceremonial controversies had resulted in its abolition or called for its discontinuance” (42). Despite the changes in society and the challenges faced by the Church, Mitchell suggests that “[t]he sermon, therefore, may be regarded not only as itself providing a

species of prose, but as a kind of index of what men were likely to attempt or applaud in contemporary literature” (382).

The issues that plagued the Church and the resolutions sought by the community are demonstrated by the changes then taking effect in the Church. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sermon as literature was a prolific genre and the symbiotic relationship of literature and sermons was indicative of the theological approach taken by the Church. Mitchell explains,

the preacher desired to create a more lasting impression, not only to “teach so as to give instruction, and please so as to keep up the attention,” but to “sway the mind so as to subdue the will,” and this desire led to certain modifications in his [clergy’s] procedure. Considerations of one kind or another tended to combine with the rhetorical traditions to which the preachers subscribed, and in the sixteenth century in particular, the humanistic movement first of all, and later the contentions of the Reformation, tended more and more to emphasise the distinction of preaching from ordinary oratory, and to compel the recognition of the fact, that, although it was a rhetorical study, it was a rhetorical study which was largely affected by its singular content and the peculiar aim of its professors.

(94)

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, challenges to the primacy of the Church and its clergy required alternative methods to combat the rise of sensationalism found in other denominations. The Church needed more than traditional sermons because the new and dynamic style of the Evangelical Reformation was significantly influencing church parishioners.

Changes to the composition and content of the sermon were needed to maintain its status because traditional sermons gave rise to abuses (Downey 5). With the unprecedented access to printed sermons, ministers sought monetary success over moral instruction (5). Downey explains

that church sermons often diverged into political rhetoric and became venues for political discourse and indoctrination. Because of abuse by the clergy who circulated political propaganda during church, other methods emerged to convey Christianity. Sermons rooted in sensationalism were coupled with extemporaneous preaching and encouraged congregants to rely upon their emotional responses, and consequently traditionalists feared such sermons lacked substance. MacDonagh writes that Austen was among those who were concerned with the changes taking place in the Christian community because the reliance of feeling over reason often leads to error (5). Although Austen may have initially been concerned with the trajectory of this trend, she does come to acknowledge its influence. In 1814 Austen wrote to her niece Fanny Knight, “. . . that she was ‘at least persuaded that they who are so [i.e., Evangelical] from Reason & Feeling, must be happiest & safest’” (Wheeler 407).

Despite these later feelings, Austen maintained her preference for theological expression more closely aligned with the teaching and practices of John Tillotson (Wheeler 408). In 1720, many years after his death, Tillotson’s theology and ethical preaching remained popular (Downey 19). For Tillotson, “moderation” was central to life and helped him develop a “. . . plain style in preaching, [that] was so largely instrumental in diffusing a taste for plainness and perspicuity in prose in general (*Eighteenth-Century English Literature* 202-04). His “plain style,” according to Wheeler, became a model for other ministers in the eighteenth century (Wheeler 408). Central to his theory was an appeal to “common sense and self-interest” (Downey 14). Tillotson believed that an individual must “. . . *work out his own Salvation*, and to take care of *that* in the first Place, and then promote the Salvation of others, as much as in him lies” (Wheeler 408). This pragmatic approach is apparent in Austen’s writings in that one must first develop and maintain a strong inner conviction before sharing beliefs with others. Elinor

Dashwood embodies these principles when she explains that she strives, first, to control her own inclinations, and then to influence others (SS 71). Elinor knows that reliance on her own feelings or judgments are often wrong. Therefore, she strives to avoid “total misapprehension of character” and allots herself sufficient “time to deliberate and judge” (SS 71).

If Austen followed Tillotson’s principles in her content, the structure of her novel more closely resembles the sermons of Archbishop Thomas Secker. Archbishop Secker was sensitive to the issues surrounding the structure and delivery of sermons. In his remarks to future clergy, *Eight Charges Delivered to the Clergy* 1761, Archbishop Secker encouraged a middle way or *via media* (Downey 106). For Archbishop Secker, the *via media* or middle way was an approach to preaching as “somewhere between the theatrical and the statuesque” (Downey 106). In an effort to ensure that his clergy best convey an accessible Christian message, he advocated an approach he believed was “designed to persuade the impartial mind rather than confirm or comfort beliefs” because “[f]aith is not . . . ‘the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’ but the logical upshot of a thorough examination of the evidence for Christianity” (Downey 92-93). Therefore, the clergy were encouraged to continue to compose sermons that focused on “removing objections to his message” and to “establish its relevance by using realistic examples from everyday life” to demonstrate the faith (Downey 93).

To Archbishop Secker, *via media* consisted of “. . . a middle way . . . of setting down, in short Notes, the method and principal Heads, and enlarging on them in such Words” (107). Although he ascribed to this method, he acknowledged it was not the “easiest” (107). This “golden mean of sermon delivery” benefits ministers who fully compose their sermons before delivery (107). Although delivery, or *extempore*, is intertwined in his theory of *via media*, he maintained a strong practice for the actual written composition of sermons (106). Traditionally,

there were four ways to deliver a sermon: read verbatim, given extempore, delivered memoriter, or read from a prepared manuscript.

Archbishop Secker generally dismissed the practice of the first three in favor of the prepared manuscript. He believed reading a haphazardly constructed sermon prohibited the deliverer from accurately engaging “hearers,” and he believed it was the rare talent who could efficiently preach a sermon wholly from memory (107). Furthermore, he cautioned that “. . . preachers often fall victim to impertinence and incoherence” (107). In an effort to avoid sloppily orated sermons, he preferred and encouraged his clergy to prepare their sermons as manuscripts. The care he encouraged his ministers to take in constructing their sermons resembles the care authors take in composing their novels. Margaret Anne Doody writes that when Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility*, she “. . . worked diligently at revising her novel for the press” and that it had originally been an epistolary novel titled “Elinor and Marianne” (Doody i). The time and effort Austen put into her work demonstrates the key components of the Archbishop’s directions. Austen changed her manuscript’s form, she “diligently” revised it, and worked to eliminate all deficiencies, repetitions, improprieties, and misapprehensions embedded in her text. These revision techniques are common for all writers, but Austen’s changes from first person epistolary to third person blend of narrator and character resulted in her creation of free and indirect discourse that reveals a character’s inner life. This new method of Austen better engages her readers, and more closely reflects the concepts advocated by Archbishop Secker and the clergy.

