

from "Ideological Contradictions and the Consolations of Form: The Case of Jane Austen" [from *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*]

[This essay is drawn from Mary Poovey's influential book *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (1984), which analyzes these three writers' self-expression within a bourgeois patriarchal culture that valued modest, self-denying "proper ladies." In the following excerpt from her chapter on Austen, Poovey focuses on *Sense and Sensibility* and its dramatized conflict between the "potentially anarchic power of feeling" and the restraining influences of propriety, rectitude, and "sense." Poovey argues that Austen uses various techniques of narration that, while allowing feminine passion a presence in the novel, keep its dangerous potentialities contained.]

In *Sense and Sensibility* ... the most fundamental conflict is between Austen's own imaginative engagement with her self-assertive characters and the moral code necessary to control their anarchic desires.

In the greater part of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen's aesthetic strategies endorse the traditional values associated with her "sensible" heroine, Elinor Dashwood. One of these strategies consists in measuring all of the characters (including Elinor) against an implicit, but presumably authoritative, moral norm. As early as the second chapter, in that free, indirect discourse that is the hallmark of her mature style, Austen shadows the opinion of a single fallible character with this implicit moral standard.¹ Irony in *Sense and Sensibility* arises for the most part from the novel's action; the dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood points up as surely as any overt narrative commentary the parsimony behind their dwindling good will. But our response to this dialogue is initially shaped by such sentences as the following: "To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy, would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree"; "How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum?"² The hyperbole expressed in the

1 For a discussion of Austen's "free, indirect speech," see Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1972), pp. 123 ff.

[Footnotes have been modified to include full references for the material reproduced here.]

2 *Sense and Sensibility*, in *The Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 1:8.

words “impoverishing,” “dreadful,” and “rob” conveys both the strategy of Mrs. Dashwood’s rhetoric and its absurdity, and the repeated use of the word “child” suggests how effective she is in manipulating John Dashwood’s generosity. Because these sentences belong to the narrative and not to direct dialogue, they mimetically convey the tone of the conversation and simultaneously judge it by reference to an implicit system of more humane values—the undeniably Christian values that one should love one’s neighbor as one’s self and that the man who hoards treasures in this world (or the woman who encourages him to do so) will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

But despite this ground of Christian principles, nearly everything in the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* undermines the complacent assumption that they are principles generally held or practically effective. Almost every action in the novel suggests that, more often than not, individual will triumphs over principle and individual desire proves more compelling than moral law. Even the narrator, the apparent voice of these absolute values, reveals that moral principles are qualified in practice. The narrator’s prefatory evaluation of John Dashwood, for example—“he was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed” (p. 5)—directs our attention most specifically to the way in which what should, in theory, be moral absolutes can, and in practice do, shade off into infinite gradations and convenient exceptions. Is it always morally wrong to be “rather” selfish, especially in a society in which such selfishness is the necessary basis for material prosperity? What efficacy will moral absolutes have in such a society? How could Elinor’s patient, principled fidelity win the passive, principled Edward if it were not, finally, for Lucy Steele’s avarice?

A second strategy that is apparently designed to forestall such questions by aligning the reader’s sympathies with Elinor’s “sense” involves the juxtaposition of Elinor and her sister Marianne at nearly every critical juncture in the novel. Consistently, Elinor makes the prudent choice, even when doing so is painful; almost as consistently, Marianne’s decisions are self-indulgent and harmful, either to herself or to someone else. But this neat design is less stable than an absolute and authoritative moral system would seem to require. Many readers have found Marianne’s “spirit” more appealing than Elinor’s cautious, prim, and even repressive reserve, and they have found Marianne’s passionate romance with Willoughby more attractive than the prolonged frustration to which Elinor submits. That such preferences may be in keeping with at least one countercurrent of the novel is suggested by the fact that whenever Austen herself explicitly compares the two putative heroes—Colonel Brandon and

