

A Study of *Sense and Sensibility* from the Perspective of Schema Theory

Ranran Hou*

Shanxi Normal University, Taiyuan 030000, Shanxi Province, China

*Corresponding author: Ranran Hou, 1443669293@qq.com

Abstract: This essay aims to analyze two main characters and the author in *Sense and Sensibility* by Schema theory. Schema theory refers to the theory of characterization and storage based on the knowledge of a particular subject. Three Schemata, the Marianne Schema and the Elinor Schema, the Austen Schema will be covered. Through the analysis of these three Schemata and their relationships, it will help readers to better understand the characters and the theme of the play by analyzing the relationships between three Schemata. The Schema theory is able to help readers to better understand the images of the characters and the author's creating intentions and provide a new perspective for the interpretation of literary works.

Keywords: Schema theory; Marianne; Elinor; Austen

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1. Introduction

As one of Jane Austen's early works, *Sense and Sensibility*, rich in humor temperament, already reveals her proficient writing techniques and skills. As for the synopsis of the novel, it mainly centers on the two Dashwood sisters of a British squire family. After the death of Mr. Dashwood, his wife and daughters have to face the embarrassing circumstances. Marrying a perfect husband becomes a matter of overwhelming urgency. The sensible elder sister, Elinor Dashwood, deeply conceals her emotions for the happiness of the whole family, while the sentimental younger one, Marianne Dashwood, is willing to give almost everything to pursue the true love. Although there is striking discrepancy in their characters, resulting in different responses when they are confronted with love, both of them have satisfactory marriages in the end.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen gives free rein to her talent of irony and realistic methods of writing to convey several messages. From the perspective of the story itself, by describing the conflicts of two different dispositions--sense and sensibility, it tells the readers that both of them are essential in settling affairs, and when the need arises, sensibility should be controlled by sense. In Jane's eyes, women should enjoy the equal rights in social status, and they should have the freedom to independently observe, analyze and then choose men for a good marriage. These are what Jane Austen wants to express in *Sense and Sensibility*. The essay is an analysis of these three Schemata and their relationships, in order to help readers to better understand the characters and the theme of the play by analyzing the relationships between three Schemata.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of Schema for decades has been in the constant novel development. The authoritative "encyclopedia of social psychology" defines Schema as "knowledge structure to represent personal things,

people and the environment.” It includes characteristics of object understanding and understanding the relationship between these characteristics. The Schema is an overall abstraction, similar to focus on case. The Schema can help people simplify reality. More importantly, the Schema directs people to deal with new information. The concept of Schema has been introduced into fields such as psychology, education, linguistics and literature.

The study of the relationship between the Schemata of figure and background, no matter they deepen or oppose each other, helps to reveal the character’s cognitive psychology and interpret the personality traits. Thus, a revelation can prove the strong explanatory power of Schema theory, and provide a new way for the interpretation of the characters.

Due to the differences in the knowledge system of each person, the individual cognition must be different. Using the Schema Theory, we can interpret the unique cognitive psychology and personality traits of the characters, and explain the thematic significance of literary works from a new perspective. The lack of such kind of knowledge will bring considerable troubles during reading comprehension.

