

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

by Jane Austen



THE AUTHOR

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was the seventh child and second daughter of an Anglican rector in a country parish in Hampshire, England. She had a happy childhood. She read widely, though she had little formal schooling, and she and her siblings delighted in writing and performing plays at home. At the age of twelve, she began to write parodies of popular literary works, and set her hand to her first serious writing project when she was nineteen. That project was an epistolary novel called *Lady Susan* which, while not a work of genius, was good enough to encourage her to keep writing.

Austen's novels evolved through years of writing and rewriting. In 1795, she began a novel called *Elinor and Marianne* that was finally published in 1810 as *Sense and Sensibility*. She started writing *First Impressions* in 1796; it was initially rejected for publication, but later saw print in 1812 as *Pride and Prejudice*. She began work in 1799 on a novel called *Susan* (not to be confused with her initial effort), which was published posthumously in 1818 as *Northanger Abbey*. She wrote three other novels as well - *Mansfield Park* (1813), *Emma* (1815), and *Persuasion* (published posthumously in 1818).

Her personal life was a happy but quiet one, consisting largely of her writing, along with the kind of country amusements - balls, parties, and teas - described in her novels. The family struggled financially between the death of her father in 1805 and the publication of her first novel in 1810. She never married, though in her late twenties she received a proposal from a local aristocrat named Harris Bigg-Wither. She accepted, but changed her mind the next morning. She always maintained a close relationship with her older sister Cassandra, though we know little of her private life, because not only did she guard her privacy very closely, but her family either censored or destroyed almost all of her correspondence after her death.

Jane Austen died in 1817 of what is now believed to have been Addison's disease. She knew she was dying, and raced against time and declining strength to finish *Persuasion*, the novel containing the character considered to be most like Jane herself - the plain but witty Anne Elliot. Her brother Henry arranged for the publication of her last two novels after her death. Only then did people become aware of the author of these popular works of literature - all the novels published during her lifetime had been published anonymously.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with the death of Mr. Dashwood. He leaves his estate to his son John, with instructions to care for his stepmother and half-sisters. His greedy wife Fanny convinces him to do nothing, however, and they move into the family home at Norland, making the Dashwoods so uncomfortable that they are glad to leave. Before doing so, however, they meet Edward Ferrars, Fanny's brother, and there are indications of a budding relationship between the oldest Dashwood, Elinor, and the young man, which Fanny ardently opposes.

Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters move to Barton Cottage, where they make the acquaintance of Sir John and Lady Middleton and her gossipy mother, Mrs. Jennings. They also meet Colonel Brandon, who falls quietly in love with Marianne, and Willoughby, who, after rescuing Marianne during a rainstorm, develops an open affection for her, and she for him. One day a planned picnic is called off because Colonel Brandon receives a letter requiring his immediate attention (the news of his ward's abuse by Willoughby). Meanwhile, Willoughby and Marianne visit the estate he is to inherit, and he strongly hints that it will be her home as well.

The next morning, Willoughby appears and suddenly announces that he must leave for London, not to return for as long as a year, sending Marianne into deep and extravagant mourning. Shortly thereafter, Edward Ferrars arrives for a visit, but though he is cordial, the visit is awkward and he shows no partiality for Elinor. Elinor soon finds out why when she meets Anne and Lucy Steele. The younger daughter, treating Elinor as an intimate friend, reveals to her that she has been secretly engaged to Edward for four years; Elinor is heartbroken and pities Edward for his alliance to an obviously unsuitable girl, but resolves to keep silent.

Mrs. Jennings then invites Elinor and Marianne to her house in London. Marianne is anxious to see Willoughby again, but he refuses to visit or answer her letters. When they meet at a ball, he is very cold to her, and they soon discover that he is engaged to a wealthy young woman named Sophia Grey. Marianne is inconsolable. Colonel Brandon attempts to relieve her suffering by explaining to Elinor his own unhappy love affair as a young man, how he acquired his ward (the illegitimate daughter of his disgraced love, who had married his brother, been cruelly treated, and strayed), and how that ward had been seduced and impregnated by Willoughby.

When John and Fanny Dashwood arrive in London, they snub Elinor and Marianne, as does Mrs. Ferrars. In order to hurt her, they invite the Steele sisters to stay with them. While there, Anne foolishly reveals Edward and Lucy's secret engagement to Fanny, who throws a fit and ejects them from the house. Mrs. Ferrars is equally angry and tries to bribe Edward to marry an heiress named Miss Morton, while threatening to disinherit him if he keeps his promise to Lucy. When he insists on doing so, she deeds the entire estate to his younger brother Robert. Later, Colonel Brandon offers a clerical living on his estate to Edward, which would allow him to marry, and Edward gratefully accepts the offer. He and Lucy prepare to marry.