Edward Ferrars—with the less moral, more passionate Willoughby, it is Willoughby who is appealing. On two occasions when Willoughby is expected but one of the more subdued lovers appears instead, the disappointment is unmistakable; and when the reverse situation occurs, in the climactic final encounter between Elinor and Willoughby, Elinor is aroused to a pitch of complex emotion we never see Edward inspire in anyone. Moreover, Willoughby repeatedly bursts into the narrative with “manly beauty and more than common gracefulness,” but Edward and Brandon seem inert fixtures of the plot, incapable of energetic gallantry and attractive only to the most generous observer. The initial description of each of them is dominated by negative constructions and qualifying phrases, and even Elinor cannot unreservedly praise the man she wants to marry. “At first sight,” she admits, “his address is certainly not striking; and his person can hardly be called handsome, till the expression of his eyes, which are uncommonly good, and the general sweetness of his countenance, is perceived. At present, I know him so well, that I think him really handsome; or, at least, almost so” (p. 20). Colonel Brandon, “neither very young nor very gay,” is “silent and grave” much of the time (p. 34), and his “oppression of spirits,” like Edward’s chronic depression, can scarcely compete with Willoughby’s charm.

The most telling dramatization of the contest between the potentially anarchic power of feeling and the restraint that moral principles require takes the form of a conflict within Elinor herself. This scene, in the final volume, owes much to conventional eighteenth-century didactic novels, but Austen’s placing it at a moment when the generally self-disciplined Elinor is unusually susceptible to emotion gives it a particularly complicated effect. Colonel Brandon has presented a living to Edward Ferrars, and Elinor is finally, but sadly, reconciled to the fact that her lover will marry someone else. In the midst of this personal disappointment, she is also particularly sensitive to her sister’s condition, for Marianne, whose own romantic disappointment had sent her into a dangerous decline, has just been declared out of danger. Elinor’s “fervent gratitude” for this news is especially great because of the joy and relief it will bring to her mother, whose arrival is expected at any moment. It is this hectic peace—as Marianne sleeps quietly upstairs and a violent storm assaults the house—that Willoughby invades when he melodramatically steps into the drawing-room.

Elinor’s first response is “horror” at his audacious intrusion; but before she can leave the room, Willoughby appeals to something even more powerful than Elinor’s “honour”: her curiosity. Elinor is momentarily captivated by Willoughby’s “serious energy”

and “warmth,” and she listens “in spite of herself” to the story he unfolds—the chronicle of his passions, both honorable and base. At the end of his dramatic recital, Willoughby asks Elinor for pity, and, even though she feels it is her “duty” to check his outburst, she cannot repress her “compassionate emotion.” It is this emotion that governs her judgment of Willoughby—a judgment that verges disconcertingly on rationalization:

Elinor made no answer. Her thoughts were silently fixed on the irreparable injury which too early an independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury, had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally open and honest, and a feeling, affectionate temper. The world had made him extravagant and vain—Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish. [P. 331]

When Willoughby departs he leaves Elinor in an even greater “agitation” of spirits, “too much oppressed by a croud of ideas ... to think even of her sister.”

Willoughby, in spite of all his faults, excited a degree of commiseration for the sufferings produced by them, which made her think of him as now separated for ever from her family with a tenderness, a regret, rather in proportion, as she soon acknowledged within herself—to his wishes than to his merits. She felt that his influence over her mind was heightened by circumstances which ought not in reason to have weight; by that person of uncommon attraction, that open, affectionate, and lively manner which it was no merit to possess; and by that still ardent love for Marianne, which it was not even innocent to indulge. But she felt that it was so, long, long before she could feel his influence less. [P. 333]

One purpose of this episode is clearly to dramatize the odds against which Elinor’s “sense,” or reason, ultimately triumphs and therefore to increase, not undermine, our admiration for that faculty. But a second effect of the passage is to subject the reader to the same temptation that assails Elinor. Because the presentation is dramatic—and because, for a moment at least, the character whose judgment has thus far directed our own hesitates in her moral evaluation, the reader is invited to judge Willoughby not by reference to an objective standard but by *his* immediate appeal to our imaginative,

sympathetic engagement. As Elinor temporizes, the moral principle for which she otherwise speaks seems dangerously susceptible to circumstances, to the appeal of “lively manners,” and to the special pleading of aroused female emotion.