3. The schema in *Sense and Sensibility*

3.1. An analysis of the Marianne Schema

In love, Marianne Schema can be regarded as sensibility mode, just like a popular expression “brainless dating.” Contrary to the rational and steady character of elder sister Elinor, younger sister Marianne conceited, frank and aloof. She has a dreamy view of love. By accident, she met the man of her dreams, Willoughby, who had everything Edward lacked: he was handsome and well-behaved, elegant; he is proficient in riding and shooting like a god; he is talented and good at singing and dancing. He read widely and was typed by the same book and paragraph as Marianne. He and she have the same temperament, the same enthusiasm, the same quality. They hit it off and fell in love at first sight. Marianne ignored his defects and disadvantages, and loved him wholeheartedly, which caused a tragic beginning. Later, Willoughby married rich for the sake of wealth and glory Miss Gray. The disillusionment of love was a fatal blow to Marianne and almost exhausted her. With all the energy of life, she finally got seriously ill, even though she almost died. But in the end, she learned from the bitter experience and got a new life. She treats love and people. The view of life has changed. Marianne finally realized that she was young after she shed all her tears. Childish, she changed her attitude towards people and things, and did not become irresistible. A victim of passion; she didn’t go to the other extreme and see through the world of mortals. As she thought at the beginning of her illness, “from now on, she seeks to live in seclusion and study.” After a period of time, Marianne calmed down, and finally she sincerely accepted Brandon’s love and became a happy court housewife. Cherishing emotion and being kind to others, or “feeling,” are the important qualities of a gentleman. Predictably, the term “sensibility” has virtually opened the door for the middle class to seek a higher cultural status. Having knowing the personality and experience, we could appreciate Marianne’s full image. More importantly, her perspective for true love is an enlightenment for us, especially without meeting emotional life.

3.2 An analysis of the Elinor Schema

Different from Marianne, Elinor was very sensible for love. Namely, Elinor Schema represents a king of reason and sense. She cannot plunge into other’s world regardless of anything. From the start of the novel, Austen made an introduction to Elinor, “She had an excellent heart, her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught.” In Elinor’s eyes, Edward is rich in emotion and good at restraining emotion. He does not draw himself, indeed, but he has great pleasure in seeing the performances of other people. He distrusts his own judgment in such matters so much, that he is

always unwilling to give his opinion on any picture; but he has an innate propriety and simplicity of taste, which in general direct him perfectly right. From Elinor's judgements, we could learn that Elinor's love is definitely not blind. Instead, she had carefully examined his personality, taste and knowledge, which were consistent with hers. Only in this way can we achieve emotional harmony between people and create appropriate and appropriate behavior. Here, concern for others means that "the bystander sympathizes with the person concerned, and the person concerned also strives to control his own emotions to take care of the feelings of the bystander." The former virtue brings gentleness, amiability, frankness, modesty and benevolent devotion. The latter virtue brings self-abandonment, self-restraint, and harmonizes the passions in our nature into self-respect, self-love, and appropriate behavior." In other words, Edward has appropriate behavior, that is, rational control of emotions and care for the interests of others. That's why Elinor and Edward had a happy ending.

3.3 An analysis of the Austen Schema

From Austen's works, her firm belief in the predominance of reason over passion. So, the Austen Schema means the sense of responsibility, good manners and clear-sighted judgement over the romantic tendencies of emotion and individuality. Austen believes that a person's happiness must come from "emotion", because only "emotional" people are sensitive to the external environment; at the same time, she opposes the tendency to take emotion as the basis of moral judgment holds that the above tendency will inevitably lead to the proliferation of egoism and the rupture of the established social order. So, it was clear that Austen was on Elinor's side for an attitude towards love between Elinor and Marianne. In Austen's judgment, the "self-control" brought by "reason" is as important as "emotion," because everyone in the world not only has private emotion, but has other more important things. Nevertheless, as Russell mentioned in *the Conquest of Happiness* say, an individual cannot live only in brain (sense), not in heart (sensitivity), which dramatically leads to unhappiness. We need gradually feel and practice moderates between brain and heart. In fact, in Austen's works, the social function of "mental cultivation" is probably the same. In other words, by strengthening individual self-education, Elinor's "appropriate and moderate" emotion will constitute an inherent cultural binding force, which will form an inevitable tension with the original Marianne liberal tendency. Through the analysis of Marianne Schema and Elinor Schema, the two sisters have left the readers the conflict between them helps readers to better understand the figures. The comprehensive description for inherent values helps the readers get closer to the author's intention.

4. Conclusion

As one of Jane Austen's masterpieces, *Sense and Sensibility* is widely studied at present. Schema is structured background knowledge. It could be dynamic, changeable, and will change or adjust according to the different experience. Schema theory helps the readers form a new perspective to understand the characters and interpret the personality traits of the character. The Schemata interact with each other. In this way, we can figure out the characteristics of the figures, then the significance of the theme can be realized better.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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