However, I do not think Austen only applied the spirit of Archbishop Secker’s advice; I believe she wrote her novel following his five-part division for sermons. This five-part division, Fraser Mitchell explains, is the traditional format for a sermon (94), one that was popularized in the seventeenth century by Bartholomäus Keckermann who is considered the “father” of this

division (95). Like Keckermann, Archbishop Secker follows this approach. According to James Downey, Archbishop Secker's third charge of his treatise, *The Eight Charges*, specifically addresses all ". . . phase[s] of preaching from preparation to delivery" (Downey 105). Downey explains that while Archbishop Secker's order closely corresponds to Keckermann's, Archbishop Secker offers a simpler approach (105).

Archbishop Thomas Secker writes that ministers should "Begin the text, and make sure it is one which lends itself to simple and fruitful analysis" (*Eight Charges* 293). He explains that starting a sermon in this way "is most convenient" for the hearers/readers and from this point the author will branch out into the "main Parts of [his] Discourse" (*Eight Charges* 293). Then, he continues, the premises originally posited must ". . . appear to be the Ground-Work of [the] Discourse, and not an After-thought." From this point the preacher "should proceed to introduce his main headings." This next step is what Secker calls the "explanatory Part." It is a combination of the "praecognitio textus" and "partition et proposition," both of which must be grounded in history and data, preferably biblical data. Following this are "Proofs from Reason and Scripture," "Inferences," then "Exhortations to suitable Practice" (Downey 105). I simplify the outline as follows: 1) begin the text and make sure it is one which lends itself to simple and fruitful analysis, 2) introduce main headings, 3) provide proof from reason and scripture, 4) allow for inferences if useful, and finally 5) demonstrate exhortations for suitable practices, and in all elements of composition the writer must aim to leave a durable impression (Downey 105). Austen incorporates each element, albeit a modified version, into *Sense and Sensibility*. Now, I will examine each element and show how Austen organized *Sense and Sensibility* to reflect the sermon tradition.

One: Begin text and make sure it is one which lends itself to simple and fruitful analysis.

Jane Austen begins *Sense and Sensibility* with a familiar premise of “disinheritance” and “exile.” Disinheritance, Laura Mooneyham argues “is central to her [Austen] artistic vision” (26) whereas “exile” is the departure from Barton from which the family can never return (Doody xi). The combination of the disinheritance and exile strip away familiar comforts and force the Dashwood women into the world without guarantee. To further complicate the Dashwoods’ lives, Austen demonstrates the failure of the family in their obligation to care for family.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Mr. Dashwood dies and leaves a widow, Mrs. Dashwood, and her daughters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, and a son, John Dashwood, from a previous marriage. The simple premise of her novel is the care of Mr. Dashwood’s wife and daughters, and whether his son, to whom the estate is entailed, will adequately care for them (SS 3-22). Additionally, Austen introduces a potential suitor, Edward Ferrars, the brother of Mrs. John Dashwood, as an option for Mrs. Dashwood’s eldest daughter, Elinor. Despite the potential suitor and the brother who has promised to look after the family, Austen quickly strips away these securities and sets the widow and her children on their own. Mr. John Dashwood, at the urging of his wife, breaks his promise of support when he accepts her idea that “something be done for them; but *that* something need not be three thousand pounds” (SS 7-8). The stage thus set engages readers with characters who exhibit real experiences, and who face circumstances familiar to and likely experienced by many in her readership. The story is “simple” but its content lends itself to simple and fruitful analysis. The moral or Christian lessons that Austen will incorporate stem from the behavior of her characters as they face an unknown and uncertain future.

While I argue that *Sense and Sensibility* is composed in the tradition of an eighteenth-century sermon, Jane Austen is interested in proper education, not indoctrination, a sentiment Jan Fergus shares. Fergus writes that “Austen educates her readers’ judgment and sympathies” but she does not believe Austen’s intentions are primarily didactic (3). Gary Kelly writes that “. . . Jane Austen not only makes novel reading and reading generally, an index of education . . . [but] makes her novels into a process of education for the reader” (255). By making her novels a process of education she crafts books that become a meditation on behavior. She expands her novels beyond the “. . . demonstra[tion] [of] the importance of female education to . . . social groups and particularly to their material interests . . .” (252) or a book of manners, like James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766). Instead her novels transform the genre and use of didactic methods to teach her readers the merit of quiet reflection and inner strength by applying these principles to realistic situations.

In so doing, Austen demonstrates “moral” principles to her readers through realism instead of using obviously religious means. For example, Elinor demonstrates the necessity of a strength beyond the individual’s feelings and desires when she tells Marianne her reasons for keeping Lucy Steele’s secret. She exclaims, “By feeling that I was doing my duty.—My promise to Lucy, obliged me to be secret. I owed it to her, therefore, to avoid giving any hint of the truth; and I owed it to my family and friends, not to create in them a solicitude about me, which it could not be in my power to satisfy” (SS 197). Through this discourse, Elinor reveals that her conviction stems from more than personal desire, but from a duty to others, particularly to her family. Her behavior was not only to protect Lucy, but to honor herself by acting correctly in the manner that benefited all.

