

Sense and Sensibility (working title: *Elinor and Marianne*) is the debut novel by English author Jane Austen, appearing in 1811. It was published anonymously: *By A Lady* appears on the title page where the author's name might have been. The novel is probably set between 1792 and 1797

There is a dual plot and dual heroines. Elinor and Marianne each pursues her romance according to her temperament and beliefs. Each has an unhappy love affair at the start. The parallel plots, illustrating the dual theme, are one of the weaknesses of the novel, for they occur too "conveniently" and are therefore not convincing.

The theme of sensibility is illustrated in the love affair between Marianne and Willoughby. The theme of sense begins with the relationship of Elinor and Edward. The two plots are carefully interwoven. Marianne's romance is ideal until Willoughby deserts her. Elinor's is threatened from the start. Marianne's reactions are always impassioned and uncontrolled; Elinor is always sensible and restrained.

Sense is finally justified and sensibility shown to be a weakness. Ironically, Marianne marries a prosaic older man, and for both it is a second love, something Marianne vowed she could never tolerate. Elinor's fate is more romantic; she marries her first and only love and is quite happy to settle down as the wife of a country parson.

Sense and Sensibility Summary

Sense and Sensibility was originally written as an epistolary novel (a novel-in-letters) called *Elinor and Marianne*. It tells the story of two sisters: Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. The two sisters along with their youngest sister, Margaret, and their mother, Mrs Dashwood, become impoverished after the sisters' father dies and leaves their home, Norland Park, to their half-brother. The new owner of Norland Park, John Dashwood, and his wife, Fanny, are an unpleasant pair and although John promised their late father that he would take care of them, Mrs Dashwood and her daughters are not welcomed in Norland Park. With no choice but to leave their home, they move to stay with their distant relatives in Barton Cottage.

This forced departure is most painful for Elinor who, whilst still at Norland Park, had formed a close attachment with Fanny's brother, Edward Ferrars. Later, it turns out that Edward is secretly engaged to another woman: Lucy Steele. However, when his mother, Mrs Ferrars, finds out, she disowns him and Ms Steele gets engaged to his brother.

After suffering in silence, Elinor is rewarded when Edward confesses to her that it was her he was in love with all along.

Meanwhile, Elinor's younger sister, Marianne, develops feelings for the charming John Willoughby. Although he openly courts her, it's later revealed that he has a history of debauchery and he never intended to return Marianne's affections.

Willoughby marries a wealthy heiress and Marianne is left heartbroken. However, the respectful Colonel Brandon, who is the sisters' neighbour at Barton, gradually wins Marianne's heart.

The novel ends with Elinor marrying Edward Ferrars and Marianne marrying Colonel Brandon.

Elinor and Marianne

The novel is centred around the contrast between sense and sensibility in the two protagonists. The older sister, Elinor, represents 'sense' as she disregards her feelings in favour of her steady mind. The younger sister, Marianne, is the epitome of 'sensibility': she is open about her feelings and doesn't hold back.

Elinor controls her temper and hides her feelings for Edward Ferrars for the sake of propriety, but at the cost of her happiness. In contrast, Marianne expresses her feelings of joy and sorrow, caused by John Willoughby, for the sake of being true to herself, but at the cost of imprudence.

In the course of the novel, Elinor has the opportunity to acknowledge and embrace her feelings by marrying the man she loves. As for Marianne, she learns common sense by suffering disappointment in love and then falling in love again with a steady older man. **The message of the story is that the brain and the heart are equally important:** neither should be neglected in favour of the other. By the end of the novel, each sister has learned to balance her sense and sensibility.

Sense and Sensibility Main Themes

Love and marriage

Marriage is a major [theme](#) in the novel but **the idea of marrying for love is foreign for most of the characters.** Mrs Ferrars controls her sons' lives by determining who is a proper match for them. When she finds out that Edward has been engaged to Lucy Steele without her knowledge of it, she disinherits him. For Mrs. Ferrars, marriage has nothing to do with love and everything to do with acquiring wealth and status. **In contrast, both Elinor and Marianne value love over any material convenience that a good match could bring.** Their values could be traced back to their devotion to each other, and to their mother and youngest sister. The strong family bond of their upbringing helps the sisters get through hardships and allows them to find happiness in marriage despite their financial circumstances. In turn, their marriages, which are based on love, mark the start of a new chapter in their family. Think about Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra. In a way, in writing *Sense and Sensibility*, the author created the happy ending for herself and her sister that they never experienced in their real lives.

