Welcome to the Sunday Morning Book Review, Jane Austen style. I apologise—it has been a long time since I have written a book review, but I will try to do this book justice. First though, I would like to give a little overall introduction to the world of Jane Austen for everyone, especially those who are wary of it or haven’t picked it up b/c they think it might be boring, b/c I admit, I thought it was silly romance stories at first too. (And no, I haven’t watched the movie.)

As with all of Austen’s novels money, inheritance, and marriage are common themes. Jane herself never married and made her money as a writer, but after her father had died saw her wealthy brother Edward barely help out her mother. (£5 is a figure JA gives often in her letters to her sister before and after they were living at Chawton and it took him 4 years after his father’s passing to secure a house for her.) I mention this because I think that this informed Jane’s critique of the rich. When I first read Austen in high school (Pride and Prejudice) I looked at it as some stupid romance novel. I’m glad I switched schools and had to read it again. Jane not only harshly critiques society’s sexism, but also it’s classism. (Or when the two meet as in Primogeniture [7], hence marriage and money being major themes as most her heroines are ‘poor.’ None so much as Miss Smith in Emma who was born to an unwed mother and would be lucky to marry at all because of that.) She spares no one from her critical eye: the rich relatives who refuse to let a sibling or other relative marry a woman that they love because that woman is poorer then they are, the well off Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood of S&S who are greedy and defy his father’s death bed wish that John will care for them after he is gone, etc. Her most wicked and villainous characters are those that seek to become rich or those that are rich themselves and are given to selfishness, self-absorption, greed and insolence. Though much of what she writes, even of her protagonists, is steeped in satire and critique.

Though her feminism is (apparently) disputed one has to look at it from the time frame in which she was writing. Her most popular heroine, which I hope to write about soon, Elizabeth Bennet (P&P) is smart and outspoken and refuses a marriage to a silly man that will make her miserable, even though her mother tries to push her into it (he will inherit her father’s estate upon his death as there are no sons in the family.) Emma, who is very rich, tells the aforementioned Miss Smith that she doesn’t want to get married at all and that women with their own money are always
respectable. (The fact that she had such a close relationship with Miss Smith was also very uncharacteristic for a woman of her station.) Elinor, who I am about to talk about, remarks about wishing that women would be allowed to hold jobs similar to those of men. But almost all of her heroines are bright and intelligent and not at all silly. (Catherine from Northanger Abbey is a little silly, but she is a very good judge of character at the same time something that cannot be said for everyone else.) And none of her heroines marry for anything other then love, which was not the norm at the time. Anyway, on to the book?

First off to be able to fully understand the book one should know the meaning of sensibility in Jane Austen’s day which differs from general usage of the word today. From the Wiki:

Sensibility refers to an acute perception of or responsiveness toward something, such as the emotions of another. This concept emerged in eighteenth-century Britain, and was closely associated with studies of sense perception as the means through which knowledge is gathered. It also became associated with sentimental moral philosophy.

Sense is still "a conscious awareness or rationality."

Now that we have that straight I would like to continue with the review of Sense and Sensibility, Jane Austen's first published novel. As this was her first novel in many respects (she did revise P&P before it got published) so it is not as polished as her others and very much reads as a first novel. (Lady Susan doesn't read as a classic novel as it's made up of letters.) While I will give away some of the plot, I will only reveal the set up as that will give enough of an idea to the characters IMO to be able to write about them and the work. Don't want any spoilers now do we? (OK, some spoilers, but not big huge major plot point spoilers.)

Like Austen's novels S&S centers around the Miss Dashwoods, Elinor and Marianne, who are full of sense and sensibility, respectively. After the untimely death of their father their fate is left in the hands of their half-brother Mr. John Dashwood and his wife Fanny. Fanny is a fabulously wicked character (oft described as the character most loved to hate) who is able to talk John out of his death bed promise to his father of helping out his step-mother and his sisters by giving them a generous sum of 1000 pounds each (there is also a younger sister, Margaret), which they could well afford especially with the new inheritance, to an annuity to nothing at all except the furniture that was already his step-mother's in the first place (that Fanny tries to keep anyway). It's a perfect and expertly written example of how actions can be justified if people are willing (or in this case determined) to do the wrong or self serving thing. This passage illustrates their characters so perfectly, and we are justified in our condemnation of them again and again in the book, and it is all illustrated in a two page conversation between Fanny and John Dashwood. Luckily the Miss Dashwoods are offered a cottage on the estate of a cousin, Sir John Middleton, and Mrs Dashwood accepts after Elinor urges her that it is the right thing to do. (Mrs Dashwood resembles Marianne much more then Elinor and so it is up to Elinor to make all the reasonable decisions for the house, she is the backbone of the house in this respect.)

As this is an Austen novel there are, of course, love interests. While still at their family's estate the Dashwoods meet Fanny's brother Edward Ferrars with whom Elinor forms an attachment. More on this is a second. After they have moved to Barton Cottage we meet Willoughby who
becomes Marianne's love interest. The way that Jane introduces these two men is brilliant.

