

sense and sensibility jane austen

Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen: A Timeless Tale of Love and Reason

sense and sensibility jane austen is more than just the title of one of the most beloved novels in English literature—it represents a fascinating exploration of human emotions, societal expectations, and the delicate balance between reason and feeling. Written by Jane Austen and first published in 1811, this novel has captivated readers for over two centuries with its witty prose, memorable characters, and insightful commentary on the social norms of Regency-era England. If you've ever wondered what makes *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen's enduring masterpiece, this article will take you on a journey through its themes, characters, and cultural significance, offering a fresh perspective on why it remains so relevant today.

The Genesis of *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen

Before diving into the story itself, it's worth understanding a bit about the novel's origins. Originally titled "Elinor and Marianne," *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen was Austen's first published novel. The title change, suggested by the publisher, reflects the central thematic contrast between the two sisters around whom the story revolves. Elinor represents "sense" — embodying logic, restraint, and social propriety — while Marianne symbolizes "sensibility," characterized by emotion, spontaneity, and romantic idealism.

Jane Austen's sharp observation of the social dynamics of her time shines through in the novel. She deftly critiques the limitations placed on women in the early 19th century, especially concerning inheritance laws and marriage prospects. The Dashwood sisters' financial struggles after their father's death highlight these inequalities, setting the stage for a story that is as much about survival and adaptation as it is about love.

Exploring the Central Characters: Elinor and Marianne Dashwood

One of the reasons *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen resonates so well is because of its richly drawn characters. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are contrasting figures, yet they complement each other perfectly, creating a dynamic tension that drives the narrative forward.

Elinor Dashwood: The Voice of Reason

Elinor is the embodiment of restraint and practicality. Throughout the novel, she navigates her emotions cautiously, putting the needs of her family above her own desires. Her sense of duty and propriety sometimes causes her to suppress her feelings, especially in her relationship with Edward Ferrars. Yet, her strength lies in her ability to balance reason with

genuine compassion, making her one of Austen's most nuanced heroines.

Marianne Dashwood: The Heart's Advocate

In contrast, Marianne wears her heart on her sleeve. She is passionate, impulsive, and guided by her emotions, often to her detriment. Her romantic entanglement with John Willoughby is a testament to her idealistic view of love, which clashes with societal expectations. Marianne's journey is one of growth, as she learns to temper her sensibility with a dose of realism, ultimately finding a more balanced approach to life and love.

Themes That Resonate: Why Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen Endures

Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen is rich with themes that continue to strike a chord with modern readers. Let's delve into a few key ideas that make the novel timeless.

Love and Marriage: More Than Just Romance

At its core, the novel explores different facets of love and marriage, exposing the complexities behind these relationships. Austen doesn't romanticize marriage as merely a happy ending; instead, she portrays it as a social contract influenced by economic necessity, personal compatibility, and emotional fulfillment. The contrasting relationships — from Elinor and Edward's quiet, steady affection to Marianne and Willoughby's fiery but unstable passion — offer a broad spectrum of what love can look like.

Social Class and Economic Security

The Dashwood sisters' financial predicament after their father's death highlights the precarious position of women in a patriarchal society. With limited opportunities for independence, women's futures were largely dependent on advantageous marriages. Austen uses this backdrop to critique social structures and to emphasize the importance of prudence and foresight, especially for women navigating a rigid class system.

Sense Versus Sensibility: Finding Balance

Perhaps the most famous theme of the novel is the contrast between sense and sensibility — reason versus emotion. Rather than advocating for one over the other, Austen illustrates the necessity of balancing both. Through her characters' experiences, the novel suggests that neither cold rationality nor unchecked passion alone leads to happiness; instead, true fulfillment comes from integrating heart and mind.

The Literary Style and Narrative Technique

Jane Austen's distinctive narrative style is a significant part of what makes *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen so enjoyable to read. Her use of free indirect discourse allows readers to closely follow the inner thoughts of characters while maintaining the author's witty and ironic voice. This technique creates a layered storytelling experience where empathy and critique coexist.

