

Regency Fiction

Mrs Dashwood and her three daughters – Elinor, Marianne and Margaret – were forced to move after Mr Dashwood died. Now living in Devonshire, Marianne meets the handsome and well-educated John Willoughby when she sprains her ankle on a rainy day. Although they have begun their courtship, Willoughby is suddenly sent to London by his aunt.

Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. She would have been ashamed to look her family in the face the next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it. But the feelings which made such composure a disgrace, left her in no danger of incurring it. She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it. She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough!

When breakfast was over she walked out by herself, and wandered about the village of Allenham, indulging the recollection of past enjoyment and crying over the present reverse for the chief of the morning.

The evening passed off in the equal indulgence of feeling. She played over every favourite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby, every air in which their voices had been oftenest joined, and sat at the instrument gazing on every line of music that he had written out for her, till her heart was so heavy that no farther sadness could be gained; and this nourishment of grief was every day applied. She spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by her tears. In books too, as well as in music, she courted the misery which a contrast between the past and present was certain of giving. She read nothing but what they had been used to read together.

Such violence of affliction indeed could not be supported for ever; it sunk within a few days into a calmer melancholy; but these employments, to which she daily recurred, her solitary walks and silent meditations, still produced occasional effusions of sorrow as lively as ever.

No letter from Willoughby came; and none seemed expected by Marianne. Her mother was surprised, and Elinor again became uneasy. But Mrs. Dashwood could find explanations whenever she wanted them, which at least satisfied herself.

‘Remember, Elinor,’ said she, ‘how very often Sir John¹ fetches our letters himself from the post, and carries them to it. We have already agreed that secrecy may be necessary, and we must acknowledge that it could not be maintained if their correspondence were to pass through Sir John’s hands.’

Elinor could not deny the truth of this, and she tried to find in it a motive sufficient for their silence. But there was one method so direct, so simple, and in her opinion so eligible of knowing the real state of the affair, and of instantly removing all mystery, that she could not help suggesting it to her mother.

‘Why do you not ask Marianne at once,’ said she, ‘whether she is or she is not engaged to Willoughby? From you, her mother, and so kind, so indulgent a mother, the question could not give offence. It would be the natural result of your affection for her. She used to be all unreserve, and to you more especially.’

‘I would not ask such a question for the world. Supposing it possible that they are not engaged, what distress would not such an enquiry inflict! At any rate it would be most ungenerous. I should never deserve her confidence again, after forcing from her a confession of what is meant at present to be unacknowledged

¹ **Sir John:** Sir John Middleton, Mrs Dashwood’s cousin, who lives nearby.

35 to any one. I know Marianne's heart: I know that she dearly loves me, and that I shall not be the last to whom the affair is made known, when circumstances make the revealment of it eligible. I would not attempt to force the confidence of any one; of a child much less; because a sense of duty would prevent the denial which her wishes might direct.'

40 Elinor thought this generosity overstrained, considering her sister's youth, and urged the matter farther, but in vain; common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood's romantic delicacy.

It was several days before Willoughby's name was mentioned before Marianne by any of her family; Sir John and Mrs. Jennings, indeed, were not so nice; their witticisms added pain to many a painful hour;—but one evening, Mrs. Dashwood, accidentally taking up a volume of Shakespeare, exclaimed,

45 'We have never finished *Hamlet*, Marianne; our dear Willoughby went away before we could get through it. We will put it by, that when he comes again... But it may be months, perhaps, before *that* happens.'

'Months!' cried Marianne, with strong surprise. 'No—nor many weeks.'

Mrs. Dashwood was sorry for what she had said; but it gave Elinor pleasure, as it produced a reply from Marianne so expressive of confidence in Willoughby and knowledge of his intentions.

Jane AUSTEN, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)

Suggested Outline

1. “The Sorrows of Young Marianne”: The Exploration of Hyperbolic Grief

A. Courting Misery

Pathetic description of Marianne’s sorrows = Austenian reappropriation of a literary *topos*, “melancholy” (l. 18); specific treatment here: Marianne seeks the most intense experience of pain (“courted the misery...”, l. 15 or “nourishment of grief”, l. 13, as substitute for the food she cannot eat because she is lovesick and heartbroken); hyperbolic description of her condition: “such violence of affliction” (l. 17), or polyptoton: “added pain to many a painful hour” (l. 43) that gives an almost pleonastic quality to the accumulation of pain.