On the trip back from London, Elinor and Marianne stop to visit the home of the Palmers, where Marianne contracts a severe chill from which she nearly dies. After she has begun to recover, Willoughby stops by and attempts to explain his behavior to Elinor. In the process of bringing Mrs. Dashwood to the Palmer home, Colonel Brandon tells her of his love for Marianne, and she encourages him to pursue it if Marianne survives her illness, which she does.

After their return to Barton Cottage, Elinor tells Marianne and her mother about her conversation with Willoughby. A few days later, they hear from their servant that Mr. Ferrars has married Lucy Steele - a shock that Elinor has trouble digesting, despite her expectation that such an event was inevitable. Later, Edward visits and, in response to their questions about his wife, tells

them that Lucy has married his brother Robert. He then proposes to Elinor, and she accepts his proposal. Edward asks for and receives the forgiveness of his mother, who also gives him and Elinor a small inheritance; later, she forgives and completely accepts Robert and Lucy. Edward and Elinor marry and occupy the parsonage at Delaford, Colonel Brandon's estate. A few months later, Brandon and Marianne marry also.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- John Dashwood - Inherits the Dashwood estate, but contrary to his promise to his father, refuses to provide for his stepmother and half-sisters.
- Fanny Dashwood - John's wife, selfish and grasping, convinces him to do nothing for his relatives because she wants all the money for herself and her son.
- Mrs. Dashwood - A quiet and helpless woman, the mother of Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret.
- Elinor Dashwood - The book's protagonist, a sensible girl of nineteen who falls in love with and eventually marries Edward Ferrars.
- Marianne Dashwood - The "sensibility" of the title; an emotional and romantic girl of sixteen, she falls madly in love with Willoughby, but when he betrays her, turns to Colonel Brandon, who has quietly loved her all along.
- Margaret Dashwood - The youngest of the three sisters at thirteen, she loves to wander the hills around the family home.
- Edward Ferrars - Fanny's brother, a kindly man of halting speech who loves Elinor, but long refuses to declare his love because of his secret engagement to Lucy Steele. When Lucy transfers her affections to his brother Robert, he is free to marry Elinor.
- Robert Ferrars - Edward's younger brother, a shallow and pompous man, he eventually marries Lucy.
- Sir John Middleton - The owner of Barton Park and Barton Cottage, he invites the Dashwoods to live in the cottage; a friendly but vulgar man.
- Lady Middleton - Sir John's wife, a plain and dull woman.
- Mrs. Jennings - Lady Middleton's mother; a talkative gossip and inveterate matchmaker.
- Charlotte Palmer - Lady Middleton's sister, who takes after her mother.
- Thomas Palmer - Charlotte's husband, a quiet and taciturn man who clearly thinks his wife a fool.

- Lucy Steele - An ill-bred and uneducated young woman to whom Edward Ferrars had become secretly engaged in his youth; she eventually shifts her allegiance to Edward's brother Robert when their mother disinherits Edward.
- Colonel Brandon - A friend of the Middletons; a quiet and serious man in his late thirties, he loves Marianne but fears to show it.
- John Willoughby - A local rake who woos and abandons Marianne after having impregnated Eliza Williams, Colonel Brandon's ward. He eventually marries Sophia Grey for her money.
- Sophia Grey - A wealthy young woman for whom Willoughby abandons Marianne.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Elinor, this eldest daughter whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood, which must generally have led to imprudence.” (p.4)

“Do you compare your conduct with his?”

“No. I compare it with what it ought to have been; I compare it with yours.” (Elinor and Marianne, p.299)

“Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims.” (p.330)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, it is obvious that the two Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne, represent the two characteristics described in the title. Using the story as a guide, how does Jane Austen define these two terms? Which does she value most? Why do you think so? Use specifics from the story to support your conclusions.
2. In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, it is obvious that the two Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne, represent the two characteristics described in the title, but they are not the only exemplars of these traits. Choose three other pairs of characters in the novel that display the same contrasts, and show how their contrasting personalities enhance the theme of the story.
3. Discuss the nature of true love as presented in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Be sure to indicate what true love is as well as what it is not from the perspective of the author. Then evaluate that idea of true love on the basis of Scripture.

