



Sense and Sensibility

Jane Austen
(1811)

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The novel consists of **three books** and is built around the principle of a didactic comparison through the story of two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. The first book mainly deals with the different attitude of each girl towards the man she hopes to marry. In the second book the two heroines go to London, where they both seem to lose their lovers to a rival woman. In the final book Elinor and Marianne become increasingly like each other, a process which makes both of them more complete people.

PLOT

On the death of Mr Henry Dashwood, his estate at Norland in Sussex passes to his son by his first wife, Mr John Dashwood. His widow and his three daughters, Elinor, Marianne and Margaret, move to Barton Cottage in Devonshire at the invitation of Sir John Middleton, a distant relative. There, Marianne falls in love with Willoughby, an attractive young man who seems to share her romantic tastes. They display their affection openly until he suddenly leaves for London. Elinor, while at Norland, had become fond of Edward Ferrars, a brother of her sister-in-law Fanny Dashwood, but his family opposes their engagement because Elinor is not wealthy. When Elinor and Marianne go to London, as the guests of Mrs Jennings, they find out that Willoughby is going to marry an heiress and that Edward has been secretly engaged to Miss Lucy Steel for five years. After a period of distress, marked by Marianne's serious illness, the two sisters finally settle down. Edward goes to Barton to declare that Lucy has broken their engagement and married his brother Robert. Elinor and Edward get married and Marianne eventually becomes the wife of Colonel Brandon, a family friend who has always admired her, though at a distance.

CHARACTERS

Elinor's scrupulous inner life is the dominant medium of the novel. She represents **the author's conscience** and is never a target of irony. It is easy to mistake her sense for coldness. Actually, through her portrait Austen shows that

the complete human personality needs certain qualities in balanced proportion. Sense and sensibility, reason and passion complement each other in her. In Elinor the author establishes a positive alternative to excessive emotionalism since, through her efforts to control her emotions and regulate her behaviour according to the conventions of society, she achieves strength and balance of character. **Marianne**, on the contrary, does not try to please other people, she refuses to conform. She is lively, sensitive, intelligent, but she is inclined to rely on **first impressions**. She regards sensitivity, or in the idiom of her time, sensibility, as a great quality; however, she gradually acquires sense and finally settles down in a prudent middle-class marriage.

STYLE

In *Sense and Sensibility* the whole action is refracted through Elinor's consciousness. It is an **introspective novel** where dialogue plays a less important role than in Austen's later works.

The author in her own voice always speaks with authority, showing the precise importance of her topic and directing the reader's attention to its relevant aspects. She uses **irony** as a most economical means of delineating character, of reading states of mind and allowing the presentation itself to be an implicit moral comment.

THEMES

The familiar themes of Austen's fiction are all present: **decorum, politeness, marriage and money**. Austen approaches the theme of money from different points of view. First, as a member of the upper professional ranks of her rural society; second, as a woman in that society, prevented by law and custom from possessing significant power over money. However, *Sense and Sensibility* is mainly about to what extent 'nature' has to be re-shaped or repressed to make 'society' possible. A minor but not insignificant theme, embodied by Marianne, is the desire to establish **unity between man and nature**.

Key idea

Sense and sensibility

The title shows the writer's interest in the impulses that move people to think and behave in certain ways. Elinor's *sense* makes her cautious when managing her own affairs and helps her promote the happiness of her family and friends. Marianne adopts *sensibility* as a doctrine which inclines her to artistic enthusiasm, rather than

to sober judgement, and finally exposes her to betrayal and sorrow.

The novel, however, is not based on a diametrical opposition between sense and sensibility; in fact, one of the main concerns in the narrative is on how the differences between the two heroines are eventually removed.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the text and answer the following questions about *Sense and Sensibility*.

- 1 What principle is the novel built upon?
- 2 Who stands for *sense*? Who represents *sensibility*?
- 3 What is one of Austen's main concerns in the narrative?
- 4 What are the main traits of Elinor's character?
- 5 What is Marianne like?
- 6 What kind of novel is *Sense and Sensibility*?
- 7 How does Austen deal with the theme of money?
- 8 What is the main theme?

**An excellent match**

The passage below gives some clues as to the main themes of the novel. It also introduces some minor characters who, however, are essential to the plot: entertaining Mrs Jennings, Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars, the men Marianne and Elinor will respectively marry at the end of the novel.