Her prose is elegant yet accessible, filled with sharp social commentary that is as humorous as it is insightful. The dialogues are crisp and often laden with subtext, revealing much about character relationships and societal pressures. Austen's ability to weave humor and seriousness together makes the novel both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Adaptations and Cultural Impact

Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen has inspired numerous adaptations across various media, each bringing its own interpretation of the story to new audiences. From the acclaimed 1995 film directed by Ang Lee, starring Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet, to television miniseries, stage plays, and even modern retellings, the novel's themes continue to resonate.

These adaptations often highlight different aspects of the story, whether focusing on the romantic elements, the social critique, or the character dynamics. They serve as a testament to the novel's flexibility and enduring appeal, proving that Jane Austen's exploration of human nature is universal and timeless.

Why Modern Readers Still Turn to *Sense and Sensibility*

In today's fast-paced, digitally driven world, the themes of *Sense and Sensibility* remain surprisingly relevant. Readers find comfort in the novel's exploration of emotional intelligence, the complexity of relationships, and the challenges of navigating societal expectations. Moreover, Austen's balanced portrayal of reason and feeling invites reflection on how we manage our own lives and emotions.

For those new to Austen or classic literature, *Sense and Sensibility* offers an accessible entry point. It combines engaging storytelling with rich thematic depth, making it a rewarding read that sparks both enjoyment and contemplation.

Tips for Reading *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen

If you're considering diving into *Sense and Sensibility*, here are a few tips to enhance your experience:

- **Take note of the social context:** Understanding the Regency era's social norms helps in appreciating the characters' motivations and constraints.
- **Pay attention to character contrasts:** Elinor and Marianne's differing approaches to life and love are central to the narrative's tension and message.
- **Enjoy Austen's wit:** Look out for irony and humor woven into the dialogue and narration—they add layers of meaning.
- **Reflect on the themes:** Consider how the balance of sense and sensibility applies to contemporary life.

Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen is not just a story of two sisters but a profound meditation on how we navigate the complexities of emotion and reason in our own lives. Whether you're captivated by romance, intrigued by societal critique, or simply charmed by Austen's prose, this novel offers a rich literary experience that continues to inspire readers worldwide.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of Jane Austen's 'Sense and Sensibility'?

The central theme of 'Sense and Sensibility' is the contrast between reason and emotion, embodied by the two main characters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, exploring how each approach affects their lives and relationships.

How do the characters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood represent 'sense' and 'sensibility'?

Elinor represents 'sense' with her rationality, restraint, and practicality, while Marianne embodies 'sensibility' through her emotional expressiveness, impulsiveness, and romantic idealism.

In what ways does 'Sense and Sensibility' critique societal expectations of women in the early 19th century?

'Sense and Sensibility' critiques societal expectations by highlighting the limited financial independence and social mobility of women, emphasizing the importance of marriage for security and status, and challenging the idea that women should suppress their emotions.

How does Jane Austen use irony in 'Sense and Sensibility'?

Jane Austen uses irony to subtly criticize social conventions and character flaws, often highlighting the disparity between appearances and reality, such as in the behavior of characters like Mrs. Ferrars and Lucy Steele.

What role does social class play in the relationships depicted in 'Sense and Sensibility'?

Social class significantly influences the characters' relationships, affecting marriage prospects, financial security, and social acceptance, as seen in the challenges faced by the Dashwood sisters and their suitors.

How has 'Sense and Sensibility' been adapted for modern audiences?

'Sense and Sensibility' has been adapted into various films, television series, and stage productions, with notable adaptations including the 1995 film directed by Ang Lee and the 2008 BBC miniseries, both of which bring contemporary relevance to Austen's exploration of love and social norms.

What is the significance of the novel's title 'Sense and Sensibility'?

The title 'Sense and Sensibility' reflects the duality between logic and emotion, reason and feeling, which are central to the novel's exploration of human behavior and relationships, embodied by the contrasting personalities of the Dashwood sisters.

Additional Resources

Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen: A Timeless Exploration of Emotion and Reason

sense and sensibility jane austen stands as a seminal work in English literature, marking the author's debut novel and setting the stage for her enduring legacy. Published in 1811, this novel offers a nuanced exploration of the dichotomy between rationality and emotion, embodied by its two central characters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. Austen's insightful commentary on social conventions, gender roles, and economic precariousness continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike, securing the novel's place as a classic.