4. Compare and contrast Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* with the same author's *Pride and Prejudice*. Critics often consider the earlier work a practice run for the more famous novel. Be sure in your comparison to note both similar characters and similar incidents that bind the two novels together. In what ways is the developing skill of Jane Austen visible when comparing the two works?
5. Discuss the danger of making judgments based on outward appearances in the light of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Which characters tend to do this, and which do not? What problems are caused by such shallow judgments?
6. Discuss the importance of open communication in the light of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Choose three situations in the book in which concealing the truth leads to trouble and heartache. Why is openness and honesty so important in human relationships? Support your conclusions from Scripture as well as from the novel.
7. Discuss the importance of keeping one's word in the context of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Edward, for example, insists on keeping his youthful and immature promise to Lucy Steele even though he no longer loves her. Was he right to do so? Choose two other examples in the story where characters either break their word or keep it at considerable personal cost, and evaluate all three decisions in the light of Scripture.
8. Discuss the role of Colonel Brandon's youthful tragedy in the plot of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Why is it included? To what extent does it parallel and shed light upon themes and events within the larger novel? Be specific in drawing connections between Brandon's story and the central plot, and show how one illuminates the other.
9. In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, the author speaks of Marianne Dashwood by saying, "She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims." To what extent is it true that Marianne is the character in the story who changes the most? How does she change? What does this tell you about the author's assessment of the two sisters' personalities?
10. Jane Austen bridges the gap between the Neoclassical and Romantic eras in English literature. The personality traits she chiefly highlights in her novel *Sense and Sensibility* may be seen as outstanding characteristics of the two literary movements. Analyze the novel itself and discuss into which category it ought to be placed. Is it more a product of the Enlightenment, or of the age of Romanticism? Why do you think so? Support your conclusions with details from the story.
11. Discuss the various love attachments in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Which do you find credible, and which are not? Why? Focus on three sets of relationships and discuss their credibility, with supporting detail, in your essay.

12. In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters are clearly intended to represent the two personality traits mentioned in the title. Yet they are not caricatures, but fully-formed individuals. Show how Elinor possesses aspects of "sensitivity," while Marianne eventually demonstrates that she has some "sense" in her head. To what extent do they change as they learn from one another?
13. In its original form, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* was an epistolary novel called *Elinor and Marianne*, and consisted of a series of letters between the two sisters. Later, she revised it into its present form for publication. Discuss the role of letters in the story, and evaluate the author's decision to switch from epistolary to narrative format. Which do you consider more effective for conveying this story, and why?
14. Compare and contrast the views of love found in Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. In your essay consider the authors' views on the motivations of men and women, the characteristics essential for love to blossom, and the requirements for a good marriage.
15. Jane Austen incorporated much of her own personality into the characters of some of her heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, and Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*. What do these heroines have in common? What do their common qualities tell you about what the author valued, both in herself and in other women? Be sure to support your argument with specific details from all three novels.
16. If Jane Austen's heroines are in many ways similar, her heroes are more diverse. Consider Fitzwilliam Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, Edward Ferrars of *Sense and Sensibility*, and Frederick Wentworth of *Persuasion*. What sets these leading men apart from one another? Consider both character qualities and the dynamics of their relationships with the heroines of the stories. Do they have any important characteristics in common?
17. Compare and contrast the handsome cads in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*. What do Wickham, Willoughby, and William Elliot have in common? Do they have any important differences? If so, what are they?
18. Jane Austen lived on the cusp between the Enlightenment and the Romantic Era. Some scholars have suggested that the arc of her writing career reflects a movement from one to the other in her thinking. They suggest that, while *Pride and Prejudice* shows the heroine making vital decisions on purely rational grounds and *Sense and Sensibility* shows the value of both reason and emotion, Austen's final novel *Persuasion* validates following one's feelings, even if they lead one in opposition to the wishes of one's family and the social values of the day. Do you agree with this assessment? Support your conclusion with details from all three novels.

19. In both Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*, the reading of poetry becomes a catalyst for courtship. What does the author see in poetry – not that written by the suitor, but merely read – that makes it a suitable vehicle for romance? Do you agree? Why or why not? Use details from the two novels to support your conclusions.
20. Both Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* tell the story of a family with two daughters that is forced to relocate because of financial reverses and the ensuing problems associated with finding suitable marriage partners for the daughters. Compare and contrast the two novels with regard to their characters, plots, and themes. Be sure to use specifics from both books to support your analysis.
21. The dynamics of marriage in the context of a highly stratified society are often central to novels of manners such as Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Unlike the novels of Jane Austen, such as *Sense and Sensibility*, however, which were written at the onset of the Romantic era, Wharton's novels were written at the rise of American Realism. Discuss how love, marriage, and social class are handled differently in the two novels. How are these treatments influenced by the literary movements of which they are a part?