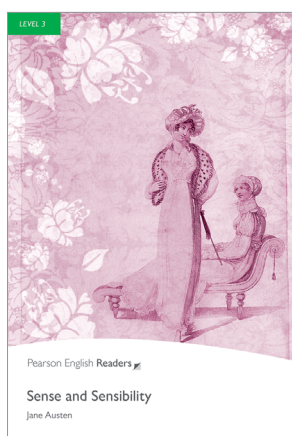


Sense and Sensibility

Jane Austen



About the author

Jane Austen, one of England's greatest novelists, was born in 1775 in the Hampshire countryside; she had six brothers and sisters. Her father, George Austen, was a clergyman; the family was middle class and comfortably off. Austen started writing as a young teenager. Even at that age her works were incisive and elegantly expressed.

Jane Austen's family was lively and affectionate. Like most country people of that time, the family lived a fairly restricted social life, since travel was difficult. Austen received several proposals of marriage. However, she never married, and lived an uneventful life, happy to remain in the family home. We know that she wrote her novels at her desk in the drawing room, with her family around her. She was an attractive, lively and witty young woman, much loved and respected by family and friends. The whole family recognized her genius. Her brother wrote: 'In person she was very attractive; her figure was rather tall and slender ... She was a clear brunette with a rich colour.'

Austen wrote six major novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816) were published during her lifetime; *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published in 1818 after her death. The books were popular. Highly placed public figures such as the Prince Regent (the heir to the throne) admired her novels greatly. The Prince kept a set of her novels in each of his homes.

As many geniuses did, Jane Austen died relatively young of illness in 1817 at the age of forty-one.

Summary

Jane Austen is one of the literary giants of the nineteenth century. *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811, was Austen's first novel and is an acknowledged masterpiece. Like all her novels, its subject matter is romantic; it is written with a sharp wit and keenly observant eye. In 1995 it was made into an Oscar-winning film starring Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet.

All Jane Austen's novels are about a young woman's progress towards marriage, and *Sense and Sensibility* is no exception. The book tells the story of two pretty, well-bred sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. Their father dies, leaving them with little money, and the family has to move to a smaller house in a different part of the country. Elinor and Marianne are very different in temperament. The elder sister, Elinor, is sensible and self-controlled. Marianne, emotional and impulsive, is much more romantic. Marianne falls in love with Willoughby, a good-looking and exciting young man, and Elinor falls in love with the ordinary but pleasant Edward Ferrars, her sister-in-law's brother. However, these romances run far from smoothly, and both girls experience disappointment in love. All ends well, of course, but with the sting in the tail that readers have learned to expect from Jane Austen.

Background and themes

Jane Austen's works are satirical comedies about the middle and upper-middle classes. The plots are variations on a standard theme: a young woman's courtship and eventual marriage. By the end of every one of Austen's novel the heroine has found a husband. The world Austen describes is not a large one; she describes small social groups in provincial environments. In one letter Austen compared herself to a painter of miniatures: 'The little bit of Ivory on which I work with so fine a brush ...' But within this narrow focus Austen explores universal themes: money and its effect on the human psyche; romance and its illusions and the necessary progression towards more realistic relationships, as the courting couples discover each other's true natures. For a young woman of this period, marriage was the surest route to independence and freedom. Marriage to a wealthy man of good birth was the most desirable position for a woman. Unmarried women living in their parents' house (as Jane Austen was) were considered to be second-class citizens. Austen was a very careful writer and revised her novels many times. She writes clearly and incisively, with great

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wit. Few writers combine this, as she does, with needle-sharp observation of human behaviour. The stories flow and are easy to read; she needs only a few words to bring the characters to life. Her dialogue is unequalled.

Sense and Sensibility is, above all, a study of character. As the title suggests, one sister, Elinor, embodies 'sense' – self-control, careful thought, and the ability to accept gracefully the trials of life. The other sister, Marianne, embodies 'sensibility' – 'sensibility' here has the old-fashioned meaning of the capacity for feeling, often too much.

In Austen's novel, 'sense' triumphs over 'sensibility'. There is symmetry in the story. Both sisters fall in love and both are disappointed in love. But one bears her disappointment bravely while the other is hysterical and self-absorbed. Whom do we admire? Elinor, of course, who, although she is loving and sensitive, is also self-contained. In this respect, Elinor is typical of Austen's heroines, and the type of woman Jane Austen most admired.

Another theme that weaves through the novel is money, the need for it, and its effect on people. Austen accepts that a certain amount of money is necessary for happiness and the respect of one's peers. But she is scathing in her condemnation of greed and meanness. Her portraits of John and Fanny Dashwood and Mrs Ferrars (Fanny's mother) are savagely witty; one does not forget them.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1, pages 1–3

Before reading

1 Discuss: Talk about the title of the book. Give students these definitions of 'sense' and 'sensibility':

Sense: intelligence about how you live your life

Sensibility: having strong feelings, often feeling too much

Put students in small groups. Have them look at the front cover of the book and discuss these questions:

- What can you see in the picture?
- Why do you think the title of the book is 'Sense and Sensibility'?
- What do you think the story is about?

After reading

2 Discuss: Talk about the characters. Have students discuss what they can learn about the following characters: John Dashwood, Fanny Dashwood and Elinor Dashwood. Ask them to find a description of each character in the book.