Jane Austen seems anxious to control the moral anarchy that strong appeals to feeling can unleash; yet, significantly, she does not exclude passion from the novel, nor does she so completely qualify it as to undermine its power. Instead, Austen attempts to bend the imaginative engagement it elicits in the reader to the service of moral education. To do so, she restricts the reader’s access to the romantic plot by conveying its details and its emotional affect only through indirect narration. At the beginning of the novel, for example, the incident in which Willoughby rescues Marianne is summarized by the dispassionate narrative persona, who supplies sentimental clichés but *not* Marianne’s response to her rescue: “The gentleman offered *his* services, and perceiving that her modesty declined what her situation rendered necessary, took her up in his arms without farther delay” (p. 42). Similarly, the episode in which Willoughby cuts and kisses a lock of Marianne’s hair is given to Margaret to relate (p. 60), and the emotional specifics of Willoughby’s farewell at Barton Cottage can be deduced only from their aftermath (p. 82). Most of Marianne’s outbursts of passion to Willoughby are confined to letters, which are concealed from the reader until after Willoughby has snubbed Marianne. In fact, the only emotionally charged encounter between the lovers that Austen presents dramatically is their final meeting at the London ball, and there Marianne’s passion is transmuted by Willoughby’s silence into the terrible muffled scream that both voices and symbolizes her thwarted love. So careful is Austen to keep the reader on the outside of such “dangerous” material that she embeds the most passionate episodes within other, less emotionally volatile stories. Thus the story of the two Elizas—related, as we will see, by a character whose relationship to the tale immediately activates our judgment—is contained within the story of Marianne’s passion for Willoughby—a relationship whose emotional content is conveyed to the reader more by innuendo, summary, and indirection than by dramatic presentation. And this second story, in turn, is contained within the story of the relationship that opens and closes the novel—Elinor’s considerably less demonstrative affection for Edward. By embedding these stories in this way, Austen seeks to defuse their imaginative affect and increase their power to educate the reader: from the fates of the two Elizas we learn to be wary of Marianne’s quick feelings, and from the consequences of Marianne’s self-indulgent passion we learn to value Elinor’s reserve.

Instead of being allowed to identify with Marianne, then, for most of the novel we are restricted to Elinor's emotional struggles. This enables Austen to dramatize the complexities of what might otherwise seem an unattractive and unyielding obsession with propriety; it also permits her to filter the two stories of illicit passion through a character whose judgment generally masters emotion. That the passion bleeds from the narrators of these two tales into Elinor's "sense" attests to the power of this force and to the dangerous susceptibility that, without proper control, might undermine the judgment of even the most rational reader.

Austen also attempts to control the allure of Marianne's romantic desires by refusing to consider seriously either their social origin or their philosophical implications. As Tony Tanner has pointed out, Austen really avoids the systematic examination of "sensibility" that the novel seems to promise.¹ The novel begins like a novel of social realism. In the first paragraphs the narrator sounds like a lawyer or a banker; family alliances, the estate that is the heart of paternalistic society, even the deaths of loved ones, are all ruthlessly subordinated to the economic facts. Given this introduction, the reader has every reason to believe that the most important fact—that Mrs. Dashwood will have only five hundred pounds a year with which to raise and dower her daughters—will govern the futures of Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret. And given this probable development, the reader can understand why romantic fantasies are appealing. It is no wonder that Marianne—facing a life of poverty, the spiritual banality of relatives like the John Dashwoods, and the superficial urbanities of a neighborhood composed only of the Middletons and Mrs. Jennings—turns to Cowper for imaginative compensation; nor is it surprising that she fancies (in accordance with the promises of romantic novels) that her beauty will win the heart and hand of an errant knight. Beneath Marianne's effusions on nature and her passionate yearning for a hero lies the same "hunger of imagination" that Mary Wollstonecraft tried and failed to analyze in *Maria*. But to take Marianne's passions and longings seriously on their own terms would be to call into question the basis of Christian moral authority, the social order that ideally institutionalizes that authority, and, finally, the capacity of orthodox religion or society to gratify imaginative desires.² Elinor's sense, despite its admirable capacity to discipline and protect the self, cannot begin to satisfy this appetite, and no other social institution in the novel does any better. Instead of taking this implicit criticism to its logical

1 Tony Tanner, Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Sense and Sensibility* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1969), p. 32.