In-Depth Analysis of Sense and Sensibility Jane

Austen

Sense and Sensibility is fundamentally a study in contrasts, both thematically and stylistically. Austen deliberately juxtaposes the qualities of “sense” — practical wisdom, restraint, and social decorum — against “sensibility,” which represents emotional openness, spontaneity, and passion. This binary not only drives the plot but also reflects broader Enlightenment debates about the role of reason and feeling in human affairs.

The narrative follows the fortunes of the Dashwood sisters, whose lives are upended by the death of their father and the subsequent loss of their family estate. This financial displacement forces them to navigate the precarious social landscape of Regency England, highlighting the limited options available to women of their class. Through this lens, Austen critiques the economic vulnerabilities inherent in the inheritance laws of the time, a theme that adds a socio-political dimension to the novel’s emotional core.

Character Dynamics and Psychological Depth

Elinor Dashwood, representing “sense,” embodies restraint and prudence. Her internal struggles reveal the constraints placed on women to manage their emotions carefully to maintain social standing. In contrast, Marianne Dashwood’s “sensibility” manifests as intense emotional expressiveness and impulsiveness, which ultimately leads to personal hardship but also growth. Austen does not idealize either trait but rather presents both as necessary human qualities, suggesting a balance is essential for well-being.

The male characters, such as Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon, serve as foils to the sisters, offering different models of masculinity and romantic suitability. Notably, Edward’s quiet dignity contrasts with the flamboyant and unreliable John Willoughby, who embodies the dangers of unchecked sensibility. Through these relationships, Austen investigates the interplay between social expectations and personal desires.

Social Commentary and Gender Roles

Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen weaves a sharp critique of the gender and class structures of early 19th-century Britain. The novel underscores the precarious position of women who, without independent wealth or property, depended heavily on advantageous marriages for security. Austen’s portrayal of the Dashwood sisters’ financial hardships sheds light on the systemic inequities faced by women, making the novel an early feminist text in its subtle advocacy for female agency.

Moreover, Austen exposes the performative nature of social manners and the superficial judgments that often dictate interpersonal relationships. The emphasis on decorum and reputation permeates the narrative, reflecting the rigid social codes that govern behavior, particularly for women. This focus invites readers to question the fairness and rigidity of such norms.

Thematic Exploration and Literary Style

Austen's prose in *Sense and Sensibility* is marked by wit, irony, and a keen eye for social detail. Her narrative voice balances humor with empathy, allowing readers to critically engage with the characters without losing sympathy. The novel's pacing and structure, with its interwoven subplots and character arcs, demonstrate Austen's skill in crafting a cohesive and compelling story that transcends its period setting.

Thematically, the novel interrogates the tension between individual desires and societal expectations, a conflict that remains relevant. Austen's exploration of emotional intelligence versus rational judgment anticipates later developments in psychological realism, making the book a precursor to modern novelistic concerns.

Comparisons with Other Austen Works

When compared to Austen's subsequent novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* exhibits a more overt moral dichotomy between emotion and reason. While *Pride and Prejudice* is often celebrated for its spirited heroine and social satire, *Sense and Sensibility*'s appeal lies in its more introspective and sentimental approach. It sets the foundation for Austen's exploration of female subjectivity and social critique, themes she refines in her later works.

In terms of character complexity, the Dashwood sisters are arguably among Austen's most psychologically nuanced protagonists. Their distinct yet complementary personalities allow for an examination of different responses to adversity, a narrative richness that enhances the novel's enduring appeal.

Adaptations and Cultural Impact

The cultural footprint of *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen is vast, with numerous adaptations spanning film, television, and stage. The 1995 film adaptation directed by Ang Lee brought renewed attention to the novel, praised for its faithful representation and strong performances, notably by Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet. This adaptation highlighted the timelessness of Austen's themes and introduced the story to a broader contemporary audience.

Beyond entertainment, *Sense and Sensibility* continues to inspire academic discourse, particularly in feminist literary studies and historical analyses of Regency society. Its exploration of emotional expression versus societal constraint remains pertinent in discussions about gender and class today.

