

Indifference in *Sense and Sensibility**

Yih-Dau Wu

Department of English, National Chengchi University
No. 64, Sec. 2, ZhiNan Rd., Taipei 11605, Taiwan
E-mail: ydw20@nccu.edu.tw

Abstract

Charlotte Brontë famously criticizes Jane Austen as a cold lady writer indifferent to passions and uninterested in feelings. Modern Austen scholars have successfully refuted Brontë's arguments and confirmed Austen's familiarity with the business of the heart. This critical debate gives rise to two misconceptions about indifference: that it is irrelevant to Austen's art, and that it is irreconcilable with feeling. This essay seeks to redress both misunderstandings. I first define indifference as unconcern and reserve, before analyzing the formative role they play in the characters, plot, and sentences of *Sense and Sensibility*. Next, I discuss the affective core of indifference. I show that, throughout the novel, Austen frequently collapses the otherwise rigid boundaries between powerful emotions and the appearance of indifference. Just as the latter can conceal

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the former, the former may be the precondition for the latter. *Sense and Sensibility*, I conclude, is not about sense or sensibility. It is centrally concerned with feeling indifferent and with feelings in indifference. Brontë's criticism is certainly unjust, but the issue of emotional inadequacy raised therein can cast new light on Austen's first-published novel.

Key Words: indifference, *Sense and Sensibility*, unconcern, reserve