

Teacher's notes

Sense and Sensibility

by Jane Austen



SUMMARY

Jane Austen is one of the literary giants of the 19th 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. It has recently been 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 goodlooking 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.

ABOUT JANE AUSTEN

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. She developed Addison's disease and died in 1817 in Winchester, at the age of 42.

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 novels 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 compares 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 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 & SENSIBILITY: THEMES

Sense and Sensibility is, above all, a study of character. As the title suggests, one sister, Elinor, embodies 'sense'

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- self-control, careful thought, 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 a symmetry in the story. Both sisters fall in love and both are disappointed in love. But one bears her disappointment bravely, 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 whom 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.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

- 1 Teach the word 'connection'. Give students these definitions of 'sense' and 'sensibility':

Sense: intelligence about how you live your life.

Sensibility: having strong feelings, often feeling too much.

In small groups students look at the front cover of the book and discuss these questions:

- (a) What is the connection between the title and the pictures, do you think?
- (b) What is the story about, do you think?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1-3

In pairs, students answer these questions.

- (a) Why do you think Willoughby is going back to London?
- (b) Do you think he is serious about Elinor?
- (c) What do you think will happen between them?

Chapters 4-6

- 1 In pairs, students discuss the following questions:

- (a) Who do you prefer, Elinor or Marianne? Give reasons for your opinion.

- (b) Which sister are you most like? Say why.

- (c) Which sister do you think is more modern? Give reasons for your opinion.

- 2 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, John Dashwood, Colonel Brandon, Mrs Jennings

For each quality, they must find sentences in the chapter that prove their point. For example, for Mrs Jennings, one could write the following:

kind . . . she tried to do many kind things for Marianne all day. (p20)

Chapter 7

In groups of four, students take it in turns to play either Edward or Willoughby. The group asks questions about their behaviour and 'Edward' and 'Willoughby' must answer the questions.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

- 1 Teach the phrase: 'the moral of the story' (what can be learnt from the story). In small groups, students write down what they think is the 'moral of the story'. They should write one to four sentences. Each group then reads out their sentences, and the class votes for the best 'moral'. Tell students that they can have more than one 'moral'.

Example: The moral of the story is that people should not marry for money.

- 2 Ask students to look up *behave* and *deserve* in their dictionaries. Then, in pairs, they discuss this question:

- (a) In what ways does Marianne behave stupidly in this book?
- (b) Do you think she deserved what happened to her? Say why/why not.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-3

advise (v) to tell somebody what you think they should do

anxious (adj) worried

carriage (n) a vehicle that is pulled by horses

encourage (v) to tell somebody that they are doing the right thing so that they will continue

engaged (adj) when you have promised to marry someone

gentleman (n) a kind man from a good family

sensibility (n) someone's strong feelings

servant (n) a person who works for someone in their house

Chapters 4-6

priest (n) someone who works for a church

Chapter 7

fever (n) a very high body temperature



Student's activities

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Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

Read the Introduction at the front of the book. Then put these sentences about the story in the right order. Keep your book closed!

- Edward doesn't seem interested in Elinor now. What has
- everyone thinks that they will marry. Elinor, her older sister, is
- family home, and move to a small house in another part of the
- Mrs Dashwood and her daughters must leave Norland, their
- gone wrong?
- Edward Ferrars. But Willoughby suddenly leaves for London, and
- meets a handsome young stranger called Willoughby. Soon
- more serious. She prefers a quiet, sensible young man called
- simply. But almost at once, Marianne, the middle daughter,
- country. They have very little money now, and must live more

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-3

Chapter 1

- Draw a 'family tree' of the Dashwood family.
- Are these sentences right or wrong? If they are wrong, correct them.
 - The father of John, Elinor, Marianne and Margaret has died. He has left his money to his son, John, who is the oldest child.
 - John's father asked John to help his (John's father's) second wife and her children.
 - There is only one Mrs Dashwood.
 - John gives a lot of money to his father's second wife.
 - Marianne and Edward are good friends.
 - Sir John Middleton has a house for Mrs Dashwood in the north of England.
- How do these people feel about each other?
 - Mrs Dashwood (Elinor and Marianne's mother) about Fanny Dashwood? Why does she feel this?

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- Fanny Dashwood about Elinor? Why does she feel this?
 - Elinor about Edward?
 - Marianne about Edward? Why does she feel this?
- 4 What do we learn from this chapter about the characters of John and Fanny Dashwood?