Key Features and Pros & Cons of *Sense and*

Sensibility

- **Features:** Dual narrative focusing on two sisters, exploration of emotion versus reason, incisive social critique, rich character development, and witty prose.
- **Pros:** Timeless themes, relatable characters, insightful social commentary, and stylistic elegance.
- **Cons:** Some readers may find the pacing slow compared to modern novels, and the Regency-era social context may require background knowledge for full appreciation.

Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen remains a pivotal work that bridges the sentimental novel tradition with emerging realist tendencies. Its nuanced portrayal of human nature, combined with sharp social observation, ensures its relevance across centuries. For readers and scholars interested in literary history, gender studies, and the evolution of the novel, Austen's debut remains a rich and rewarding text to explore.

Sense And Sensibility Jane Austen

sense and sensibility jane austen: Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen, 2001-04-03 Jane Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, is a witty satire of the sentimental novel, a popular genre in Britain throughout the 1790s and the Regency. When it first appeared in 1811, the words in its title carried significant cultural weight beyond the confines of the novel, and into both popular and learned discourse. Through her dual heroines, Austen addresses, and satirizes, notions of sense and sensibility, and engages with the issues of inheritance, marriage, and love. The story concerns two sisters: the level-headed Elinor and the passionate and impulsive Marianne. When their father dies, his son by a previous marriage assumes possession of the family home. Marianne and Elinor, left to the care of their mercenary brother John and his wife Fanny, must remove to a cottage with their mother. Each sister meets a man in whom she is interested, and as with other Austen novels, requited love does not come easily. This newly annotated edition offers a thorough and perceptive introduction and a wide range of carefully selected contextual materials that further explore the term sensibility.

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sense and sensibility jane austen: *Sense & Sensibility* Jane Austen, 2023-12-14 In her seminal work, *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen masterfully explores the intricate interplay of reason and emotion as embodied by the contrasting sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. The novel is characterized by Austen's signature wit, keen social observation, and incisive commentary on the constraints of 19th-century English society, particularly in matters of love and financial

security. Through carefully crafted dialogue and vivid characterization, Austen constructs a narrative that critiques societal norms while evoking a deep understanding of human relationships and moral dilemmas. Jane Austen, known for her sharp intellect and astute observations of her contemporaries, drew inspiration from her experiences within the landed gentry and the complexities of social hierarchies. Her life in close-knit rural communities, along with her extensive reading of contemporary literature, shaped her narrative voice and thematic preoccupations. *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811, serves as a poignant reflection of her reflections on gender dynamics, agency, and the pursuit of happiness in a restrictive society. This novel is essential reading for anyone interested in romantic literature and social commentary. Austen's nuanced exploration of rationality and passion offers enduring insights into the tensions of personal fulfillment versus societal expectation. *Sense and Sensibility* remains a timeless classic, inviting readers to engage with its multidimensional characters and their transformative journeys.

sense and sensibility jane austen: *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen, 2004-03-11 In her first published novel, Jane Austen presents us with the subtle portraits of two contrasting but equally compelling heroines. Through their parallel experiences of love, loss, and hope, she offers a powerful analysis of the ways in which women's lives were shaped by the claustrophobic society in which they had to survive. This revised edition contains new notes, appendices, chronology, and bibliography.

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.0000000000 Two sisters of opposing temperament but who share the pangs of tragic love provide the subjects for *Sense and Sensibility*. Elinor, practical and conventional, the epitome of sense, desires a man who is promised to another woman. Marianne, emotional and sentimental, the epitome of sensibility, loses her heart to a scoundrel who jilts her. True love finally triumphs when sense gives way to sensibility. Illustrated by Hugh Thomson, with an Afterword by Henry Hitchings.