This practice of dealing with the ordinary in literature reflects the principles of Samuel Johnson. According to Donald Greene, Johnson argues “. . . the most effective biography—and, by extension, novel—is not that which deals with great public figures, but with the ordinary individual” (Greene 156). Johnson’s influence on Austen’s writings is substantial and critics such as A. C. Bradley, F. R. Leavis, and Isobel Grundy, to name a few, have seen a significant Johnsonian presence in Austen’s writings. F. R. Leavis wrote that Leavis was “. . . convinced that Austen even in her final novels, remained primarily influenced by earlier eighteenth-century moralist works such as Johnson’s *Rasselas*, [that is] impressed ‘in the very ethos of her work’” (quoted Todd and Blank lxviii). A. C. Bradley wrote, “she [is] a ‘moralist’ cum ‘humanist’ and is deeply influenced by Samuel Johnson” (quoted Todd and Blank lxvi). In addition to A.C. Bradley and F. R. Leavis, Isobel Grundy, in her article “Jane Austen and Literary Traditions,” posits that Austen’s preference for Samuel Johnson is apparent because she favors authors “with Augustan affinities such as Richardson, Johnson, Cowper, and Burney” (Grundy 197). According to Mooneyham, “[Elinor] exemplifies the principles of the Augustan age. [S]he displays moral exertion and reason . . .” (33). Finally, Grundy claims that “[w]hile so many of her [Austen] characters . . . admire Cowper, their narrator is consistently Johnsonian” (199).

Austen’s incorporation of Johnson’s theories in her writing is illustrative of her ability to make the “spiritual” realistic. Samuel Johnson was not only a critic of literature, but also composed sermons for his own devotion. Thomas Kass, in an essay entitled “Reading The ‘Religious’ Language of Samuel Johnson’s Sermons,” writes that “. . . [Johnson’s] most frequent method of beginning his *Sermons* is to write a paragraph on some general phrase of human existence which the congregation had experienced and with which it could empathize” (244). This method was advocated by Archbishop Secker who directed his clergy to “. . . write sermons

punctuated by examples from the natural rather than the supernatural world” (243). Austen incorporates these principles and her work reflects not only the traditions of Samuel Johnson, but also Archbishop Secker’s instruction on composing sermons. The use of the “novel” as an instrument for instruction is certainly not unique, but Austen’s homiletic structure is. This structure allows her to secret her moralism in her artistry and demonstrate how “realistic” characters actively live Christian principles. Thus, Austen transforms dry rhetoric into something desirable.

In *Rambler* No. 4, his famous essay on the novel as genre, Samuel Johnson tasked authors to “. . . learn [that] which is to be gained from books. [Such] experience . . . can never be attained by solitary diligence, [that it] must arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world” (Johnson 10). He understood the appeal of realistic fiction, and believed that writers have a great responsibility. Austen takes her responsibility as an author to heart and through her novels offers readers moral lessons. By structuring her “sermon” as a novel, she invites her readers into a world where Christian theory meets practical application. Marilyn Butler explains that Elinor Dashwood is Austen’s first character to “consistently reveal her inner life” (Butler 189). Austen continued to refine this technique in her subsequent novels, but *Sense and Sensibility* is the first of Austen’s novels in which readers experience the intimate and moral struggles of Elinor Dashwood. Like Elinor, readers learn to balance affliction in accordance with right reason. Even after Edward and Lucy’s secret is revealed, Elinor finds herself subjected to the needs of others: “Elinor was to be the comforter of others in her own distresses, not less than in theirs; and all the comfort that could be given by assurances of her own composure of mind, and a very earnest vindication of Edward from every charge of imprudence, was readily offered” (SS 196).

Two: Introduce main headings.

Sense and Sensibility compares the sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, and readers often interpret this novel as a lesson in prudence. Margaret Anne Doody succinctly encapsulates the sentiment that “. . . many female readers in search of example and ‘maxims for the conduct of life’ have felt that they are always trying to be Elinors, and always falling into Mariannes” (Doody xvii). The common assumption is that readers should emulate Elinor, who resembles sense, and refrain from being Marianne, the embodiment of sentiment or sensibility. This binary is too simple and therefore insufficient. While I believe Austen’s intention is to demonstrate the effects and approaches of these concepts, I think that Austen uses these notions as binary “headings” for her sermon, and then works to dissolve their sharp rigorous division by incorporating the narrator as a guide for her readers in a manner similar to that of the minister.

This is the “explanatory Part” or second step in composing a sermon. Austen is following Archbishop Secker’s instructions. She “propos[es] general Heads together, [and then] . . . proceed[s] upon them separately, and . . . gives Notice when you come to each” to alert her readers as to which principle she is dissecting (Downey 105). Austen’s detailed description of the Miss Dashwoods’ personalities, and those of their male counterpoints, coincides with this instruction and describes the two primary principles she plans to examine. In the first chapter of the novel, Austen describes “sense” in her description of Elinor and “sensibility” in her description of Marianne. Furthermore, Austen immediately informs the reader that Elinor and sense is the model of behavior that will prevail in the novel: Elinor “possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all . . .” (SS 6).

Early in the novel Austen describes Elinor Dashwood's temperament and juxtaposes this calm sense with the sensibility of Marianne, whose abilities are ". . . in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was every thing but prudent" (SS 6). In addition to the primary focus on the Dashwood sisters, Austen provides male equivalents. For Elinor, there is Colonel Brandon and for Marianne there is Edward Ferrars. Elinor and Colonel Brandon are defined by their reservation and observation, and Marianne and Edward Ferrars by their impetuosity and impulse. Each personality act towards its natural ends; Colonel Brandon and Elinor maintain a strong stoicism whereas Marianne and Edward suffer the consequences of foolish indulgence of their romantic feelings: Marianne with Willoughby and Edward Ferrars, in the past, with Lucy Steele.

Jan Fergus writes that "Austen employs a technique she never afterwards relinquishes; it is a technique of contrasts" (7), a concept first recognized by Marilyn Butler in her book *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (183). The technique of contrasts "advances on the assumption that what happens to one of the central characters must also happen to the other; at every turn, the reader cannot avoid the appropriate conclusion" (Butler 183). Both Fergus and Butler not only acknowledge the significant differences between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, but between Colonel Brandon and Willoughby and between both and Edward Ferrars. These contrasts show the readers how two different personalities approach similar circumstances. For example, when the Dashwood family meets Mrs. Jennings, who is described as "a good-humoured, merry, fat, elderly woman who talked a great deal, and seemed very happy and rather vulgar," both Elinor and Marianne are relentlessly teased about "leaving their hearts in Sussex" (SS 26). Nevertheless, Marianne's "vexed" reactions towards Mrs. Jennings' crude behavior causes ". . .