Chapter 2

- Find the word 'relationship' in your dictionary. What is the relationship of these people?
 - Sir John Middleton: Lady Middleton, Mrs Dashwood (mother of Elinor and Marianne)
 - Mrs Jennings: Lady Middleton
 - Colonel Brandon: Sir John
- Which people in this chapter are:
 - over forty years old?
 - about forty years old?
 - about thirty-five years old?
- Which of these things do you think will come true? Say why/why not.
 - Elinor and Colonel Brandon will marry.
 - Marianne and Colonel Brandon will marry.
 - Mrs Dashwood and Colonel Brandon will marry.
 - Colonel Brandon will not marry anyone.

Chapter 3

- Who says these things? When and why do they say them?
 - 'I've hurt my foot.'
 - 'I can carry you.'
 - 'He has a very nice house not too far away ...'
 - 'My daughters do not try to catch men!'
 - 'I must go to London immediately to finish some important business.'
 - 'And so you had a secret adventure this morning.'
 - 'If something is nice, it can still be wrong.'
 - 'But he loves her. You can see that!'
 - 'I'm here to say goodbye.'
- In pairs, answer these questions.
 - How does Marianne show that she is not very sensible?
 - How does Elinor show that she is sensible?

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Student's activities

CHAPTERS 4-6

Chapter 4

- Answer these questions.
 - Who do the sisters meet as they walk along the road?
 - How is Edward different towards Elinor?
 - What is Lucy Steele's 'great secret'?
 - How does Elinor act when she hears Lucy's secret?
 - What does Elinor think of Lucy? Why?
- Work in pairs. Act the conversation between Elinor and Lucy as they walk in the park.

Chapter 5

- Choose the right answer.
 - Elinor and Marianne go to London because
 - John Dashwood invites them.
 - Mrs Jennings invites them.
 - Marianne writes a letter to
 - her mother.
 - Willoughby.
 - People think that Marianne and Willoughby are
 - engaged.
 - just friends.
 - Marianne
 - has told Elinor and her mother that she and Willoughby are engaged.
 - has not told them that they are engaged.
 - Willoughby does not speak to Marianne at the party because
 - he is engaged to another woman.
 - he is angry with her.
 - In Willoughby's letter, he tells Marianne
 - he never loved her.
 - he loved her but needed to marry someone rich.
- Work in pairs. Discuss these questions.
 - Elinor says about Willoughby's letter: 'This is not the letter of a gentleman.' Do you agree? Say why/why not.
 - 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

- Answer these questions.
 - What unpleasant news about Edward does John Dashwood give Elinor?
 - Why is John Dashwood pleased about this?

- Why are Mrs Ferrars and Fanny angry with Marianne?
- Why does Mrs Ferrars send Edward out of the house?
- Who is Mrs Ferrars going to give all her money to?
- Why do Elinor and Marianne cry?
- Why didn't Elinor tell Marianne about Edward's secret engagement?

- Read this and answer the question.

'How can you forget him so easily? Is your heart so hard?'

'Marianne, I do feel strongly for Edward. Yes, I loved him, and it was very painful. Fanny, Lucy and Mrs Ferrars have all hurt me too. But I couldn't say anything - I had to try to be calm, and to help you too. Please, Marianne, say nothing, and be polite to Lucy and Edward.'

- How do these words show the difference between Elinor and Marianne?
- Which sister has 'sense'? Which sister has 'sensitivity'? Say why.

CHAPTER 7

- Put these sentences in the order of the story.
 - Edward visits Mrs Dashwood, Elinor and Marianne.
 - Mrs Ferrars forgives Edward.
 - Willoughby talks to Elinor.
 - Marianne marries Colonel Brandon.
 - Colonel Brandon says he can give Edward a job as a priest.
 - Elinor and Marianne learn that Edward is married.
 - Marianne becomes dangerously ill.
 - Edward and Elinor get engaged.
 - Mrs Dashwood tells Elinor of Colonel Brandon's love for Marianne.
- The title of this chapter is 'All's Well That Ends Well'. Do you agree that everything ends well for these people? Say why/why not.
Elinor, Marianne, Lucy Ferrars, Edward Ferrars, Willoughby

Activities after reading the book

Talk with another student.

People agree that Jane Austen's books show us the importance of money in the early 19th century. How is money important to people's lives in this book?

Then write two or three paragraphs about this.

