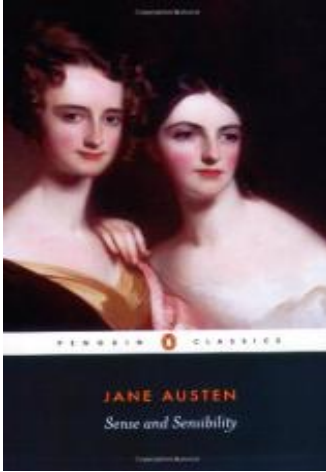


Sense and Sensibility

by Jane Austen



About the Book

(Excerpted from **The Jane Austen Book Club**)

Sense and Sensibility was written in the late 1790s but much revised before publication in 1811. It is primarily the story of two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. The death of their father has left them, with their mother and younger sister, financially pressed. Both women fall in love, each in her own characteristic way --- Marianne is extravagant and public with her emotions, Elinor restrained and decorous.

The object of Elinor's interest is Edward Ferrars, brother to Fanny Dashwood, her odious, stingy sister-in-law. Elinor learns that Edward has been for some time secretly, unhappily, and inextricably engaged to a young woman named Lucy Steele. She learns this from Lucy, who, aware of Elinor's interest though pretending not to be, chooses Elinor as her special confidante.

Marianne hopes to marry John Willoughby, the book's only sexy man. He deserts her for a financially advantageous match. The Surprise and disappointment of this sends Marianne into a dangerous decline.

When Lucy Steele jilts Edward for his brother Robert, Edward is finally free to marry Elinor. Edward seems quite dull but at least her own choice. Marianne marries Colonel Brandon, the dull man Elinor and her mother have picked out for her.

Discussion Guide

1. As the title suggests, **Sense and Sensibility** is, in some ways, a debate about the principles of rationalism, represented by Elinor Dashwood, and those of Romanticism, represented by her sister Marianne.

Few Austen heroines are set up so approvingly as Elinor is. Yet novelist David Gates has described her as "ambivalent a heroine as **Mansfield Park's** notoriously hard-to-warm-up-to Fanny Price."

Why would he say such a thing?

2. And what about Marianne?

3. One of the tenets of Romanticism is that instinct and emotion are better moral guides than reason. At one point in the book, Marianne tells Elinor that if she (Marianne) were doing anything wrong, she (Marianne) would know it.

Do people usually know when they're doing something wrong?

Do you think Austen thinks so?

Does Marianne do anything wrong?

4. A turn of the century review describes Mrs. Jennings as a character it is "equally delightful to have met on paper and not to have met in the flesh." Why is it delightful to spend time reading about a character who would be tedious in person?

Might a character be every bit as tedious on paper as in person? Can you think of examples?

5. Think for a moment about the scene in which Lucy tells Elinor about her secret engagement to Edward. It is a scene full of secrets.

The conversation takes place in whispers so as to be kept secret from everyone else in the room.

Ostensibly Lucy is confiding a secret. But she is simultaneously keeping one, in that she knows Elinor is a rival and wishes to warn her off without appearing to do so.

Elinor is keeping from Lucy the secret of her own painful feelings.

She will keep Lucy's secret a secret, though doing so prevents her from being open with anyone. Elinor spends much of the book utterly isolated by this secret.

Sometimes it seems that everyone in **Sense and Sensibility** has a secret. Make a list.

6. Although the women are beautifully delineated, **Sense and Sensibility's** leading men remain somewhat shadowy. "For my money Edward is the least likable of Austen's heroes," David Gates has said, "while his opposite number, Willoughby, is the most sympathetic of Austen's libertines." Discuss.

7. Why doesn't Colonel Brandon fall in love with Elinor?

8. Critic William H. Galperin does not like Colonel Brandon. He has characterized Brandon's pursuit of Marianne as "insistent, if sinister."

As one part of his case against Brandon, he refers to two points in Willoughby's final conversation with Elinor in which anonymous informants figure. "Mrs. Smith had somehow or other been informed" Willoughby says, of his affair with Eliza, and later "some vague report" of Marianne reaches his fiancée. William H. Galperin has argued that this unnamed informant can only be Colonel Brandon.

Is it possible that Colonel Brandon is, in fact, the evil mastermind behind the entire plot?

Did you suspect as much?

9. Elinor considers Lucy's marriage to Robert Ferrars as "extraordinary and unaccountable," "completely a puzzle." Is it completely a puzzle to you as well?

10. Willoughby's final confession to Elinor is one of the books more unsettling and unexpected scenes. It allows us in some part (how much?) to forgive and pity him. It reminds us that he is the only sexy man in the book. It reminds us that Marianne once wanted a marriage in the Romantic tradition and has got a rational one instead. How do you feel about that?

Does **Sense and Sensibility** have a happy ending?

Why does Lucy get to be happier than Willoughby?

Author Bio

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 at Steventon near Basingstoke, the seventh child of the rector of the parish. She lived with her family at Steventon until they moved to Bath when her father retired in 1801. After his death in 1805, she moved around with her mother; in 1809, they settled in Chawton, near Alton, Hampshire. Here she remained, except for a few visits to London, until in May 1817 she moved to Winchester to be near her doctor. There she died on 18 July 1817.

As a girl Jane Austen wrote stories, including burlesques of popular romances. Her works were only published after much revision, four novels being published in her lifetime. These are **Sense and Sensibility** (1811), **Pride and Prejudice** (1813), **Mansfield Park** (1814) and **Emma** (1816). Two other novels, **Northanger Abbey** and **Persuasion**, were published posthumously in 1818 with a biographical notice by her brother, Henry Austen, the first formal announcement of her authorship. **Persuasion** was written in a race against failing health in 1815-16. She also left two earlier compositions, a short epistolary novel, **Lady Susan**, and an unfinished novel, **The Watsons**. At the time of her death, she was working on a new novel, **Sanditon**, a fragmentary draft of which survives.

Critical Praise

"These modern editions are to be strongly recommended for their scrupulous texts, informative notes and helpful introductions."

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