Reading People in *Sense and Sensibility* and in Life

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Trenton Olsen gave the following address at the University's Big Read Chat on March 16th, 2017.

It's a pleasure to share some thoughts with you at the concluding event for BYU-Idaho's first ever "Big Read" on Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. The Big Read is a chance for students, faculty, and staff to spend a year reading a great work of literature together as a university community, and I look forward to sharing many more books together over the coming years. I would like to speak today about how characters in *Sense and Sensibility* read and often misread one another, even as we interpret and sometimes misinterpret them. We'll also reflect on how this novel and others like it can help us in our efforts to understand one another in the real world.

Just when the Dashwood family expects John Willoughby to formalize his relationship with Marianne Dashwood and announce an engagement in Chapter 15, he leaves Devonshire with virtually no warning or explanation. Marianne, of course, is devastated. Her sister Elinor is troubled by Willoughby's backwardness, "so unlike a lover [and] so unlike himself," and immediately begins trying to interpret his behavior. Perhaps, she fears, "no serious design had ever been formed on his side" regarding Marianne. Maybe, she muses, "some unfortunate quarrel had taken place" to separate them. Whatever the reason for his sudden departure, Elinor is sure that "something more than what he owned to us must have happened." Whereas Elinor views Willoughby's behavior with suspicion, her mother, Mrs. Dashwood, declares, "I have explained it to myself in the most satisfactory way." She concludes that Willoughby's benefactor, Mrs. Smith, has discovered his connection with Marianne and called him away in order to separate them, and she attributes Willoughby's lack of explanation to his consideration for Marianne's feelings. What follows is an interpretive debate between Elinor and her mother not just about Willoughby's actions and intentions, but about how to read human behavior and character in general. They argue about standards of evidence, verbal and nonverbal communication, probability and certainty, tangible proof and the benefit of the doubt, and text and subtext. In this scene and throughout the novel, Austen's characters read one another even as we interpret them.

Austen's characters very often misread one another. Few suspect Willoughby's selfishness and deceptiveness because of his good looks, charisma, "lively spirits, and open, affectionate manners" (Ch. 10). Marianne concludes from Colonel Brandon's age and reserved manner that "his feelings have no ardor," and dismisses the possibility of a relationship with him as "ridiculous." In reality, however, Brandon has nursed a broken heart for twenty years, and is every bit as romantic as she is. Marianne also interprets Elinor's calm demeanor as a sign of emotional dullness and apathy rather than discipline and consideration for others.

Austen's characters are not the only ones who commit such misinterpretations—we may well make similar mistakes as readers. Take Edward Ferrars: I confess that for much of the novel, I find myself wondering what precisely Elinor sees in this character. Austen generally portrays Edward as morose, despondent, and hopelessly awkward—and not, by the way, in that charming Hugh Grant kind of awkwardness of the film adaptation.

Elinor, however, interprets Edward correctly. His manners "required intimacy to make them pleasing," and Elinor has experienced more intimate exposure to Edward's character than we have (Ch. 3). She rightly reads his good heart and high character long before we see him demonstrate these traits in his willingness to honor a commitment to Lucy Steele notwithstanding his resulting financial disinheritance and sacrificed feelings for Elinor.

Austen's novel emphasizes how easy it is to misinterpret others, even those closest to us. Of course, we do this all the time, and occasionally describe certain people as being "hard to read." So why is it so easy to misinterpret others? Austen portrays two common human tendencies in *Sense and Sensibility* that make reading people so difficult. The first obstacle to accurate interpretation is a form of wishful thinking that confuses our internal desires with external realities. Elinor is reluctant to share her growing affection for Edward with her family because "she knew that what Marianne and her mother conjectured one moment, they believed the next—that to them, to wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect" (Ch. 4). Marianne and her mother make interpretive decisions based on desired outcomes. In other words, they believe what they want to believe. Psychologists call this confirmation bias: the tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs. We naturally seek to confirm what we already think and dismiss or avoid alternative possibilities. This can make us overconfident in our own beliefs and leads us to entrench our positions when confronted with contrary evidence.[1] All of us have confirmation bias, and Austen's characters exhibit this mental tendency repeatedly in the novel. Elinor, whom most readers interpret as an embodiment of rational logic—the "sense" in *Sense and Sensibility*—is not exempt from this pattern of thinking. When Edward exhibits "uncertain behavior" nearly as puzzling as Willoughby's, she is "well disposed to regard his actions with all the candid allowances and generous qualifications which had been rather more painfully extorted from her, for Willoughby's service, by her mother" (Ch. 19).