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Book 1, Chapter 8

Mrs Jennings was a widow with an ample jointure¹. She had only two daughters, both of whom she had lived to see respectably married, and she had now therefore nothing to do but² to marry all the rest of the world. In the promotion of this object she was zealously active, as far as her ability reached; and missed no opportunity of projecting weddings among all the young people of her acquaintance. She was remarkably quick in the discovery of attachments, and had enjoyed the advantage of raising the blushes³ and the vanity of many a young lady by insinuations of her power over such a young man; and this kind of discernment enabled her soon after her arrival at Barton decisively to pronounce that Colonel Brandon was very much in love with Marianne Dashwood. She rather suspected it to be so, on the very first evening of their being together, from his listening so attentively while she sang to them; and when the visit was returned by the Middletons' dining at the cottage, the fact was ascertained⁴ by his listening to her again. It must be so. She was perfectly convinced of it. It would be an excellent match, for HE was rich, and SHE was handsome. Mrs Jennings had been anxious to see Colonel Brandon well married, ever since her connection with Sir John first brought him to her knowledge; and she was always anxious to get a good husband for every pretty girl. [...]

Mrs Dashwood, who could not think a man five years younger than herself, so exceedingly ancient as he appeared to the youthful fancy⁵ of her daughter, ventured to clear⁴ Mrs Jennings from the probability of wishing to throw ridicule on his age.

'But at least⁵, mama, you cannot deny the absurdity of the accusation, though you may not think it intentionally ill-natured. Colonel Brandon is certainly younger than Mrs Jennings, but he is old enough to be MY father; and if he were ever animated enough to be in love, must have long outlived⁶ every sensation of the kind. It is too ridiculous! When is a man to be safe from such wit⁷, if age and infirmity will not protect him?'

'Infirmity!' said Elinor. 'Do you call Colonel Brandon infirm? I can easily suppose that his age may appear much greater to you than to my mother; but you can hardly deceive yourself as to his having the use of his limbs⁸!'

'Did not you hear him complain⁸ of the rheumatism? and is not that the commonest infirmity of declining life?'

- 1 **jointure**. Appannaggio vedovile (assegnato all'atto del matrimonio).
- 2 **but**. Fuorché.
- 3 **raising the blushes**. Provocare il rossore.
- 4 **ventured to clear**. Si arrischiò a liberare.
- 5 **at least**. Almeno.
- 6 **must have long outlived**. Deve avere da tempo superato.
- 7 **such wit**. Un tale spirito.
- 8 **you can hardly ... limbs**. Non puoi negare che abbia l'uso degli arti.



'My dearest child,' said her mother, laughing, 'at this rate⁹! you must be in continual terror of MY decay; and it must seem to you a miracle that my life has been extended to the advanced age of forty.'

35 'Mama, you are not doing me justice. I know very well that Colonel Brandon is not old enough to make his friends yet apprehensive of losing him in the course of nature. He may live twenty years longer. But thirty-five has nothing to do with matrimony.'

'Perhaps,' said Elinor, 'thirty-five and seventeen had better not have any thing to do with matrimony together. But if there should by any chance happen to be¹⁰ a woman
40 who is single at seven and twenty, I should not think Colonel Brandon's being thirty-five any objection to his marrying *her*.'

'A woman of seven and twenty,' said Marianne, after pausing a moment, 'can never hope to feel or inspire affection again, and if her home be uncomfortable, or her fortune small, I can suppose that she might **bring herself to** submit to the offices
45 of a nurse, for the sake of the provision¹¹ and security of a wife. In his marrying such a woman therefore there would be nothing unsuitable¹². It would be a **compact** of convenience, and the world would be satisfied. In my eyes it would be no marriage at all, but that would be nothing. To me it would seem only a commercial exchange, in which each wished to be benefited at the expense of the other.'

50 'It would be impossible, I know,' replied Elinor, 'to convince you that a woman of seven and twenty could feel for a man of thirty-five anything near enough to love, to make him a desirable companion to her. But I must object to your **dooming** Colonel Brandon and his wife to the constant confinement of a sick chamber, merely because he chanced¹³ to complain yesterday (a very cold damp¹⁴ day) of a slight¹⁵ rheumatic feel in
55 one of his shoulders.'

'But he talked of flannel waistcoats¹⁶,' said Marianne; 'and with me a flannel waistcoat is invariably connected with aches, cramps, rheumatisms, and every species of **ailment** that can afflict the old and the feeble¹⁷.'

60 'Had he been only in a violent fever, you would not have despised¹⁸ him half so much. Confess, Marianne, is not there something interesting to you in the flushed cheek, hollow eye, and quick pulse¹⁹ of a fever?'

Soon after this, upon Elinor's leaving the room, 'Mama,' said Marianne, 'I have an alarm on the subject of illness which I cannot **conceal** from you. I am sure Edward Ferrars is not well. We have now been here almost a fortnight, and yet he does not
65 come. Nothing but real indisposition could occasion this extraordinary delay. What else can detain him at Norland?'

'Had you any idea of his coming so soon?' said Mrs Dashwood. 'I had none. On the contrary, if I have felt any anxiety at all on the subject, it has been in recollecting that he sometimes showed a want²⁰ of pleasure and readiness in accepting my invitation, when
70 I talked of his coming to Barton. Does Elinor expect him already?'

'I have never mentioned it to her, but of course she must.'