2 See Tanner, *ibid.*, p. 30.

conclusion, as Wollstonecraft tried to do, Jane Austen defuses its threat by directing our judgment away from bourgeois society and toward the self-indulgent individual. Austen caricatures just enough of Marianne's responses to nature and love to make her seem intermittently ridiculous, and, when her desires finally explode all social conventions, Austen stifles her with an illness that is not only a result but also a purgation of her passion. At the end of the novel, Austen ushers Marianne into Brandon's world of diminished desires in such a way as to make Marianne herself negate everything she has previously wanted to have and to be.

Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another! ... Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby. [Pp. 378–79]

To further defuse the questions raised by Marianne's assertive subjectivity, Austen seconds the opinion of eighteenth-century moralists that women's appetites are particularly dangerous and more akin to inexplicable natural forces than to socialized—hence socializable—responses. Except for Elinor, nearly all of the women in *Sense and Sensibility* are given to one kind of excess or another. Mrs. John Dashwood and her mother, Mrs. Ferrars, attempt to dominate the opinions, the professions, and even the emotions of the men who are closest to them; Willoughby's aunt, who is empowered by money and age, is even more tyrannical; and Sophia Grey, Willoughby's fiancée, enacts her passion and her will when she commands Willoughby to copy her cruel letter for Marianne. Austen implies that these women are exceptional only in the extent of their power, not in the force of their desires. The narrator describes a "fond mother," for example, as "the most rapacious of human beings" (p. 120)—a description borne out by the monomaniacal Lady Middleton—and she refers lightly to the "suffering" endured by every lady who has the "insatiable appetite of fifteen" (p. 33). Until her compassion is necessary to the plot, even Mrs. Jennings seems dominated by a single uncontrollable desire, the hunger to live vicariously through the romantic attachments of her young friends.

Austen's female characters certainly do not monopolize passion, nor are their little contrivances finally more destructive than Willoughby's deceit. But the implications of her characterizations of such women can be identified by contrasting them with her presentation of male characters. Austen consistently provides men's behavior with a realistic explanation by describing the social or psychological contexts that shaped it. Mr. Palmer's general contempt, Elinor concludes (without any narrative qualification), "was the desire of appearing superior to other people" (p. 112)—a desire that is an understandable compensation for Palmer's initial error: "his temper might perhaps be a little soured by finding, like many others of his sex, that through some unaccountable bias in favour of beauty, he was the husband of a very silly woman" (p. 112). Austen's comparable references to Mrs. Palmer's history are both cursory and curt: her mantelpiece, the narrator informs us, is adorned with "a landscape in coloured silks of her performance, in proof of her having spent seven years at a great school in town to some effect" (p. 160). Austen also more extensively explains the differences between the Ferrars brothers than between the oldest Dashwood sisters; she makes no attempt to account for the temperamental contrast between Elinor and Marianne but carefully attributes the differences between Robert and Edward to their education. The only female character Austen appears to explain is Lucy Steele. Initially, Lucy's "deficiency of all mental improvement" seems to be the effect of her neglected education: "Lucy was naturally clever; her remarks were often just and amusing ... but her powers had received no aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate, and her deficiency of mental improvement ... could not be concealed from Miss Dashwood" (p. 127). Soon we discover, however, that this "explanation" is really only Elinor's generous and erroneous first impression. Austen explicitly ridicules the notion that Lucy's "want of liberality" could be "due to her want of education" by having Edward cling to this rationalization to the end. But in jilting Edward for his brother Robert, Lucy conclusively proves herself inherently flawed. Like Shelley's 1831 characterization of Frankenstein, and like both portrayals of the monster, female nature appears to be fated, fixed. Austen's final comments on Lucy are decisive: her behavior exposes "a wanton ill-nature" (p. 366), characterized by "an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest" (p. 376).