3 Artwork: Draw a family tree.

Write 'The first marriage of Mr Dashwood' and 'The second marriage of Mr Dashwood' next to each other on the board. Draw two diagrams for the family trees, and ask some students to come to the front and fill them in with the names of the Dashwood family members. Then put students in small groups, and have them draw their own family trees (if this is a sensitive issue to some students, you could ask them to draw their future family trees). Have each student describe and talk about their family trees in groups.

Chapter 2, pages 4–5

Before reading

4 Guess: Imagine what the Dashwoods' new life is like. Recap what was going on in Chapter 1 by asking the students some questions. Then have students work in small groups to imagine the new life of the Dashwoods in Devon. Have them discuss using the following questions:

- How big do you think their new house is?
- How old do you think Sir John Middleton is?
- What do you think he is like?
- Do you think they will find new friends there?
- Do you think they will be happy or unhappy there?
- The title of the chapter is 'An Invitation to Dinner'. Who invites whom? What do you think?

After reading

5 Guess: Predict the storyline.

Go over the following characters with their age: Mrs Dashwood (40), Elinor (19), Marianne (16) and Colonel Brandon (35). Ask students what they think will happen later in the book.

Which of these things do you think will come true? Say why/why not.

1. Elinor and Colonel Brandon will marry.
2. Marianne and Colonel Brandon will marry.
3. Mrs Dashwood and Colonel Brandon will marry.
4. Colonel Brandon will not marry anyone.

Chapter 3, pages 5–10

After reading

6 Pair work: Talk about Marianne and Elinor.

Put students into pairs. Have them discuss the following questions. When they are ready, ask some pairs to share their answers with the rest of the class.

- How does Marianne show that she is not very sensible?
- How does Elinor show that she is sensible?

7 Discuss: Personalise the situation.

Remind students that Marianne does not try to keep her feelings a secret. Have students imagine that they are in love. Ask them if they would act like Marianne or try to be calm and hide their feelings. Students could work in pairs or small groups.

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Chapter 4, pages 10–16

Before reading

- 8 Discuss:** Talk about Willoughby and Marianne. Have students work in small groups and discuss the following questions.
- *Why do you think Willoughby is going back to London?*
 - *Do you think he is serious about Marianne?*
 - *What do you think will happen between them?*

After reading

- 9 Role play:** Have students work in pairs. Ask them to act out the conversation between Elinor and Lucy as they walk in the park. Encourage them to think about the distance between them, the speed of their walk, if they stop walking at some stage or not, how they use their body language, facial expressions and voice quality, etc. When the students are ready, ask some pairs to perform in front of the class.

Chapter 5, pages 16–23

After reading

- 10 Discuss:** Talk about Willoughby and Marianne. Have students work in small groups. Have them discuss the following questions. Monitor each group during the discussion, and later ask some individual students to share their ideas with the rest of the class.
- *Elinor says about Willoughby's letter: 'This is not a letter from a gentleman.' Do you agree? Say why/why not.*
 - *What do you think of Willoughby?*
 - *Do you think Marianne will forget Willoughby quickly? Say why/why not.*
 - *Do you think Marianne has been stupid? Say why/why not.*

Chapter 6, pages 23–28

After reading

- 11 Pair work:** Talk about the two sisters. Put students in pairs. Have them discuss the following questions:
- *Who do you prefer, Elinor or Marianne? Give reasons for your opinion.*
 - *Which sister are you more like? Say why.*
 - *Which sister do you think is more modern? Give reasons for your opinion.*
- Later, find out how many students prefer Elinor and how many students prefer Marianne. Then lead a whole-class discussion.
- 12 Write:** Write a description of the characters. Recap what has happened so far. Ask students to look up the noun 'quality' in their dictionaries. Then, in pairs, students write down one or two qualities that they feel the following characters have: Lucy

Steele, Mrs Ferrars, Fanny Dashwood and Mrs Jennings. For each quality, they must find sentences in the chapter that prove their point.
Example: Mrs Jennings: kind; she tried to do many kind things for Marianne all day. (p. 20)

Chapter 7, pages 28–39

Before reading

- 13 Discuss:** Talk about the end of the story. Encourage students to think how the story ends. This could be done as a whole-class activity or a small-group activity.
Now both Marianne and Elinor have broken hearts. What do you think will happen to them next? If you are writing the last chapter, how will you end the story?

After reading

- 14 Discuss:** Talk about the title of the chapter and the story.
The title of this chapter is 'All's Well That Ends Well'. Do you agree that everything ends well for these people: Elinor, Marianne, Lucy, Edward, Willoughby, Colonel Brandon and Mrs Dashwood? Say why/why not.
- 15 Discuss:** Talk about marriage for money and marriage for love. Put students in groups. Have them discuss the following questions.
- *What do you think of Willoughby's story? Is he bad or stupid?*
 - *Think about yourself. Will you marry for money or love?*

Extra activities

- 16 Role play:** Give Marianne some advice. Put students into pairs. Have them think about Marianne's behaviour in the book. Tell them that they want to give Marianne some advice to be more sensible. You could use the following questions.
- *In what ways does Marianne act without thinking carefully in this book?*
 - *Can you give her some advice?*
- 17 Write:** Write about money in people's lives. Have students work in small groups to talk about money and how important it is to people's lives. When they finish exchanging the ideas and opinions, have each student write some short paragraphs.
People agree that Jane Austen's books show us the importance of money in the early nineteenth century. How important is money to people's lives in this book? Write about John and Fanny Dashwood, Willoughby and Edward. How important is money to you?