2004 First Place Critical Analysis

Fanny’s Pathos Overrides John’s Logic:

A Textual Analysis of the First Two Chapters of *Sense and Sensibility*

In the first chapter of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Henry Dashwood falls victim to a will which leaves him “no power [to provide] for those who [are] most dear to him,” namely, his wife and three daughters (12). After the will is set forth, he establishes a plan to diligently work and save throughout the remainder of his life in order to ensure that his wife and daughters will not be left desolate when he passes away. These hopes are robbed when he dies only a year later. Before dying, he pleads with his only son, John, born to him by a previous marriage, to help his wife and daughters, who are left with virtually nothing. John assures his father that he will “do everything in his power to make them comfortable,” and his father dies in peace (12). Mr. John Dashwood, comfortably set with four thousand pounds a year, a present income, the prospect of inheriting half his wealthy mother’s fortune, and his father’s estate left to him as a result of his father’s death, felt himself quite capable, even “with little inconvenience,” of assisting his stepmother and half sisters by a gift of three thousand pounds, and plans to do so when occasion permits (13).

In the second chapter, John’s self-centered and stingy wife, Fanny, convinces him to relinquish his plan. In a conversation that covers four pages, Fanny persuades John that only minor favors will thoroughly discharge his promise to his father to assist his relations. Despite the fact that Fanny’s arguments ride on logical fallacies, including those of red herring and false dilemma; argument to the person and hasty generalization; and circular argument and self-contradiction, her command of pathos manipulates her morally weak husband into believing that her argument is quite logical, and that it is perfectly just of him to give only the bare minimum in fulfilling his promise to his father.

The first method Fanny employs is to distract John’s attention away from the original issue, also known as the logical fallacy of red herring. She deliberately targets her distraction in a way that will affect him
emotionally, thus playing on her powers of pathos. She knows that John has great emotional, social, and financial investment in his only child and son, Harry, who is but a small child at the time. By making the issue seem like a matter of neglecting his only child, Fanny twists the whole issue from being a matter of fulfilling his duty to his late father, stepmother, and half-sisters, to being entirely a matter of fulfilling his duty to his son. She gives him a guilt trip by questioning how he could possibly have a clear conscience while “impoverishing [his son] to the most dreadful degree” and “[robbing] his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum” (15). John would be mortified to have impoverishment or robbery on his list of paternal characteristics, and Fanny is fully aware of this as she sidetracks him into believing that he will have these despicable words on his track record if he sticks with his original plan to give his half-sisters three thousand pounds.

Fanny deplores that by giving the Dashwood mother and sisters three thousand pounds, John would be “[ruining himself, and their poor little Harry, by giving away all his money to his half-sisters” (15). This hyperbole (three thousand pounds is far from “all his money”) creates the false dilemma that she imbeds into her fallacy of ignoring the issue. She makes him believe that either he can keep all his money to himself and be a good father, or give his stepmother and half-sisters money and fail as a father. Despite the fact that this dilemma is nonexistent, Fanny makes it appear to be real, thereby persuading John to act as she would have him act. The reason this false dilemma affects John’s emotions is explained by Austen’s authorial interpretation in the first chapter of the novel. Austen describes him as “rather cold-hearted, and rather selfish” (12). Fanny acknowledges this, and knows that the only way to emotionally influence her cold-hearted husband is by bringing up points that appeal to his selfish nature. Fanny understands that being a respectable father in the eyes of the world is one of John’s few emotional softspots, for the reason that it is directly correlated with his reputation among men. She uses this awareness by convincing him that following through with his original plan would ruin his reputation. The way she capitalizes on his selfish nature strengthens her pathos considerably.

Once Fanny has successfully steered John off the course of the original issue by inciting guilt in him for how his plan would potentially turn him into a horrible father, she goes to work in reconciling his uneasiness over straying off the original course. She does this through her pathos-fortified logical fallacies of argument to the person and hasty generalization. She convinces him that the only reason he was on the primary course was
to complete a task issued by a man who was “light-headed” and not “in his right senses” at the time, and thus “did not know what he was talking of” (15). This is the logical fallacy of argument to the person, or “attacking the person making the argument rather than the argument itself” (Troyka 143). This argument is faulty, because even if John’s father had been delusional when asking him to help his sisters, that is besides the point, because it would still be a very rational, practical, and ethical thing to be asked of him. It is rational for an already affluent brother to share with his sisters in the estate and fortune left to only him by their father, which would have largely gone to the sisters anyway had their father had any power over its bestowal. It is practical that a brother help out his sisters when they are in dire need of help and he is in a position to easily give help. And it is ethical for a person to offer assistance to family members who are suffering, especially when their suffering came about as a result of that person’s gain.

Despite the unsound foundation of Fanny’s argument to the person, it further convinces John that he doesn’t need to feel guilty about not helping his sisters because of its appeals to John’s emotions. It is suggesting that because the responsibility to help his sisters was placed on his shoulders by a man who wasn’t quite right in the head, he has every right to dispose of and forsake the responsibility. This makes John feel very good about himself as his burden of blame is lifted and placed on someone besides himself. If someone (or his conscience) were to accuse him of wrongly neglecting the task he promised to carry out, Fanny’s argument gives him a sure reply of pointing an accusing finger at a silently agreeable scapegoat.