Elinor far more pain than could arise from such commonplace raillery as Mrs. Jennings” (SS 26). Readers are invited to observe and “follow” the characters’ actions and endure the consequences. Austen allows readers to observe characters’ behavior and hopes these interactions will teach “right reason,” the best ways to behave.

By applying the technique of “contrasts,” Austen “. . . directs the reader’s attention not towards what they [the characters] experience, but towards how they cope with experience, away from the experimental to the ethical” (Butler 184). Instead of providing readers with binary examples of “all good” or “all bad” characters. Austen weaves her characters into uncomfortable situations that require more than manners to endure. Jan Fergus observes that “[i]nstead of deploring, like a moralizer, these truths about sympathy and judgment, she learns to exploit them in her novels to help create the more complex and sensitive responses she requires” (Fergus 6). Austen demonstrates how human nature works in conjunction with genuine interactions. Emphasizing these interactions with human nature reveals her belief that human nature must be consistently directed towards proper action, and subjects practice this belief through the judgments of her narrator.

Roger E. Moore offers a controversial opinion of Austen’s belief in human nature. By suggesting that Austen believed in the “innate goodness of people” (315), Moore strips Austen of powerful nuances in her characters. Although he admits that Austen’s characters do “. . . suffer from pride, arrogance, selfishness, or vanity,” he chalks up this behavior to “fault” instead of “the unsatisfactory education of original sin” (Moore 316). Again, Moore’s opinion does not do justice to Austen. The genius of her novels clearly demonstrates that she understands the intricacies of a person’s natural inclinations for his or her base passions and that these inclinations must be controlled and tempered. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen’s characters are

tested but, through reason and the observation of the effects of good and bad behavior, they learn the value of proper conduct.

Her emphasis on proper education is paramount and directly links Austen with the eighteenth-century clergy whose theological approach shifts its focus to the best ways to educate their parishioners towards Christian principles. Austen adopts their pedagogy and applies it to her craft, creating a sermon by a lay person for lay people. Her emphasis on reason over feeling aligns with long-standing Christian philosophy. In his writings, Samuel Johnson reflects an astute awareness of the need for continuous mastery over the “self.” W. Jackson Bate, the respected biographer of Johnson, writes that he held a “. . . lifelong compulsion to get all possible evils anticipated in advance, shrewdly, realistically, and digested into habitual response in order not to lose his ability as a ‘free agent’ and become the helpless victim of chance, caprice, or malignity” (Bate 374). Aware of his own human frailty, Johnson sought to cultivate proper habits to maintain his “free agency.” The emphasis on good and proper habits directed towards virtue are similarly emphasized in Austen’s writings. One such principle that Johnson followed was “. . . Socrates’s injunction about the ‘examined life’ and [that one must] examine it closely, honestly, without illusion but still with values . . .” (Bate 376). The intricate nature of self-examination is a concept Thomas Merton encouraged, believing: “[t]he real inner life and freedom of man begin when this inner dimension opens up and man lives in communion with the unknown within him” (Merton 53).

In Austen’s books, beginning in *Sense and Sensibility*, her lead female protagonists consistently examine their lives. Readers are invited into the intimate musings of Elinor Dashwood where they experience her humanity. What Austen creates and perfects in her later novels—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*—is an examination of the

internal life of her characters, reflection based upon principles promulgated by the English Church that reflect Christian rhetoric. Marilyn Butler notes that the interior likeness of Elinor Dashwood forms the element of Elinor's character that is essential to the purpose of the *Sense and Sensibility*. Austen's technique focuses on the internal examination of her heroines, in a manner that is private, honest, and relatable to her readers.

Austen adds an additional layer to this theory of internal examination in the creation of her character Marianne Dashwood. Unlike her sister Elinor, Marianne learns to temper her external expressions only after experiencing heartache and disappointment. In contrast to Elinor, Marianne and her temperament reflect the Platonic dichotomy of a "horse" that is not guided by reason: her wildness make her deaf and blind to the prudence of self-control. However, Austen does not simply use Marianne as a cautionary example; rather she shows the reader how "Mariannes" can alter their lives. In the last volume of the novel, Marianne falls ill and almost dies. In the forced silence of her sickness, Marianne has a moment of clarity. She explains later, "[l]ong before I was enough recovered to talk, I was perfectly able to reflect" (SS 262). Her moment of change is a result of her own self-examination, when she is forced into what Thomas Merton describes as "[c]ontemplation [that] is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source," that is God (Merton 58).

Generally, Austen refrains from directly invoking God as a catalyst for change, but in this instance Marianne's awakening is correlated to an acknowledgment of her behavior as it relates to God. In explaining her change to her sister, Marianne says "[m]y illness has made me think— It has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection" (SS 262). During this time of reflection and subsequent recovery Marianne experiences what Merton calls the "reality of that Source" and recognizes her recovery as a "time for atonement to my God" (SS 262). Critic Laura

Mooneyham notes that “Austen is a Christian Stoic in that she believes loss is a human burden to be borne” (Mooneyham 152). Even though Marianne must bear the burden of realizing her “favorite” maxim of “no second attachments” is wrong while she also loses her relationship with Willoughby, she is not hopeless. Austen provides readers with practical application in the maintenance of a transformation. For Marianne, recognition of heartache resulted from failure to her duty: “[w]henever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected or some failing indulged” (SS 262). Despite these failures, Austen demonstrates the way in which Marianne will actualize her change. First, she accepts the truth and the scars left by her actions and then regulates her weakness through actions supported by religion: “[h]is [Willoughby’s] remembrance can be overcome by no change of circumstances or opinions. But it shall be regulated, it shall be checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment” (SS 263).

Three: Provide proof from reason and scripture.

The purpose of *Sense and Sensibility* is to educate readers about Christian principles and how these principles apply to their lives. Therefore, Austen’s real life examples are necessary to coincide with the “proof of reason” that Archbishop Secker highlighted as the third component of a sermon. In the beginning chapters of the first volume, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are introduced to the reader and their personalities are specifically described. Although it is obvious that Austen is juxtaposing dispositions of sense with sensibility, she adds an additional element. Each of the young women offers proofs or ‘maxims’ of the doctrines by which she lives her life. Marianne ascribes to a doctrine of no second attachments (SS 70) and believes that she can only “. . . be happy with a man whose tastes did in every point coincide with [her] own” (SS 14).