'I rather think you are mistaken, for when I was talking to her yesterday of getting a new grate for the spare bedchamber²¹, she observed that there was no immediate hurry for it, as it was not likely²² that the room would be wanted for some time.'

75 'How strange this is! What can be the meaning of it! But the whole of their behaviour to each other has been unaccountable²³! How cold, how composed were their last adieus! How languid their conversation the last evening of their being together! In Edward's **farewell** there was no distinction between Elinor and me: it was the good wishes of an affectionate brother to both. Twice did I leave them purposely²⁴
80 together in the course of the last morning, and each time did he most unaccountably follow me out of the room. And Elinor, in quitting²⁵ Norland and Edward, cried not as I did. Even now her self-command²⁶ is invariable. When is she dejected²⁷ or melancholy? When does she try to avoid society²⁸, or appear **restless** and dissatisfied in it?'

■

9 at this rate. Di questo passo.

10 if there ... to be. Se per caso ci dovesse essere.

11 to the offices ... provision. Ai doveri di infermiera per avere assicurata la sicurezza finanziaria.

12 unsuitable. Sconveniente.

13 he chanced. Gli è capitato.

14 damp. Umido.

15 slight. Lieve.

16 flannel waistcoats. Gilè di flanella.

17 the feeble. I deboli.

18 despised. Disprezzato.

19 flushed ... pulse. Guancia accaldata, occhio incavato e polso accelerato.

20 want. Mancanza.

21 spare bedchamber. Camera degli ospiti.

22 it was not likely. Era improbabile.

23 unaccountable. Inspiegabile.

24 purposely. Di proposito.

25 in quitting. Nel lasciare.

26 self-command. Autocontrollo.

27 dejected. Depressa.

28 avoid society. Evitare la compagnia.



LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | | | |
|---|--|----|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | state that something is not true | 7 | knowledge |
| 2 | persuade herself | 8 | contract |
| 3 | condemning | 9 | express dissatisfaction or pain |
| 4 | confirmed | 10 | imagination |
| 5 | hide | 11 | uneasy, not quiet |
| 6 | persistent illness | 12 | goodbye |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and say which five different characters are the following.

- 1 She enjoys match making:
- 2 She is 17 years old:
- 3 Marianne thinks him old:
- 4 Marianne thinks he is really ill:
- 5 She did not cry when she left Norland:

3 FIND one more fact about each of these characters from the text.

4 EXPLAIN:

- 1 why Mrs Jennings thinks that Marianne and Colonel Brandon would be an excellent match;
- 2 why Marianne thinks that the only marriage for Colonel Brandon is with a woman of 27;
- 3 why Mrs Dashwood thinks Edward Ferrars will not visit them.

5 HOW does Marianne describe her sister's personality towards the end of the passage?

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

6 POINT out the dominant narrative mode. Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Dialogue.
- ☐ Narration.
- ☐ Description.

7 FOCUS on the narrator. It is

- 1 first-person / third-person;
- 2 obtrusive / unobtrusive.

**8 IRONY** is the hallmark of Jane Austen's work.

Irony works when one person (the reader or character) knows something that another character does not. The unknowing characters then reveal something about themselves, unaware that they are doing so.

We (the readers) and Mrs Jennings, Mrs Dashwood and Elinor know that 35 is not too old for love and marriage. We and they also know that marriage was the essential security for a young woman at that time.

Marianne does not know this, and she reveals her own ideas about love and marriage.

- 1 What does one have to be like to be in love, according to Marianne (lines 21-26)? What is her idea of the perfect marriage (lines 42-49)?
- 2 What are the author's aims in using irony? Tick as appropriate.
 - ☐ To condemn the object of parody before we may observe it in action.
 - ☐ To reveal character.
 - ☐ To introduce a moral comment.
 - ☐ To direct the reader's attention to a relevant topic.

9 ANALYSE Austen's method of characterisation. She presents characters both 'directly' and 'indirectly'. Consider the character of Mrs Jennings. How is she introduced? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Through the other characters' thoughts.
- ☐ Through her own thoughts.
- ☐ Through the narrator's words.
- ☐ Through the other characters' words.

Which kind of characterisation is this, direct or indirect?

10 AUSTEN's characters are never either good or bad. How does the author show that Mrs Jennings is both interfering and gossipy, but also kind?**11 EXPLAIN** how both Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars are described indirectly.**12 STATE** the theme of the passage. Various kinds of marriage are considered. Two are expressed by Marianne – one she criticises and the other she idealises. What are they? Is Mrs Jennings's idea of marriage one of these or different?**13 EXPLAIN** the contrast between sense and sensibility introduced through the two sisters. What in the text makes clear that Marianne represents sensibility and Elinor stands for sense?

Marianne = sensibility →

Elinor = sense →

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE**14 CONSIDER** the title of the novel and relate it to the changing view of man's essential nature in the Romantic Age.

> COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**15 DISCUSS.** What does your judgement of people rely on?