Two interwoven climactic gradations underlie the description of Marianne’s sadness, with textual echoes:

- paragraph 1: “feelings”, l. 3 < “wept”, l. 4 & “crying”, l. 9 < description of sadness as disease, l. 5-6 < exclamatory sentence, l.7
- paragraphs 2-3: “crying”, l. 9 & 14 < “indulgence of feeling”, l. 10 < “till her heart was so heavy that no farther sadness could be gained” (l. 12-13) with emphatic structure, belied by rest of description < “grief”, l. 13 < “misery”, l. 15

Description of Marianne’s pain as unending vortex of sadness ⇒ reaching the apex of emotional suffering

B. Sentimental Tears

Only thing Marianne is still able to do: “wept” (l. 4), “crying” (l. 9 & 14). Marianne could thus be seen as the embodiment of sensibility, as evidenced by the use of the exclamatory sentence, which might be construed as a narratorial comment on Marianne’s tendency to passionate emotion: “Her sensibility was potent enough!” (l. 7). Contrary to title, no balance between reason (= sense) and sentimentality (= sensibility). ⇒ influence of 18th-century sentimental novels and their emphasis on tears (cf. the 18th century being described as the “century of tears”)

Focus on Marianne’s pain and sorrow after Willoughby’s sudden departure for London, made possible by the use of internal focalization by the omniscient narrator; e.g. Marianne’s sorrow is metaphorically described as a disease: “She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment” (l. 5) → use of adjectives with the privative prefix <un-> to convey the loss of control over her body and the physical consequences of her emotional pain. Extended metaphor, with contamination of the other family members (“giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters”, l. 6), which leads to their own inaction (negative forms in the dialogue: e.g., “I would not ask such a question for the world”, l. 32) ⇒ Marianne’s pain paralyzes the whole household.

Transition: “her voice often totally suspended by her tears” (l. 14) shows that this hyperbolic exploration of grief entails an impression of stasis and inaction.

2. “Waiting for Willoughby”: Delaying the Action through Spatial and Temporal Displacement

A. Stasis and Inaction

Violence of Marianne’s feelings corresponds, in the temporal sphere, to a stretching of time: e.g. use of superlative expressions (“the greatest part of it”, l. 5 or “for the chief of the morning”, l. 9); and growing duration of her actions, underlined by the use of –ING forms (“giving” and “forbidding”, l. 6; “indulging” and “crying”, l. 8-9; “singing and crying”, l. 14; nb. also idea of repetition). Impression reinforced framing of text by references to Willoughby’s departure (l. 1-2) and expected return (l. 45 ff.): no diegetic progression in the passage. ⇒ Marianne exploring her grief = passing time while she waits for Willoughby’s return // reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (l. 45), as the eponymous character is famous for his tendency to delay action.

Initial singulative narrative marked by the passing of time, expressed through time indicators (“first night”, l. 1; “when breakfast was over”, l. 8; “the evening”, l. 10; etc.), becomes iterative (cf. turning point in line 13: “this nourishment of grief was every day applied”, l. 13). Repetition of the quantifier “every” (l. 6 & ll. 10-13) to emphasize repetition of action and sense of iteration. ⇒ As if this period in Marianne’s life had been removed from the natural course of time (= structurally, from the progression of the narrative as well).

B. Past and Present

Removal from the temporal frame of the narrative // self-exclusion from the spatial centre of the family (Barton Cottage, their house in Devonshire and the setting for most of the action), with e.g. “wandered about in the village of Allenham” (l. 8), with the phrasal verb underlining the idea of aimlessness, of loss of bearings. Completely removed from family life, as borne out by her not taking part in the conversation between Mrs Dashwood and Elinor: object of their conversation, e.g. deprived of her individual voice by her mother: “I know Marianne’s heart: I know that she dearly loves me”, l. 35 where Marianne’s wishes are filtered through Mrs Dashwood’s own perceptions, since she is the grammatical subject of both sentences. Contrasts with her being presented as linked to Willoughby, even though he’s absent, with e.g., chiasmic structure with central reference to their union: “she had been used to play to Willoughby, every air in which **their** voices had been oftenest **joined**, . . . every line of music that he had written out for her” (l. 10-12).