When we meet Edward he seems very dull indeed. Our first impressions of him are all through second hand accounts. He is never properly addressed in the book unless it is in conversation between two people. This is how we learn about him. He has no conversations that we are allowed to hear except through the bits and pieces that Elinor tells Marianne. Yet with each new meeting in the novel he opens up a little more. This not only mirrors Elinor's outward appearance of practicality and calmness, but also his quiet and reserved personality. Jane Austen describes him as someone whose manners required intimacy to make them pleasing. Just as the characters in the novel need to take some time to get to know him so do we.

Willoughby, however, makes a grand entrance, literally sweeping Marianne off her feet after she has a tumble and twists her ankle. "His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of her favourite story; and in his carrying her into the house with so little previous formality, there was a rapidity of thought which particularly recommended the action to her." Marianne is the sensible one, and how could we expect after such a perfect entrance for Elinor's love interest that Marianne's would not also mirror her wild romantic notions? And just as Marianne has misgivings about the nature of Elinor and Edward's relationship because of the reserve that both exhibit, Elinor too has misgivings about Willoughby and Marianne's immediate (after a morning's conversation) esteem and attachment to him. This is compounded by his lack of manners concerning his ridiculous reasons for not liking another member of their party, Colonel Brandon, one reason being he said it might rain when Willoughby wanted it to be nice out. (I'll take things a gentleman of society doesn't say for 400, Alex.) (Also-I had a good laugh when Marianne describes her distaste for Col. Brandon as a suitor because he's on the wrong side of 5 and 30. It's like Obamabots describing all us old lady Hillary supporters!)

While at Barton Park they are subject to Mrs. Jennings, Sir John's mother and his wife Lady Middleton, who is never happy except when spoiling her children. They also meet other relatives of Sir John's that find Elinor to be a most agreeable woman and seek her friendship, including Mrs. Palmer, who hilariously contradicts herself with every sentence, and the Miss Steele's, all of whom Elinor finds wanting in sense. Mrs. Jennings and the Middletons, while they help propel the Miss Dashwoods into society, including taking Elinor and Marianne to London, are poor companions for Elinor's rational and calm nature. Mrs. Jennings is a well meaning, but over the top woman who is always trying to play the matchmaker and figure out with whom the girls are partial to. Sir John, while doing them the great favour of offering them his cottage, demands many dinners and social engagements from them. (And this is how we meet all our various players who, as in all Austen novels, will play some role or another in the lives of our heroines and are strangely (to me, I'm sure this was normal) almost all related to each other, even if only distantly.)

Sense and Sensibility touches on many of the same themes as Pride and Prejudice, though the latter fully realises more of them. The main focus of the novel is of course that of the relationship between the two sisters and of their opposing temperaments. Though it was billed, and is still seen by some, as your run of the mill romance novel it is an obvious jab at the romance novels of the day. She shows a blatant disdain for Marianne's overly romantic temperament and wild expressions of emotion and it is clear that at the beginning of the novel she favours Elinor. To Austen the perfect temperament is a blend of both sense and sensibility. Elinor displays both with
her love of drawing and her ability to not only look after the family after her father dies, but also as she navigates through society. Within the novel we are shown that appearances may be deceiving and that expectations, especially those formed by the more romantic and emotional characters ungoverned by sense and reason are likely to lead to disappointment. These are themes that are timeless and are still applicable today (well men and women can mix as they wish and I can hold a job, etc, etc).

Marianne can be exemplified as your typical romantic teenager who is wont to express all her emotions as she feels them and holds nothing back. I have a warm place in my heart for Marianne because I understand how she doesn't feel the need to be polite or mask her contempt in some circumstances, indeed there are some people who don't warrant it at all and I'm really not one to talk about how people shouldn't do that, I do it all the time. There is a passage where Marianne expresses her belief in a first and only love, we assume that the narrator's tone of mockery reflects Jane's view of romantic love and of Marianne's gullibility. Though for all her passion she could save herself some heartbreak and trouble by showing some discretion and better judgement. (Of course these traits are not exhibited by our heroines alone.) Elinor could do with a dash of more sensibility. She keeps secrets from her family, not wanting to burden them with her personal troubles and at one point keeping a painful secret to herself for 4 months without anyone to help her through it.

The nice thing about Jane Austen's books is that the bad people always get theirs in the end. And I don't mean that the rich end up poor and the poor end up rich (though this does happen, but sometimes the good people end up poor but happy in the end-it's the happy that counts, non?). I mean that those who possess the traits of selfishness, vanity, greed, conceit, deceitfulness, or foolishness, etc, are left to their own small lives with each other or rejected by one of our heroes for marriage to a woman of a lower class because she contains admirable qualities that the first woman does not. Men who marry a woman based only on the fact that she is pretty or people who marry out of necessity or because of money often times find that they are trapped in a miserable marriage to a foolish or stupid person. As I said at the beginning all of Jane's heroines marry for love and end up happy.

I know I'm missing a bunch of stuff, I totally forgot about this until today, but I hope that this will spark some interest and I'm always much better in a discussion. If you're not sold yet did I mention that she made dead baby and dead lady jokes?

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