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sense and sensibility jane austen: Sense/Sensibility 27 Jane Austen, 1996-02-01

sense and sensibility jane austen: Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen, 2016-07-16 *Sense and sensibility* : a novel, By Jane Austen (World's Classics) complete in one volume--new edition. Romance, Novel. *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel by Jane Austen, and was her first published work when it appeared in 1811 under the pseudonym A Lady. A work of romantic fiction, better known as a comedy of manners, *Sense and Sensibility* is set in southwest England, London and Kent between 1792 and 1797, and portrays the life and loves of the Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne. The novel follows the young ladies to their new home, a meagre cottage on a distant relative's property, where they experience love, romance and heartbreak. Jane Austen wrote the first draft of the novel in the form of a novel-in-letters (epistolary form) sometime around 1795 when she was about 19 years old, and gave it the title *Elinor and Marianne*. She later changed the form to a narrative and the title to *Sense and Sensibility*. Sense in the book means good judgment or prudence, and sensibility means sensitivity or emotionality. Sense is identified with the character of Elinor, while sensibility is identified with the character of Marianne. By changing the title, Austen added philosophical depth to what began as a sketch of two characters. The title of the book, and that of her next published novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), may be suggestive of political conflicts of the 1790s. plot--When Mr. Henry Dashwood dies, his house, Norland Park, passes directly to his only son John, the child of his first wife. His second wife, Mrs. Dashwood, and their daughters, Elinor, Marianne and Margaret, are left only a small income. On his deathbed, Mr. Dashwood extracts a promise from his son, that he

will take care of his half-sisters; however, John's selfish and greedy wife, Fanny, soon persuades him to renege. John and Fanny immediately take up their place as the new owners of Norland, while the Dashwood women are reduced to the position of unwelcome guests. Mrs. Dashwood begins looking for somewhere else to live. In the meantime, Fanny's brother, Edward Ferrars, a pleasant, unassuming, intelligent but reserved young man, visits Norland and soon forms an attachment with Elinor. Fanny disapproves the match and offends Mrs. Dashwood with the implication that Elinor is motivated by money rather than love. Mrs. Dashwood indignantly speeds her search for a new home. Mrs. Dashwood moves her family to Barton Cottage in Devonshire, near the home of her cousin, Sir John Middleton. Their new home lacks many of the conveniences that they have been used to; however, they are warmly received by Sir John, and welcomed into the local society-meeting his wife, Lady Middleton, his mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings and his friend, the grave, quiet and gentlemanly Colonel Brandon. It soon becomes apparent that Colonel Brandon is attracted to Marianne, and Mrs. Jennings teases them about it. Marianne is not pleased as she considers the thirty-five-year-old Colonel Brandon an old bachelor, incapable of falling in love or inspiring love in anyone else. Marianne, out for a walk, gets caught in the rain, slips and sprains her ankle. The dashing, handsome John Willoughby sees the accident and assists her. Marianne quickly comes to admire his good looks and outspoken views on poetry, music, art and love. Mr. Willoughby's attentions are so overt that Elinor and Mrs. Dashwood begin to suspect that the couple are secretly engaged. Elinor cautions Marianne against her unguarded conduct, but Marianne refuses to check her emotions, believing that it is a falsehood. Unexpectedly one day, Mr. Willoughby informs the Dashwoods that his aunt is sending him to London on business, indefinitely. Marianne is distraught and abandons herself to her sorrow. Edward Ferrars then pays a short visit to Barton Cottage but seems unhappy and out of sorts. Elinor fears that he no longer has feelings for her, but feels compelled, by a sense of duty, to protect her family from knowing her heartache.....

sense and sensibility jane austen: The Annotated Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen, David M. Shapard, 2012-02-02 From the editor of the popular Annotated Pride and Prejudice comes an annotated edition of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* that makes this tale of two sisters in love an even more enjoyable read. Here is the complete text of the novel with more than 2,000 annotations on facing pages, including: • Explanations of historical context • Citations from Austen's life, letters, and other writings • Definitions and clarifications • Literary comments and analysis • Multiple maps of England and London • An introduction, bibliography, and detailed chronology of events • More than 100 informative illustrations Filled with fascinating information about everything from the rules of inheritance that could leave a wealthy man's daughters almost penniless to the fashionable cult of sensibility that Austen so brilliantly satirizes, David M. Shapard's Annotated *Sense and Sensibility* is an entertaining and edifying delight.