Class and society

Edward talks to Mrs Dashwood about how doing what his family expects him to do will not make him happy. Edward wants to live a simple and quiet life, while his family expects him to do what is appropriate for a man like him: to become very wealthy or a great genius. *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel of manners because it depicts in great detail the late eighteenth-century English high society. Elinor and Marianne, who are less wealthy than most of their acquaintances, have to navigate through all kinds of social gatherings and situations. Elinor is very careful to always present herself and her family in the appropriate way: she often hides what she really thinks and controls her temper. Marianne, on the other

hand, doesn't care as much for her role in society; she's more interested in being honest than in presenting herself in a calm and collected manner.

Society in the novel is presented as a ruthless game of manners that often involves hypocrisy, and having to endure humiliation hidden behind the pretence of good intentions. At the same time, society is a necessary component in the sisters' lives because it is thanks to its complicated devices that they chance upon meeting their husbands.

Appearance vs reality

In the novel, false appearances are not only limited to the way characters present themselves. **Some characters prove to be deceiving in their personal relations with others.** John Willoughby skillfully misleads Marianne to believe that his intentions towards her are serious. In reality, it turns out that he has a history of debauchery and is more interested in securing a fortune than marrying for love. Similarly, Lucy Steele appears to be genuinely in love with Edward Ferrars but when his brother Robert gets his inheritance, she swiftly becomes engaged to him and leaves Edward. In doing so, she reveals that she is not who she appeared to be.

Gender roles

The role of women in the society described in *Sense and Sensibility* is limited. During the 1700s, women in England couldn't inherit any property and they couldn't have a career of their own. However, **Austen shows that there are ways in which a woman can exert power and have a kind of freedom within those restrictions.** Mrs Ferrars orchestrates the lives of her sons. Fanny Dashwood cleverly controls her husband's decisions by manipulating him to think her opinions are his own. Before having a husband, Lucy Steele does whatever it takes to find a suitable match and to secure her social status.

As for Elinor and Marianne, although they don't resort to such cunning means, they also manage to find some freedom by marrying for love. Be that as it may, **for the most part, women depend on men** and are unable to do much if they don't have a husband or a father at their side.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Colonel Brandon

A retired officer and friend of Sir John Middleton who falls in love with Marianne Dashwood and acts kindly, honorably, and graciously towards the Dashwoods throughout the novel

Mrs. Dashwood

The kind and loving mother of Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret and second wife to Henry Dashwood. She has inherited no fortune of her own but wants the best for her daughters and shares Marianne's romantic sensibilities.

Elinor Dashwood

The nineteen-year-old eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood and the heroine of Austen's novel. Elinor is composed but affectionate, both when she falls in love with Edward Ferrars and when she comforts and supports her younger sister Marianne.

Henry Dashwood

The father of John Dashwood and, by a second marriage, of Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret Dashwood. He dies in the opening chapter of the novel and bequeaths his estate at Norland to his son, leaving his wife and daughters impoverished.

Fanny Dashwood

The selfish, snobbish, and manipulative wife of John Dashwood and the sister of Edward and Robert Ferrars.

John Dashwood

The weak-minded and money-grubbing heir to the Norland estate. At his wife Fanny's suggestion, he leaves his mother and sisters with very little money and remains largely unconcerned for their welfare.

Margaret Dashwood

The thirteen-year-old, good-humored youngest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood, Margaret shares her sister Marianne's romantic tendencies.

Marianne Dashwood

The seventeen-year-old second daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood. Marianne's spontaneity, excessive sensibility, and romantic idealism lead her to fall in love with the debaucherous John Willoughby, though he painfully spurns her, causing her to finally recognize her misjudgment of him. After this turn of heart, she ultimately marries her long-standing admirer, Colonel Brandon.

Mrs. Ferrars

The wealthy, manipulative mother of Edward and Robert who disinherits her first son when he refuses to marry a rich heiress.

Edward Ferrars

The sensible and friendly older brother of Fanny Dashwood and Robert Ferrars. Edward develops a close relationship with Elinor while staying at Norland and ultimately marries her, after he is freed from a four-year secret engagement to Lucy Steele.

Robert Ferrars

A conceited coxcomb and the younger brother of Edward and Fanny. Robert inherits his mother's fortune after she disinherits Edward. Ironically, he ultimately marries Lucy Steele, even though it was Edward's engagement to this same woman that caused his mother to disinherit him.

Lucy Steele

Mrs. Jennings' cousin and a sly, selfish, and insecure young woman. She has been secretly engaged to Edward Ferrars for four years but she ultimately marries his brother, Robert, once Edward is disinherited.

John Willoughby

An attractive but deceitful young man who wins Marianne Dashwood's heart but then abandons her (greedily) in favor of the wealthy Miss Sophia Grey.