Fanny backs up her point that John needn’t help out his half sisters through evidence of hasty generalization. She stereotyped that everyone else in the world would agree with her in what she thinks John should do. She says that it is “very well known that no affection was ever supposed to exist between the children of any man by different marriages” (15). This implies that if he were to give affection to his half sisters in the form of money, he would be breaking social mores that would bring ridicule upon him. This threat of ridicule is a very effective form of pathos for a man whose status in society is precious to him. When John suggests that he cuts the sum in half, and give five hundred pounds to each of the Dashwood sisters, Fanny responds, “What brother on earth would do half so much for his sisters, even if really his sisters! And as it is—only half blood! But you have a generous spirit!” (16). This gratifying statement has double purpose to
manipulate John’s emotions. It first makes him feel so excessively generous that his guilt of giving his sisters less than what he originally planned to give is wiped away. It secondly makes him feel wary of being too generous, in order to avoid violating the unspoken contract brothers have in regards to their dealings with their sisters, according to Fanny.

After John acquiesces that Fanny is right and that he should be more careful in how he carries out what his father asked of him, Fanny’s final task of persuasive pathos is accomplished by the logical fallacies of circular argument and self-contradiction. She assures him that by carrying out a new plan of minimal assistance, he will also be doing what is at his stepmother’s and half sisters’ best interest. By doing this, she not only erases all guilt, but also makes him feel rather pleased with himself that he is doing what’s best for all involved. This appeals to his selfish whims immensely.

Fanny reasons that because John’s stepmother and half sisters will live poor, they will have no use for money. This is a case of circular argument to the extreme. Circular argument, also known as “begging the question,” is a logical fallacy of using the problem to explain the cause of the problem, such as saying a poem is bad because it is poorly written. Fanny takes this circular argument one step further as she uses the problem to also explain the solution to the problem. By proposing that her half sisters won’t need money because they are poor, she is using the same logic as if she were to say that a poem won’t need any revision because it is a bad poem. It is almost funny how blatantly she “begs the question.” She says:

They will have five hundred a-year amongst them, and what on earth can four women want for more than that? They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be! Five hundred a year! I am sure I cannot imagine how they will spend half of it; and as to your giving them more, it is quite absurd to think of it. They will be much more able to give you something. (18)

Fanny is saying that living cheap is the most comfortable and desired lifestyle to have, and that by giving them any more money, he would be doing a disservice to their happiness.
Imbued in this logical fallacy of circular argument is self-contradiction. After she expresses her confidence of how delightful their lives will be and how they really couldn’t want for anything more, she derides them for their poverty. In lamenting over how rude John’s father was to leave the china to his wife and daughters rather to them, she says, “The set of breakfast china is twice as handsome as what belongs to this house. A great deal too handsome, in my opinion, for any place they can afford to live in” (18). This snide remark is ridiculing them for being in a position that she had previously made glowing recommendations of, and a position they would not be in if it were not for her influence.

Fanny further contradicts herself as she continues her complaint concerning the china: “But, however, so it is. Your father only thought of them. And I must say this; that you owe no particular gratitude to him, nor attention to his wishes, for we very well know that if he could, he would have left almost every thing in the world to them” (18). She finishes her argument by contradicting her original claim (which was also argument to the person) that the only reason his father requested that he give them money was because he was delirious. Her final argument to the person makes John’s father seem like a person who would have, with full mental capacity, begged John to give his wife and daughters money. This contradicts her first statement that John’s father would never have dreamed of asking John to give his wife and daughters money had his mind not been affected by a fever. But by this time, Fanny has John so far off course, that any statement which justified John’s actions is easily integrated by him into his own belief system. Fanny has full reigns over his emotions, and she masterfully applies her pathos in a way that results in a feeling of self-righteousness that is “irresistible” to him (18).

Because of Fanny’s command of pathos, she is able to convince John Dashwood that “it would be absolutely unnecessary, if not highly indecorous, to do more for the widow and children of his father” than help them move out of their house (which John and Fanny promptly overtake after John’s father passes away) and send them occasional gifts of fish and game (18). Fanny’s powers of emotional persuasion over John’s weak moral and logical capacities set the stage for both the underlying conflict and one of the principal messages of the book. The conflict is the Dashwood sisters’ bleak prospects of marrying because of their lack of dowry, and the message is the foolishness and unhappiness of the English custom to marry for money (and if not money, than handsomeness and charm).
Besides setting the stage for the rest of the book, Austen also created Fanny’s character to comment on our tendency as humans to rationalize selfish actions through blaming them on other people, flattering ourselves into believing our selfish actions are moral, ignoring or underrating the needs of others, or undervaluing our capacity to help others. Austen presents us with an insensitive, self-centered, and unlikable character in Fanny, and then displays the pain the Dashwood sisters and mother have to endure as a result of Fanny’s behavior. Through doing this, Austen is portraying the act of refusing to share of your substance as a foolish, detestable, and directly hurtful thing to do. Austen is challenging us to examine ourselves to see if we are using tactics similar to Fanny’s in justifying our acts of withholding our substance to those who need, and in some cases deserve, it more than we do. Finding any of Fanny’s logical fallacies within our own thought processes will encourage us to alter them because of how repulsive Austen portrays Fanny’s character.