Elinor, on the other hand, strives to influence the indulgent behavior of her family by “exerting” herself to maintain her calm disposition (*SS* 6).

After further establishing these premises, Austen moves the women into the “real world.” Their removal from Barton is Austen’s method of moving the girls from comfort to a place where their “maxims” and “doctrines” are tested. Here, Austen applies her “lessons,” moving beyond the confines and comfort that sermons offer individuals when in church. This unusual sermon is not built on high religious theory; rather Austen incorporates realistic characters into common experiences. After the upheaval, she sets her readers up to believe they will experience a linear story that reinforces the binary hierarchy of sense over sensibility. Marianne quickly meets a man, Willoughby, who resembles all her hopes and dreams (*SS* 33). He is everything romantic, and their hearts indeed unite in mutual understanding. Nevertheless, Austen does not suffer this to last. Instead, she removes Willoughby under suspicious circumstances without an explanation to readers or the Dashwoods. Austen simultaneously reintroduces Edward Ferrars, but incorporates Lucy Steele into the plot (*SS* ch. 17 and 21). The reorder of the characters challenges the fortitude and disposition of both characters and the reader, challenging all preconceived assumptions.

In volume one, chapter seventeen, the return of Edward Ferrars designates a material change in the novel. After months of absence, Edward reappears in the lives of the Dashwoods and a poignant discussion about principles arises at their reunion (*SS* 70). Throughout the course of this conversation, Edward seeks to determine whether Marianne remains “as steadfast as ever” in her opinion on love, to which she replies, “[a]t my time of life opinions are tolerably fixed” (*SS* 70). Marianne’s determination to hold on to her principles appears, in the context of this discussion, to be admirable, but upon further reading, Marianne’s beliefs or “maxims” are

demonstrated to be foolish. The “maxim” which is her “favorite” as Edward recalls “. . . [is] that no one can ever be in love more than once in their life . . .” (SS 71). These comments then lead to a general discussion of character, and Edward and Elinor discuss whether Marianne is naturally “a lively girl” (SS 71). Throughout this conversation, Austen masterfully raises a number of issues for her readers to consider, but most notably requires Elinor to clearly articulate and clarify her positions or “doctrines” to which she ascribes (SS 71).

Unconscious and flippant remarks by Marianne concerning Elinor’s character require Elinor to explain whether her “judgments” are “. . . to be subservient to those of [the] neighbors” (SS 71). This pointed criticism seems to surprise Elinor and she responds directly. She says, “[m]y doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behavior” (SS 71). Elinor’s remarks are pivotal. These comments succinctly expostulate the central “lesson” of the novel, that self-control and reflection are necessary for a stable life, and establish a significant turning point, suggesting that even the best characters are fallible. Up to this moment, Elinor has been central in the maintenance of morality, good sense, and prudence. Unlike Marianne, Elinor has not been self-indulgent, and upon Edward’s arrival, Elinor maintains her control and quiet demeanor.

Although Elinor’s outward appearance reflects control, readers are given insight into her turbulent thoughts. Despite her efforts, she cannot but wish for Edward to “. . . still distinguish her by the same affection which once she had felt no doubt of inspiring . . .” (SS 72). In fact, until Lucy Steele forces Elinor into her confidence, Elinor remains convinced of Edward’s preference for herself, even though she fails to explain his melancholic behavior. In the final chapter of the first volume, Elinor is faced with her greatest obstacle. Lucy Steele forces Elinor into intimate confidences about her secret engagement to Edward (SS 99). Until this point, Elinor’s

forbearance appeared to rest in her confidence of Edward's affection for her, but Austen does not allow this misunderstanding to continue. After learning the truth about Edward, readers experience Elinor's heartache. Elinor is ". . . almost overcome—her heart sunk within her, and she could hardly stand; but exertion was indispensably necessary, and she struggled so resolutely against the oppression of her feelings, that her success was speedy, and for the time complete" (SS 102). Austen removes all of Elinor's hope and forces her to endure personal heartache while simultaneously subjecting her to keep the secrets of Lucy Steele, Edward Ferrar's secret fiancée. Here is the moment when Elinor becomes human, not just a personification of good behavior. Elinor now shares the fate of Colonel Brandon: both are the center for misunderstanding, cruel treatment, and undesired information that tests their characters beyond the parameters of formal duty.

The onset of this burden clearly challenges Elinor's fortitude and subjects her "maxims" or life doctrine to harsh realities. Austen treats Elinor like the biblical character of Job. This resemblance links Austen to the tradition of sermon and further demonstrates the second part of the sermon composition by grounding the "Proof from Reason and Scriptures" (Downey 105). In the biblical story of Job, the devil challenges God, exclaiming that Job only loves him because God has blessed him (Job 1:1-22). The story continues that God allows Satan to test Job by stripping him of his family, wealth, and health, yet Job remains faithful. Elinor is similarly subjected, but Austen modifies this biblical story for her heroine. Instead of Elinor suffering from physical affliction, she suffers from mental afflictions. She alone must know and keep all these devastating secrets without the benefit of release. Misunderstood, shamed, and frequently embarrassed, Elinor perseveres and remains faithful to her maxim. By bringing both Elinor and Marianne's maxims to the forefront for scrutiny, and incorporating biblical principles, Austen

directly enters into the homiletic traditions practiced by English clergy from Archbishop John Tillotson (1630-1694) to Archbishop Thomas Secker (1693-1768).

Four: Allow for inferences, if useful.

The inferences one must draw from Austen's sermon are few, but I believe one must consider whether using the novel as a means to share a sermon is sufficient to convey a traditionally Christian message. The power of the novel is psychological, but as Johnson articulates, it is through the "exhibits [of] life in its true state" that the message of the story is more readily received. A pioneer in her own right, Austen sees the novel as a medium that offers a broad path for conveying messages. Although the novel is successful in depicting life, she recognizes it is frequently disregarded as trite. In response to such criticism, the narrator of her novel in *Northanger Abbey*² delivers a scathing rebuke for people who "... undervalue the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them" (NA 36). Her first novel, although it was published posthumously, reflects her strong feelings on the matter.