The harshness with which Austen disposes of Lucy Steele exceeds the necessities of the plot, but it is perfectly in keeping with her moral design. For, like Shelley, Austen wants to convince the reader that female nature is simply inexplicable and that propriety must restrain this natural, amoral force. At least one other set of female characters

also supports this argument, but, paradoxically, the episode in which they appear alludes not to an innate female nature but to the constraints imposed on women by patriarchal society. Because of this, the episode threatens to subvert the argument for propriety it theoretically should support. The characters are the two Elizas, and their story belongs to Colonel Brandon.

Colonel Brandon relates the story of the two Elizas to Elinor ostensibly to persuade her to warn Marianne about Willoughby. But both the hesitations with which he interrupts his narrative and the fact that *he* focuses not on the second Eliza (Willoughby's victim) but on her mother ("his" Eliza) suggest that Brandon does not fully recognize his own motives for telling the story. As the tale unfolds, it becomes clear that Brandon's deepest intention is to warn Marianne about the dangerous nature of her own passion; paradoxically, however, the overall effect of the episode is to reveal to the reader the depth—and consequences—of *Brandon's* sexual anxiety.¹ This anxiety, initially aroused by the first Eliza, is now being reactivated by Marianne. But there is one critical difference between the two situations: unlike the first Eliza, Marianne's passion is not for Brandon but for Willoughby. Thus Brandon's anxiety is doubly displaced: it is a past fear of too much emotion *and* a present fear of too little love. The first Eliza *did* love him, Brandon asserts, as if to enhance his own appeal, but she could not withstand her guardian's pressure to marry Brandon's older brother, heir to the family's encumbered estate. As he tells the story, Brandon stumbles over the details that wounded him most:

"My brother did not deserve her; he did not even love her. I had hoped that her regard for me would support her under any difficulty, and for some time it did; but at last the misery of her situation, for she experienced great unkindness, overcame all her resolution, and though she had promised me that nothing—but how blindly I relate! I have never told you how this was brought on. We were within a few hours of eloping together for Scotland. The treachery, or the folly, of my cousin's maid betrayed us. I was banished ... and she was allowed no liberty, no society, no amusement, till my father's point was gained. I had depended on her fortitude too far, ... —but had her marriage been happy ... a few months must have reconciled me to it.... This however was not the case. My brother had no regard for her.... The consequence of this, upon a mind *so* young, so lively, so inexperienced

1 I am indebted to Patricia Meyer Spacks and to her Yale College seminar on Jane Austen for many of the observations about this episode.

as Mrs. Brandon's, was but too natural.... Can we wonder that with such a husband to provoke inconstancy, and without a friend to advise or restrain her ... she should fall? Had I remained in England, perhaps—but I meant to promote the happiness of both by removing from her for years.... The shock which her marriage had given me," he continued, in a voice of great agitation, "was of trifling weight—was nothing—to what I felt when I heard, about two years afterwards, of her divorce. It was *that* which threw this gloom, even now the recollection of what I suffered—".... (Pp. 205–06; ellipses added)

The story begins and ends in Eliza's infidelity to Brandon; only as an extension of this does her infidelity to her husband matter, only as the origin of his pain does Eliza's unhappiness figure. The weakness of this woman—and her sexual abandon—are "natural," according to Brandon; only the presence of a male guardian could have protected her from herself. Once Eliza has fallen, her fate is so predictable (and disturbing) that it warrants only summary description—except in regard to Brandon's own misery:

So altered—so faded—worn down by acute suffering of every kind! hardly could I believe the melancholy and sickly figure before me, to be the remains of the lovely, blooming, healthful girl on whom I had once doated. What I endured in so beholding her—but I have no right to wound your feelings by attempting to describe it—I have pained you too much already. [P. 207]

Given the fate of the mother, Brandon is not surprised at the fall of the second Eliza, the daughter, who has been bequeathed to his protection. At seventeen, her mother's fatal year and Marianne's current age, she too evaded her male guardian and ran away with Willoughby. Now pregnant, abandoned, poor, and miserable, this Eliza is a second monument to the passionate excesses of women.