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Perhaps even more limiting in our efforts to read other people is the second obstacle: egocentric or self-centered thinking. "The injustice to which [Marianne] was often led in her opinion of others" results from this thought pattern: "She expected from other people the same opinions and feelings as her own, and she judged of their motives by the immediate effect of their actions on herself" (Ch. 31). To interpret others from the perspective of our own interests, ideas, or experience is to attempt squinting at them through a blind spot. Jesus asked, "why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" and taught that we must first remove our own beam before we can hope to see our brother clearly, much less assist in the delicate procedure of mote removal (Luke 6:41). The great Victorian novelist Marian Evans—better known by her pen name George Eliot—was both a student and a champion of Jane Austen's work. She drew on Christ's metaphor of motes and beams in the eye to make a similar point: "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self" (*Middlemarch,* Ch. 42). When we view others only through the lens of our own vantage point, we "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). In reality, the limitations of our own perspective make it very difficult—if not impossible—to read other people accurately enough to understand their motives, thought processes, emotions, and behaviors.

The crucial first step to moving beyond this stumbling block is recognizing it. The characters in *Sense and Sensibility* who are most adept at reading other people are also most aware of their interpretive failings. Elinor acknowledges, "I have frequently detected myself in such kind of mistakes… in a total misapprehension of character in some point or other: fancying people so much more gay or grave, or ingenious or stupid than they really are, and I can hardly tell why or in what the deception originated" (Ch. 17). Col. Brandon similarly recognizes the limitations

of his own judgements, reflecting, "where the mind is perhaps rather unwilling to be convinced, it will always find something to support its doubts" and "where so many hours have been spent in convincing myself that I am right, is there not some reason to fear I may be wrong?" (Ch. 27).

Reading other people, however, takes more than recognizing the limits of our own perspectives; it requires moving beyond them through empathy, which Austen and her contemporaries called sympathy. It's hard to recognize our blind spots when we're only using the lens of our own perspective. Marianne's character development centers on shifting away from this self-centered point of view. From Marianne's vantage point, Elinor's behavior "so exactly the reverse of her own appeared no more meritorious… than her own had seemed faulty to her" (Ch. 19). Marianne's most significant growth comes when she learns not only that Lucy has been secretly engaged to Edward, but also that Elinor has been silently suffering under this knowledge for months. Marianne comes to understand the depth of Elinor's pain, which she had falsely supposed to be insignificant, and resolves to be more thoughtful of others. The moment when Marianne considers the events of the past four months from Elinor's perspective rather than her own is the key turning point in her development. Empathy, as Austen understood it, requires intellectually and imaginatively putting yourself in someone else's position and endeavoring to consider a given situation from their point of view.

Exercising empathy is easier said than done. How do we develop this capacity? Let me share with you one exciting and demonstrably effective way. A recent study published in the journal *Science* found that people performed better on tests measuring empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence after reading literary fiction.[2] These are the skills necessary to read someone's body language or interpret what they might be thinking. This study designed and executed five different experiments and found that reading literary fiction had a direct and quantifiable effect on empathy. Even those subjects who did not particularly enjoy literary fiction gained the same benefit by reading. Here's an especially interesting and important part of the study: reading *literary fiction,* as opposed to popular fiction or scholarly non-fiction, increased empathy. Literary fiction is more ambiguous and leaves more to the imagination. It encourages readers to actively make inferences about complex characters and to be sensitive to emotional nuance. When we say literary fiction, we're talking about serious, demanding, and complex novels: classics by writers like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, or great contemporary novelists like Anthony Doerr or Marilynne Robinson. Interestingly, those in the study who read popular fiction made as many mistakes on the empathy tests as people who read nothing.

Before discussing a few recent popular novels widely read by students, let me clarify that there is beautiful and complex literature in many different genres. A label like "young adult" may tell us something about a particular book, but this is more of a marketing term for publishers than a definitive description for readers. Uncritically dismissing entire genres out of hand would be inconsistent with the kind of critical thinking we try to practice and encourage.