Nevertheless, to fully appreciate *Sense and Sensibility*, readers must get a good understanding of Austen's perspective on novels, and, to do this, accessing Austen's own words concerning this topic is paramount. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen spends a significant portion of the book commenting on "the novel." Through the narrator and her character Henry Tilney, Austen composes a clever and rational argument in support of the genre. Both the narrator and Henry Tilney don the cloak of defender and teacher and fervently champion the value of novels. In volume one, during a conversation concerning the gothic literature of Mrs. Radcliffe, Henry

² Austen. Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. Edited by Marilyn Butler. Penguin Classics, 1995. Print. (NA).

Tilney says he receives great pleasure from books and claims to “have read all of Mrs. Radcliffe’s works” (NA 102). His boldness in support of the genre buoys Austen’s argument that novels matter and that “rational” creatures, like Henry Tilney can find them enjoyable.

The narrator in *Northanger Abbey* is more forceful in her opinion on the matter. At the end of chapter five in volume one, the narrator makes a fervent argument for the primacy and legitimacy of this genre while cleverly rebuking dissenters (NA 36). Full of wit and sarcasm she says, ““And what are you reading, Miss—?’ ‘Oh! it is only a novel!’ . . . or in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed . . . [and] the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (NA 36). Despite her vehement defense of fiction, Austen is mindful of examining the legitimate criticism that accompanies this genre. Through Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen takes care to portray the kind of “person” who, although sweet, and sincere, is impressionable. The care taken to highlight the disparity further demonstrates Austen’s awareness of her readers as well as providing another example of the need for people to direct the uneducated towards the good. In fact, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Sir John Middleton receives a rebuke from Marianne when he jests with her about “setting one’s cap at a man” (SS 34). Marianne is displeased with the accusation and the carelessness with which Sir John makes his joke, and she quickly rebukes his behavior. However, Sir John remains impervious to the retort: “Sir John did not understand this reproof; but he laughed as heartily as if he did . . .” (SS 35). Many readers tend to skim or altogether pass over such seemingly insignificant passages to get to the “good parts” all the while missing the subtleties that enhance the story. Such an example is emblematic of the way in which novels, specifically Austen’s novels, convey lessons to their readers.

Even though Austen's novels are pure fiction, universal truths are woven into the fabric of her stories. In *Sense and Sensibility*, issues relating to family loyalty and duty, care for one another, prudence in action, and fortitude of conviction are all topics to which readers can relate. W. Jackson Bate in his biography of Samuel Johnson writes that Johnson's suggested approach to religion is one that ". . . [must be] empirical and analytical, and assumes that when one has cast off all illusions, what one has left is the truth" (283). I believe that Austen approached her novels in this spirit. In particular, *Sense and Sensibility* is a quest for truth that is indeed empirical and analytical. For Austen, the power of the novels is in the lasting effects on her readers who, once they cast off all the "illusions" she has created in her characters, will find messages of universal truths directly applicable to their lives. Austen's adherence to Anglican pedagogy in her novel *Sense and Sensibility*, and her strategic approach of crafting a sermon under the guise of popular fiction continue to be exceedingly successful. This continued success commands notice and respect. Despite her inclusion of Christian moral principles, she remains popular, gathering "believers" and "nonbelievers" to her. Those who do not believe at least frequently find themselves entertained and, like Sir John, laughing without real understanding.

Five: Demonstrate exhortations for suitable practices.

The final element to a sermon is its application in life, and I believe this last component is particularly Austenian. As I have suggested, *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel about "real" people for "real" readers that primarily focuses on family and community. Austen's use of the "normal" provides readers with real examples of how to apply "right reason" in their own lives. Recall W. Fraser Mitchell's discussion on tactics for clergymen. He writes that to captivate their audience, the clergy were encouraged to enact a type of rhetorical sleight-of-hand. He explained that clergy

incorporated discussions about seemingly insignificant “symbols” into their sermons, but throughout the course of the sermon, the “symbol” comes to reflect the orator’s purpose. For example, the biblical story of Job is not just about a man who endured hardship; rather it is about whether the man’s love for God is true and if it can endure. This is what Austen has done in *Sense and Sensibility* by writing about a family and their interactions with the community. However, the characters’ interactions actually represent the difficulty of living a Christian life. Similar to the manner in which Mitchell suggests using seemingly insignificant symbols to relate Christianity, Austen’s readers, “. . . receive a shock of surprise when the preacher appear[s] to justify its selection by argument and by sacred authority” (Mitchell 7). Austen applies this technique to her writings by inviting her readers simply to enjoy stories about families.

However, through the course of the story, readers unconsciously become participants in making moral judgments. With the narrator as their guide, reader judgments are directed through laughter, abhorrence, and amusement towards what is “right.” In *Sense and Sensibility*, the binaries created by Austen in the characters of the Miss Dashwoods are purposefully muddled to encourage not only closer reading of the text, but also deeper reflection into the reader’s internal thoughts and feelings. This brilliant tactic allows readers idly to follow the lives of Austen’s characters, laughing at or recoiling at their absurdities while always judging. Influenced by the narrator’s own judgments which are sarcastic, pithy, and often mean, readers find themselves smirking and reveling at the mistakes made by the characters. However, what readers do not usually realize is that they [the readers] are learning to judge and act as introspective Christians and the behavior they so despise is often behavior that they, themselves, exhibit in their own lives. Austen’s narrator guides readers through the pages of the book, encouraging them to form proper opinions. Once readers learn to recognize behavior in the novel, they then develop an

awareness that accompanies them in life. This awareness manifests itself through the readers' application and recognition of behavior in their own lives, thus making Austen's sermon effective.