The intense anxiety that Brandon betrays here is produced by his fear of female sexual appetite. If female sexuality had caused the first Eliza to betray him, how vulnerable might the excitable Marianne be to Willoughby, who had seduced the second Eliza? Yet Brandon expressly admires Marianne for the very passion that occasioned the downfall of the two Elizas. Brandon wants Marianne to be emotionally responsive, but he wants her sexuality to answer only to his command. When Elinor wishes that Marianne would renounce sentimental prejudices, Brandon's response is swift: "No, no, do not desire it,—for when the romantic refinements of a young mind are obliged

to give way, how frequently are they succeeded by such opinions as are but too common, and too dangerous! I speak from experience" (pp. 56–57). The allusion is clearly to the first Eliza; Brandon fears that beneath the "romantic refinements" of the girl lurks a woman's sexual appetite, which is both "common" and "dangerous." Better far to keep women innocent, to protect them from themselves—and to protect men from their "natural" volatility.

The anxieties Brandon unwittingly reveals suggest that Austen at least intuits the twin imperatives that anchor patriarchal society: men want women to be passionate, but, because they fear the consequences of this appetite, they want to retain control over its expression. This anxiety explains why women in this society must experience so problematic a relation to their own desire. In order to win the husband necessary to their social position, women must gratify both of men's desires by concealing whatever genuine emotions they feel so as to allow men to believe that *they* have all the power. Women must use indirection, in other words, the allure of "romantic refinements," and the subterfuges of manners and modesty in order to arouse male desires and assuage male anxieties.

The implications of this passage are very close to those Mary Wollstonecraft specifically addresses in both *The Rights of Woman* and *Maria*. But in *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen will no more pursue the criticism of patriarchy that is inherent in this insight than she will pursue the grim reality that is implicit in the narrator's account of the Dashwoods' economic situation. Despite its gestures toward realism, *Sense and Sensibility* repeatedly dismisses the analysis of society that realism might imply and instead embraces the idealism of romance. But Austen's idealism never completely banishes her realistic impulse either. Instead, Austen retains both "principles" and romance. Thus Marianne debunks her own youthful romance, and the novel as a whole endorses the "heroism" (the word itself appears on pp. 242 and 265) of Elinor's self-denial. Nevertheless, Austen rewards both characters at the conclusion of the novel precisely in terms of romantic love and of lives lived happily ever after.

Some of the tensions that we finally feel in *Sense and Sensibility* emerge, then, from the conflict between the realism in which the action is anchored and the romantic elements that Austen harnesses to this realism. Throughout, she attempts to use realism to control the imaginative excesses that romances both encourage and depict: not only does the point of view repress the romantic plot, but Austen also suggests that Elinor's self-denial—her refusal to reveal Lucy Steele's secret and her willingness to help Edward even to her own disadvantage—ultimately contributes to her own happiness as well

as to the happiness of others. The prerogatives of society, Austen suggests, sometimes make secrecy and repression necessary; but if one submits to society, every dream will come true. The last part of this formulation reminds us, of course, that, just as Austen uses realism to control the irresponsible and morally anarchic imagination, she also enlists the power of the reader's wishes to buttress her moral design. Theoretically, if her readers will submit to a version of the frustration Elinor suffers or even the compromise to which Marianne grows accustomed, their wish for a happy ending will be legitimized and gratified. This fusion of realism and romance in the service of aesthetic closure decisively distinguishes between Wollstonecraft's *Maria* and Austen's early novels. For notwithstanding her imaginative engagement in "romantic expectations," Wollstonecraft's persistent goal is to criticize the social institutions that seem to her to thwart female feeling. Jane Austen, on the other hand, despite her recognition of the limitations of social institutions, is more concerned with correcting the dangerous excesses of female feeling than with liberating this anarchic energy. Her turn to aesthetic closure enables her to dismiss many of the problems her own divided sympathies have introduced. That the need for such closure grows out of society's inability to grant happiness to everyone in the terms it promises is a problem that can remain unexamined because it is, ideally, irrelevant to this fiction. The most troubling aspect of *Sense and Sensibility* is Austen's inability to establish narrative authority because she is ambivalent toward both realism and romance. Her inability to establish moral authority is clearly related to this ambivalence. But its complexities and implications are more clearly apparent in her next novel, *Pride and Prejudice*.

(1984)