While visiting the British Library as a graduate student, I saw Jane Austen's portable writing desk—the 18th century equivalent of a laptop. Seeing the desk and thinking about what Austen wrote there was impressive. A teenage girl stood next to me, and I looked over to see her reaction to the display. I saw that she wasn't looking at Austen's desk at all, but was fixated on the adjacent exhibit featuring J.K. Rowling's handwritten manuscript of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.* She was in tears. Though I was moved to see that a book meant this much to such a young reader, I couldn't help but think that it would be a tremendous loss if she never moved beyond books like *Harry Potter* to works like *Sense and Sensibility.* Before proceeding any further with this comparison, let me say that I have read and own all seven Harry Potter books, which I look forward to sharing with my children. Please rest assured that I am not a Harry Potter hater, nor am I a supporter of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

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That said, let's consider *Harry Potter* for a moment along with other popular young adult fantasy series: *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent.* All of these books share a common premise regarding their central characters. In effect, the protagonists of these novels all say the same thing: *To the common observer, I may seem like just an ordinary, nondescript teenager, but in actual fact I am the most important person on the planet. As my story makes clear, the world I inhabit revolves around and depends upon me.* While self-centeredness is not an exclusively adolescent problem, the self-centered teenager whose sense of empathy is still developing may read such a story and think, *Hey, me too! Finally a character to whom I can relate!* Remember, at the opening of *Sense and Sensibility,* Marianne Dashwood is only 16, and her mindset is not far from this. Over the course of the novel, however, she grows out of it, and comes to view Elinor and other characters more empathetically. Moving beyond an egocentric outlook also helps Marianne combat confirmation bias and change some of her ideas. While Marianne reflects in the first volume, "At my time of life opinions are tolerably fixed. It is not likely that I should now see or hear anything to change them," she thankfully leaves this adolescent inflexibility behind (Ch. 27). As Austen writes in the novel's conclusion: "Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract… her most favourite maxims" (Ch. 50). Trying on other points of view helps Marianne refine her own.

Contrast the egocentric narrative of young adult novels like *The Hunger Games* with *Middlemarch* by Jane Austen's literary descendant George Eliot. Eliot's protagonist, Dorothea Brooke, is smart, idealistic, and deeply principled. She's also young, attractive, and interesting. As readers, we definitely root for her. Dorothea marries Edward Casaubon, a failed and aging scholar who is selfish, thin-skinned, pedantic, and sometimes cruel. Compared to Dorothea, Casaubon is unattractive and profoundly unlikable. Dorothea begins to realize the mistake of her marriage on a trip to Rome that I might describe as the worst honeymoon in all of English literature, were it not for Thomas Hardy. Here are a few lines from *Middlemarch* about Dorothea following that experience:

> One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—*but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?* I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr. Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us. (Ch. 29, my emphasis)

A long passage follows that takes us deep into Casaubon's inner life, and we come to understand his motives, thoughts, and feelings. Eliot stops herself mid-sentence and forces us to consider the emotions and experience of this unappealing person just when we're least disposed to care. She keeps us from giving our empathy exclusively to the protagonist as if hers is the only perspective that matters. We begin to wonder whether Dorothea is the main character at all.

Reading great literature gives us this experience. The best literature asks us, "why always [you? Is your] point of view the only possible one?" It forces us to mentally move out of our own perspective and inhabit the lives and minds of others, taking on the point of view of people who may seem radically different from us. It can be all too easy to go through our lives as if we were the protagonist of a novel and those around us inconsequential minor characters. Reading great literature helps us to resist that. It reminds us that people who may be on the outskirts of our lives are not minor but main characters who are just as central, weighted, and significant in their own mental and emotional lives as we are in ours. Reading literature like *Sense and Sensibility* enhances our empathy, which is both prerequisite and essential to that "greatest" love, which is both a gift of the Spirit and an exercise of the mind (1 Cor. 13:13).

References

1. The Oxford Handbook of Social Cognition. Ed. Donal E. Carlston. Oxon: Oxford UP, 2013. 388-389.

2. Kidd, David Comer and Emanuele Castano. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind." *Science*, 18 Oct. 2013. 6156. 377-380.