Focus on absent lover rather than presence of family causes more pain: “her solitary walks and silent meditations . . . still produced occasional effusions of sorrow as lively as ever” (l. 18-19), where the comparative of equality shows that this spatial displacement reactivates pains because it allows her to reiterate her exploration of the gap between the past and the present (e.g., “past enjoyments” vs “present reverse”, l. 9 and “a contrast between the past and present”, l. 15). Even when she is actually there, cultivates this spatiotemporal removal through her activities: e.g., modal expression USED TO (l. 11 and 16; also noticed by Elinor with the use of same modal expression in l. 31) or use of past perfect (l. 11-13 and l. 16), which both convey the idea of a break between past and present = spatial displacement and effacement result in Marianne’s inhabiting the past to reactivate her pain in the present. ⇒ Caught in the constant repetition of the past to nourish her grief (l. 13) and eschew action as she waits for Willoughby’s return.

Transition: Confrontation of Mrs Dashwood’s and Marianne’s contrasted conceptions of time (l. 45 & l. 46) ⇒ imposition by Mrs Dashwood of what is proper and decorous when it comes to matters of the heart.

3. “The Way of Mrs Dashwood’s World”: The Ironic Dramatization of Manners

A. Keeping Up Appearances

From the start, importance of not losing face (cf. “inexcusable”, l.1; “ashamed”, l. 2), with the two conditional sentences marked by the delayed use of hypothetical inversions (“had she been...”, l.1 and “had she not risen...”, l. 2-3). ⇒ Need for her behaviour to correspond to social conventions, which her mother embodies (< *Sense and Sensibility* as novel of manners); Mrs Dashwood describes it as “a sense of duty” (l. 37), of which she might well be the source (cf. assertive use of the modal SHALL in l. 35, which betrays her confidence in her influence on her daughter).

In the dialogue with Elinor, Mrs Dashwood is the voice of propriety: e.g., subtle yet forceful imposition of the need for “secrecy” (l. 24) through understated expression of her opinion (cf. use of modals MAY and MUST as a way to feign logical deduction in l. 24-25). Imposes her views despite Elinor’s eagerness to know the truth, with obvious response to the situation (cf. emphatic ternary rhythm in l. 27: “one method so direct, so simple, and in her opinion so eligible...” to mimic the evidence of truth, with impossibility to contain herself: “she could not help suggesting it”, l. 28). Places herself in position of moral superiority, with e.g. the use of the modal SHOULD: “I should never deserve...” (l. 33), even though she ultimately fails to understand the situation (e.g. her surprise in l. 20 or her feeling “sorry” because of her faux pas while she should be happy, like Elinor, that Marianne believes her pain is about to end).

B. The Narrator as Ironist

Her lack of understanding of the situation because she focuses on social norms is underlined by the narrator’s subtle irony (e.g., “But Mrs Dashwood . . . at least satisfied herself”, l. 21-22 pointing implicitly to the absurdity of some of her explanations and poking fun at her), which turns the novel of manner into a comedy of manners of sorts; cf. possibly comic gestures (e.g., “accidentally”, l. 44) or the discrepancy between Mrs Dashwood’s assimilation of Marianne’s pain and the reaction of their acquaintances (l. 42-43, with possible use of free indirect speech with the unusual diction, use of the modalizing adverb “indeed” and brief adoption of an almost informal style: “were not so nice” = could be Mrs Dashwood’s voice).

Elinor is central to the subtly comic condemnation of Mrs Dashwood’s behaviour, through sharp contrast between the two characters in the dialogue: e.g. opposition between “it would be most ungenerous”, l. 33 and “Elinor thought this generosity overstrained”, l. 39, with zero focalization allowing the narrator to pinpoint the gap between Elinor’s trying to coax her mother into asking Marianne about Willoughby (“so kind, so indulgent a mother”, l.30) and her inner disapproval of her mother theatrics (cf. Mrs Dashwood’s answer to Elinor’s question, ll. 32-39, framed by the same two grammatical structures, “I would not...”, l. 32 & 36 and the almost overstated reference to violence, with polyptoton on “force”, l. 34 & 36). Narrator’s irony seeps into Elinor’s words, with ambiguity of phrases such as “so indulgent a mother” (possible denunciation of Mrs Dashwood’s absorption of Marianne’s pain with the textual echo between “indulging”, l. 8 and “indulgence of feeling”, l.10) and the ambiguity of the phrase “all unreserve” (l. 32): might well apply to the exaggerated reaction of both Marianne and Mrs Dashwood, and not solely to Marianne’s former openness). ⇒ Dramatic quality to the extract, with subtly comic condemnation of Mrs Dashwood as counterpoint to pathetic description of Marianne’s grief