What is your first thought when you consider a Jane Austen novel? Marriage? Romance? Mr. Darcy? Most would associate these aspects with Austen novels. However, I believe there is one major theme that is overlooked in most of her stories—sisterhood. Ang Lee’s adaptation does not fail to emphasize this neglected theme in his interpretation of Elinor Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility.

In the novel, Elinor experiences truly uncontrollable emotions only after Edward confirms his engagement to Lucy is officially broken. Austen deliberately hides Elinor’s passion to enhance the theme of rationality prevailing over emotion. However, by shifting the reveal of Elinor’s emotional climax from marriage to sisterhood, Ang Lee emphasizes an equally crucial theme of the novel. Austen’s rational language is twisted by Lee into cinematic intensity, particularly the scene in which Marianne is dying. This moment allows Elinor to express her true, unrelenting feelings for her sister. Lee’s Sense and Sensibility adaptation is not afraid to delve into Elinor’s character and reimagine Austen’s great work as more than just a traditional romance. It is a love story between two sisters.

The scene begins with a top-down view of the two sisters which emphasizes the weaknesses within both characters. The baroque style of this shot not only displays the physical distance between the two sisters but also reveals just how spiritually different they are. It is no accident that Marianne is the star of the scene, wearing all white and taking up two-thirds of the shot. Marianne is contrasted with Elinor who is donned in all black and hidden in the void of negative space surrounding Marianne. This physical contrast symbolizes the personalities of the two sisters: Marianne is the center of attention, revealing all she is through her wild romanticisms, while Elinor hides her feelings behind the indelicate candor of her sister. Additionally, the emotional swelling of an orchestral symphony emphasizes the darkness and intensity of the dramatic moment.

During the entirety of the shot, Elinor speaks only these sentences: “Marianne, please try. I cannot—I cannot do without you. Oh, please, I have tried to bear everything else—.” Along with these words, Elinor chokes between breaths and is heaving from her sobs. The camera slowly pans forward, closing in on Elinor as she cries beside Marianne’s bed. The image above is a close-up shot of Elinor. Here she says, “I will try—but please, dearest, beloved Marianne, do not leave me alone.” As she speaks these words, a look of fear washes over her. She is already alone, framed by the blackness which symbolizes her world—one void of sensibility. She has felt a world without the beauty of Marianne’s romantic ideals, and it terrifies her. Elinor, in this moment, breaks and tears spill from her eyes. Her emotional climax is saved for her sister, thus uncovering the hidden theme of sisterhood.