

## JASNA SOUTHWEST *J*ALA *S*UPER~*R*EGIONAL *S*PRING *M*EETING



Professor Joan Ray, author and former President of JASNA, one of the most gifted and diverting speakers in all Janedom, gave one of her signature spirited, scholarly, and humorous talks. The subject was the celebration of the 200th year of the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*, and Joan took her starting point from the final image in *Sense and Sensibility*: the happy ending of Elinor and Marianne:-- **"though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands."**

Joan felt this conclusion left a bitter after taste, and pointed out that although Jane Austen is brilliant in all the details she gives us, she also leaves out much. For instance, the Dashwood siblings' ages; the length of time until Mr. Dashwood marries again; and why Mrs. Ferrars has control of the family assets. There's not a single positive sibling relationship in this novel, except that of Elinor and Marianne, and even that is fraught. The juvenile Middleton siblings are horrors; the Steele sisters are together only by necessity; and Robert is careless about Edward's downfall. John has no emotional connection with his half-sisters, Col. Brandon suffers from his brother's abuses, and we never see sisters Lady Middleton and Mrs. Palmer together interacting pleasantly. The book is negative about sibling groups - and all children.

Joan focused particularly on Col. Brandon, bringing out his excellence, and on Edward, about whom she quipped dryly, "There's more to Edward than dullness - and it's not very good." Brandon, though he is presented as almost "elderly," is in fact a good and forceful man, a true hero who in an active and energetic life has been a dueler and an eloper, and is romantic and generous. She does not see Marianne as his reward, but him as her reward - for Marianne is Austen's "Dark Lady," who falls, but is not a fallen woman. And she is literally dark, described in the text as tall and dark, not blonde and short as she is portrayed in the movies. To Joan, these two leading men represent a loss of authorial control in this novel. Brandon's real self is concealed, seen as old, enfeebled, "silent and grave," but he is grave because he's worrying about his ward Eliza, who has disappeared. Joan aptly quotes D.H. Lawrence in his *Studies in Classical American Literature* as saying, "Never trust the teller, trust the tale".

About Edward, it seems that few people have much good to say, and Joan least of all. She illustrates how Emma Thompson in filming her version of *Sense and Sensibility*, cast "the Hugh Grant persona" as Edward, in a necessary attempt to make him appealing, and she invented scenes such as one in a stable where he "almost" confesses to Elinor about his engagement to Lucy but is interrupted. For in truth, Edward is an alarmingly adept liar. He visits Barton Cottage immediately after being with Lucy, and he tells a pointblank lie when asked about the hair in the ring he is wearing. Means might have been found to end his engagement with Lucy, but Edward makes no attempt to behave honestly; if he is sensitive to Lucy's feelings, he is not to Elinor's. I will never look at him in the same way again; not that I was much disposed to look at him again anyway.-- Diana Birchall