In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* Marilyn Butler concludes her chapter on *Sense and Sensibility* with the following quote: "The fact that the question [of Marianne and Colonel Brandon's marriage] still occurs shows that in this most conscientiously didactic of all the novels the moral case remains unmade" (196). While I understand Butler's sentiment, ultimately, I disagree with her remarks because I believe she misses Austen's fundamental point. *Sense and Sensibility* is more than a story about the sensible Elinor and passionate Marianne; it is a story about directing one's feelings according to Christian precepts. Butler believes that Jane Austen fails to "get us to read her (Marianne's) story with the necessary ethical detachment . . . when she imposes her solution [marriage to Colonel Brandon] . . ." (196). Disappointment in this union between Marianne and Colonel Brandon may be true for many readers, and perhaps to a point even for ourselves, but I believe this is because we miss the true purpose of this novel. Readers are not supposed to be ethically detached, but rather to learn that actions have consequences and hopefully teach the "Marianne within" to exercise self-control. If readers find Austen's ending to the novel "controversial" it is because those readers fail to see the analogy she has created, and like Sir John laugh at its ridiculousness because its merits are beyond their understanding.

In my opinion, the criticism offered by Butler reflects a misconception of the purpose of Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Many readers struggle with their reaction to *Sense and Sensibility* because this book challenges readers' ideas and reflects their own misconceptions. Austen does not allow for relative principles to persist, and demonstrates how misdirected feelings actualized through behavior affect the community. I believe the core lesson of the novel is succinctly

summed up in the following statement: “. . . the argument of the novel is that such feelings, like the individuals who experience them, are not innately good” (Butler 196). Austen holds a mirror towards intimate behavior and challenges readers to identify with her characters. For readers and critics alike who find Austen’s novels “too” didactic, a close read of Austen’s characters should reveal their fallibility: none are wholly “good” or “bad.” Elinor is the most composed and most closely associated with good behavior and right reason, but she is so because she continually exerts herself towards this purpose. Karen Stohr’s article “Practical Wisdom and Moral Imagination in *Sense and Sensibility*” offers an interesting perspective on Austen’s novel. She writes that Elinor is capable of acting well because she possesses a moral imagination that acts in accordance with practical wisdom (392). Elinor continually exhibits these traits throughout the novel by keeping her personal suffering secreted because she knows the pain it would cause her family. Stohr defines practical wisdom as something necessary. Practical wisdom “. . . make[s] fully virtuous actions possible and must reach down to the level of minute details about behavior, because much of moral life is conduct via the mundane” (392). Such a description adequately summarizes *Sense and Sensibility*.

The entirety of the book focuses on small actions of the characters. Each is judged according to his or her abilities, and none is perfect. Throughout the entirety of the text, mistakes abound, misconceptions are held onto and in some places encouraged, and through these actions readers learn how to reflect and behave. Some of Austen’s characters—Elinor, Marianne, Edward Ferrars, and Colonel Brandon—must determine how best to act and how their actions affect others while enduring the careless and malicious behavior of others, particularly Willoughby and Lucy Steele. Unfortunately for Marianne and Willoughby, their behavior stems from feeling, and learning to control these feelings proves to be difficult, but it is behavior that

every reader understands. Marianne shows her immaturity when she says, “If there has been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure” (55, Austen 52). It is precisely this misconception, relying upon one’s feelings as a compass to navigate behavior, that Austen is highlighting, criticizing, and examining. Even though Marianne indulges her feelings, Elinor is not immune from her own, and through the behavior of each, readers learn how best to manage these inclinations and, hopefully, become aware of how their behavior affects their community.

Christian Principles.

In 1821 Richard Whately reviewed *Persuasion*, Austen’s final novel, and declared, “Miss Austin [sic] has the merit of being evidently a Christian writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste, and of practical utility, by her religion being not at all obtrusive” (95). Although he is writing specifically about *Persuasion*, he is astute in his praise of Austen’s genius. He recognizes the Christian undertones of her work and proclaims that each of her novels can be read as a “dramatic sermon” (95). I agree with Whately’s designation of Austen’s writings. To him, Austen successfully conveys a primarily Christian message without forcing the issue:

. . . she probably introduced it [moral lesson] as fare [sic] as she thought would be generally acceptable and profitable: for when the purpose of inculcating a religious principle is made too palpably prominent, many readers, if they do not throw aside the book with disgust, are apt to fortify themselves with that respectful kind of apathy with which they undergo a regular sermon, and prepare themselves as they do to swallow a

dose of medicine, endeavoring to get it down in large gulps, without tasting it more than is necessary. (95)

Like Whately, I believe that Austen's principles are fundamentally Christian. As previously mentioned, many readers of Austen see her as a secular author whose writings concentrate on propriety and social decorum and not on the facets of Christian teaching. However, such a categorization is insufficient, because Austen's messages are built upon more than secular niceties. The moral strength of her characters and their abilities to change and remain steadfast through life's challenges are indicative of Christian principles. In all her novels, Austen's distinguishing factor is her protagonist's inner strength, demonstrated through major characters like Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot.

In "The Myth of Limitations," Donald Greene writes "Jane Austen is one of the great portrayers of guilt," a term he defines as ". . . redemption by remorse, self-examination, [and] the acquisition of new insight, expiation" (152). He believes Austen's focus on "guilt" is reminiscent of Richardson, and Austen's examination of "guilt" reveals the inner lives and self-reflective awareness of the self (152) learned by Marianne Dashwood after her illness. Austen's books do feature social concerns, such as marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* and the role of the individual within the community in *Emma*, but the focus of her work is not social propriety; rather it is the individual character's responses to the obstacles of life.

Austen's ability to persuade her readers is a talent recognized by Jan Fergus in her book *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel: Northanger Abby, Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice*. Fergus writes that Austen is a master of persuasion, one who ". . . manipulates readers' responses to didactic and moral ends" (6). While the term "manipulator" seems

underhanded, I agree with Fergus's acknowledgement of Austen's abilities as precise. Austen successfully conveys truth through her fiction. Her work is purposefully rhetorical, or as Plato held, a method to reach truth (Bizzell and Herzberg General Introduction 29). For Plato, rhetoric was a means ". . . to convey truth that is already in the rhetor's possession to an ignorant audience—by any effective means, so long as the virtuous rhetor keeps the audience's best interest at heart" (Bizzell and Herzberg Introduction 29). I believe Austen's novels are exercises in this Platonic principle, but the message Austen conveys is rooted in Christianity.

