

## An Intimate Look at Relationships and Affection in Jane Austen's

### *Sense and Sensibility*

Life has changed considerably since the time of Jane Austen. Today, a twenty-seven year old woman wouldn't be considered a spinster; women can own property and make their own money; fashion and fads have come and gone. And, the way we express ourselves in language has changed. This is one of the biggest setbacks people have when reading these "older" books. It can also be challenging to read these novels because while some of the words they use are familiar to us, they seem to mean something very different than how we use them today. Two examples are the words "intimate" and "affection".

### Intimate

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "intimate" comes from the Latin *intimus*, meaning, "inmost, deepest, profound or close in friendship, as n. a close friend". Today, we typically use this in regards to a sexual relationship, but it didn't always mean that. There are many definitions of the term in the Oxford English Dictionary, but the one that closest resembles how it is used in *Sense and Sensibility* is

"Close in acquaintance or association; closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge; characterized by familiarity (with a person or thing); very familiar. Said of persons, and personal relations or attributes. Also transferred of things, Pertaining to or dealing with such close personal relations."

According to the OED, this usage of the word can be traced back to 1635 in G. F. Biondi's *Donzella Desterrada ii* translated by James Hayward. In this, Biondi writes, "A Knight who was an intimate friend of his". By today's standards, we would assume that this knight was a romantic partner but when it was written in the 1600's, it simply implies a very dear and close friend.

This is the connotation of the word 'intimate' in *Sense and Sensibility*. On page 49, after Mr. Willoughby makes his heroic entrance to our story, Mrs. Dashwood is inquiring about him to Sir John asking, "And is that all you can say for him?...But what are his manners on more intimate acquaintance?" Again, if this was asked today, this would be a fairly personal question, and a very odd one for a mother to be asking about for her daughter. In this context, Mrs. Dashwood is simply asking for more information on his character, since all Sir John can relay is that he is a good rider and a good shot. For a mother hoping to marry off her daughters to well-respected men, this is not a good enough answer.

Another time the word 'intimate' is used is on page 64 after Willoughby addresses Marianne by her first name by itself. Austen writes, "...and in his addressing her sister by her Christian name alone, she instantly saw and intimacy so decided, a meaning so direct, as marked a perfect agreement between them". In this instance, we definitely see the term leaning more towards today's understanding as this was a very striking thing for a young man to do. By doing this, Elinor is now of the understanding that the two are to be engaged to each other, due to how friendly and informal they are together.

At the end of the novel, when the strings are being tied up, Austen reflects on the relationship between Elinor and Edward Ferras by saying, “their intimate knowledge of each other seemed to make their happiness certain,” (364). This usage of the word seems to blend the two meanings: the old and the new. While this quote certainly does not imply sexual relations, the two do end up married and happy due to their closeness prior to marriage. In the time since the novel began, Elinor and Edward have become very close and have come to know each other on a deeply personal level.

### Affection

The word “affection” is borrowed from the Anglo-Norman, Old French, and French languages. There are many uses and meanings for the word throughout history. The version that relates most closely to both Austen’s works and modern usage is

“Favourable or kindly disposition towards a person or thing; fondness, tenderness; goodwill, warmth of attachment. Esp. in early use also more strongly: †love (for another person)” (Oxford English Dictionary).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* reports this use of the term “affection” dating back to a 1384 version of the *Bible* translated by John Wycliffe, the first theologian to translate the book into English in its entirety. The verse that is quoted in the OED is Romans 1:31 which reads, “unwise, unmannerly, without love [without affection, or love], without bond of peace, without mercy,” (Bible Study Tools).<sup>1</sup> In this verse, the Apostle

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<sup>1</sup> The direct translation from OED says, “With outen affeccoun or loue [Latin sine affectione], withouten bond of pees, withouten mercy,” which was complicated to comprehend in its old style. Using the website biblestudytools.com, I was able to find Wycliffe’s translation written in a more comprehensible format cited above.

Paul is describing the consequences of disobeying God, which includes being without love or affection.

Many of the examples of this definition listed in the OED refer to a more romantic connotation between two people. Shakespeare uses the term in *Hamlet* saying, “How know you he [loves] her?...I heard him swear his affection,” (1600) and Henry Fielding wrote in *Tom Jones*, “We are no sooner in Love, than it becomes our principal Care to engage the Affection of the Object beloved,” (1749).

Using “affection” to refer to a more romantic feeling or a more specific type of love is one that was more common in the past and is seen in Austen’s writing as well. On page 43, Marianne says to Elinor, “A woman of seven-and-twenty, can never hope to feel or inspire affection again.” This was said amid a conversation regarding Colonel Brandon being thirty five years old and looking for a wife. Elinor says that if there was a single twenty seven year old woman, she would make a better partner than a seventeen year old. Marianne responds by saying that a woman of that age should not hope to find love or affection.

Later in the novel, after Marianne and Mr. Willoughby met and began their relationship, Austen writes, “...to afford him opportunity of witnessing the excellencies of Marianne, of marking his animated admiration of her, and of receiving, in her behaviour to himself, the most pointed assurance of her affection,” (58). In this, Austen is describing how Mr. Willoughby has been coming around to see Marianne and it is clear that she has strong romantic feelings for him.

In a conversation between Lucy Steele and Elinor, the latter discovers that Edward Ferrars, who up until now she believed to have an interest in her, has had a

secret relationship with Lucy for close to four years. Due to the longevity and secrecy of this relationship, Elinor asks if she ever felt any reason to worry about Edward but Lucy responds by saying, “With almost every other man in the world, it would be an alarming prospect; but Edward’s affection and constancy nothing can deprive me of I know,” indicating that the way Edward has loved and treated her gives her no concern regarding his loyalty (145).

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

As indicated above, the words “intimate” and “affection” are used in a somewhat different way in Austen’s novels than we are familiar with today. In fact, they seem to have almost swapped meanings. The examples of “intimate” here refer to a close feeling between two people, but not in a sexual meaning. The use of the term in a sexual connotation did not appear until 1889 in a dictionary written by James Redding Ware saying, “The defendant..did not however have intimacy with her. He had never been intimate with her”. This dictionary was written after Austen’s time so while she might have used the term “intimate” to refer to a feeling of romance, as possibly seen with Edward and Elinor’s relationship, it didn’t have a sexual meaning until much later.

On the other hand, the use of “affection” in *Sense and Sensibility* has a connotation of love, either romantic or familial, which slightly differs from what we are familiar with today. According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of “affection” is “a feeling of liking and caring for someone or something : tender attachment,” with examples referring to a fondness for someone. While this definition is certainly part of the definition cited in the OED, it also says “Esp. in early use also more strongly: †love (for another person)” which is the way it is used in Austen’s novels. The use of the word

has also declined significantly since 1830 where it was used about 130 times for every one million words. Today, it is used less than 5 times for every one million words.

While the connotation of the words “intimate” and “affection” have certainly changed since the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*, the deeper meanings have stayed the same. Even though this text was written over 200 years ago, the understanding of these relationships and the terms used, can still be understood and related to in our modern era.

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### **Reflection**

I wanted to compare these two words since the original assignment was presented to us since the two are related somewhat in how they are used throughout history. Since the original project required only one word or phrase, I chose “intimate” but I continued to do research on the word “affection” and still tracked it throughout the novel of *Sense and Sensibility*. The purpose of this revision was to examine the two words that have seemingly swapped connotations since the writing of the novel while still relating to relationships between people.