Platonic tradition believed that "transcendent truth" existed and that human beings can access it (Bizzell and Herzberg Introduction 81), a principle incorporated into the Christian tradition. The scripture in John 8:32 reads "[t]hen you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The correlation between freedom and truth helps to further distinguish persuasion from manipulation. Persuasion is a conviction towards knowledge and this is the goal of good rhetoric, an art of influencing the soul through words that seek to better the recipient (Bizzell and Herzberg Introduction 85). Therefore, Plato sees himself as "didactic, not manipulative" and "used his discourse to shape his audience for its own good" (Bizzell and Herzberg Introduction 81), a philosophy and practice to which Austen adheres.

The relationship between Platonic philosophy and Christianity was originally posited by St. Augustine (Wild 3). As such, many ideas of Platonic philosophy were adapted to Christianity and remain useful in discussing Christian principles. In his *Apology*, Plato quotes Socrates, saying the "unexamined life is not worth living" (Apology 38a). Even though Plato's discussion was part of the defense for Socrates and his beliefs, the sentiment of the statement is central to the message found in *Sense and Sensibility*. Examination of the interior life is the delineating element between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. In the Christian tradition, the "examined" life

is often referred to as the contemplative life. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and later Marianne cultivate an interior life, and Elinor's fortitude and Marianne's conversion are correlated to Christianity.

Elinor's inner strength sustains her when Edward's secret engagement is learned. Elinor's ". . . heart sunk, within her, and she could hardly stand; but exertion was indispensably necessary, and she struggled so resolutely . . . that her success was speedy" (SS 102). Elinor succeeds because she has developed this habit, and this trait is later learned and exhibited by Marianne. After Marianne's brush with death she resolves to change and displays this change when she refrains from asking "[a] thousand inquiries [that sprang] up from her heart. . . ." when she learned of Willoughby's visit to Elinor (SS 264). Despite both of the Dashwood sisters being "good" people, both sisters err, and subsequently seek inspiration and guidance beyond themselves and their community. In Elinor Dashwood, Austen portrays a woman who is guided by "command and reason," but Marianne is a woman who finds herself humbled by experience. The internal quest of each Dashwood sister is emblematic of Christianity in two ways. First, acknowledgment that truth or wisdom can be obtained and also by Austen's inclusion of God as a catalyst in Marianne's conversion (SS 262). Pope Benedict XVI explains, ". . . one does not pray to a god that is only pondered."

Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century Catholic monk and writer, explained that the contemplative life is "[t]he need to open up an inner freedom and vision, which is found in relatedness to something in us which we don't really know. This is not just a psychological unconscious. It is much more than that" (Merton 53). For Austen, this "something more" is silent reflection. In each of her novels, Austen's heroines seclude themselves to quietly consider life, particularly Fanny Price and Anne Elliot. Mooneyham describes this characteristic as illustrative

of “[t]he wisest of her [Austen’s] characters [in that they] are undemonstrative and silent when their souls are most deeply moved” (41).

In *Sense and Sensibility*, such behavior is alluded to through words. Elinor “wonders,” “imagines,” “listens,” and “thinks” about situations, but does not speak unless motivated by a sense of duty. Merton writes that it is difficult “. . . to make people realize that life can have an interior dimension of depth and awareness [because it] is systematically blocked by [one’s] habitual way of life, [a life solely] concentrated on externals” (Merton 52-53), a sentiment Marianne Dashwood exemplifies. Her unwillingness to control her emotions illustrates this principle: “[s]he [Marianne] was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself” (SS 63). Nevertheless, Merton believes that “[a]ll men can seek and find this intimate awareness and awakening which is a gift of love and a vivifying touch of creative and redemptive power . . .” (Merton 54). Merton believes that people can be taught to recognize their need for the contemplative life and can learn to “seek and find” it.

Conclusion.

In her writings, Austen does not moralize from the pulpit, nor does she lecture her readers; instead she offers realistic stories that emphasize human interaction. In *Sense and Sensibility*, her characters are human and each acts for his or her benefit, but through Elinor, Austen provides readers with an example of someone who strives to be better than her base feelings and, in Marianne, an example of someone who learns to control hers. This approach is characteristically Christian. Therefore, I maintain that *Sense and Sensibility* is a holistically focused sermon for daily life. It is through this novel that Austen attempts to direct a person’s “feelings” towards the good.

Even though Marilyn Butler writes that *Sense and Sensibility* is “unremittingly didactic” (Butler 182), I believe Austen softened her didacticism through her technique and relatable characters. Her stories, grounded in realism, reflect ordinary people, working through common issues, striving to be their best, which allows the reader to enter into the spirit of her sermon without resistance. She makes it possible for readers to strip away the “illusions” of eighteenth-century manners, manor houses, and gentry, and focus on fundamental human truths embedded in the stories. Austen’s sermon is simple. She advocates behavior that makes this life bearable and more pleasant to others.

Using the novel-as-genre, Austen successfully conveys her “message” in a “. . . real technical achievement . . . [in] *Sense and Sensibility*, . . . [through the] crucial process of Christian self-examination [that] is realized in literary terms” (Butler 189). Austen’s form is more appealing than dry sermon rhetoric, and arguably more successful. Its continued effectiveness cannot be denied and the breadth of her influence continues. Austen was once encouraged to alter her content and at the behest of James Stanier Clarke was “invited” to write a novel about a clergyman. She declined this offer, saying the discourse would center “. . . ‘on subjects of Science & Philosophy’ and ‘be occasionally abundant in quotations & allusions’” (Grundy 192). Austen was right in her refusal because if she would have pursued this suggestion she would have missed a significant opportunity to be influential. Her refusal not only displays exceptional wisdom but also reflects her awareness about the limiting effect a story about a clergyman would have had. Although Grundy highlights Austen’s self-deprecating remarks, I do not think that Austen believed herself incapable; rather I am of the opinion that through her own self-evaluation Austen knew she would have more success composing a sermon about people experiencing real life. Her self-awareness directed her towards a means that circumvented

traditional methods of sharing Christianity, and she produced a text that influences, directs, and encourages readers to pursue principles that lead to more full and happy lives.

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