sense and sensibility jane austen: Sense and Sensibility: The Jane Austen Illustrated Edition Jane Austen, 2010-07-01 This special edition of *Sense and Sensibility* includes the famous illustrations by Charles Edmond Brock, created in 1898. Brock and his brothers were all successful illustrators of the day and often posed for each other using costumes, props and furniture in their Cambridge studio. Brock's younger brother, Henry, also illustrated Austen's books and joined him in illustrating other Austen releases for this set of 1898 editions. *Sense and Sensibility*, first published in 1811, was Austen's first published novel. The story revolves around the Misses Dashwood, Elinor and Marianne, left in reduced circumstances after their father's death. Their new home is a cottage on a distant relative's property, where they experience both romance and heartbreak. Marianne meets the dashing John Willoughby who courts her with poetry and flowers. Meanwhile, staid, sober neighbor Colonel Brandon also falls in love with Marianne, but she makes her preference for his rival clear. Elinor is in love with the diffident Edward Ferrars, a young man of good breeding and high moral standing. Their sentiments are quite compatible but his ambitious sister Fanny has other plans for him and works to separate these kindred souls. As true love finds its way to persevering over all obstacles, the impetuous sister gains maturity and balance and the cautious sister has her emotional awakening.

sense and sensibility jane austen: Sense and Sensibility (Jane Austen Collection) Jane Austen, 2023-11-07 Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is now available in an exclusive collector's edition featuring a delicate laser-cut jacket on a textured book with foil stamping and ribbon marker, ideal for fiction lovers and book collectors alike. The *Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen Collection Edition*: Presents Jane Austen's beloved classic, widely regarded as a shining example of Romantic epistolary fiction, and after *Pride and Prejudice*, solidifying Austen's place in literature's pantheon of great writers. Explores such important themes as the legal ramifications of love and marriage in high society, sense (rational thought) vs. sensibility (emotions), gender roles in the eighteenth century, and the harmful effects of wealth and greed on relationships. Is ideal for special-edition book collectors, Jane Austen aficionados, fans of literary fiction and classic literature, and people who love both the book and the movies it inspires. Whether you're buying this as a gift or for yourself, this remarkable limited edition features: Beautiful hardcover with a distinctive one-of-a-kind, high-end/high-treatment laser-cut jacket, perfect for standing out on any discerning fiction lover's bookshelf. Decorative interior pages featuring pull quotes distributed throughout. Part of a 6-volume Jane Austen series including *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*. For Elinor Dashwood, sensible and sensitive, and her romantic, impetuous younger sister Marianne, the prospect of marrying the men they love appears remote. In a world ruled by money and self-interest, the Dashwood sisters have neither fortune nor connections. Concerned for others and for social proprieties, Elinor is ill-equipped to compete with self-centered fortune-hunters like Lucy Steele, while Marianne's unswerving belief in the truth of her own feelings makes her more dangerously susceptible to the designs of unscrupulous men. *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen is one of six titles completing the Jane Austen collection, which includes *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Northanger Abbey*.

sense and sensibility jane austen: Sense and Sensibility Jane Austen, 2021-07-19 *Sense and Sensibility*, a novel by Jane Austen that was published anonymously in three volumes in 1811 and that became a classic. The satirical, comic work offers a vivid depiction of 19th-century middle-class life as it follows the romantic relationships of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. *Sense and Sensibility* tell the story of the impoverished Dashwood family, focusing on the sisters Elinor and Marianne, personifications of good sense (common sense), and sensibility (emotionality), respectively. They become destitute upon the death of their father, who leaves his home, Norland Park, to their half-brother, John. Although instructed to take care of his sisters, John is dissuaded of his duty by his greedy wife, Fanny. The family--which, in addition to Elinor and Marianne, includes their mother and a younger sister--moves to Barton Cottage in Devonshire. There the open and enthusiastic Marianne meets Colonel Brandon, a staid and settled bachelor 20 years her senior. Although he expresses an interest in Marianne, she discourages his attention and instead becomes infatuated with the attractive John Willoughby, who seems to be a romantic lover but is in reality an unscrupulous fortune hunter. He deserts Marianne for an heiress, and she eventually makes a sensible marriage with Colonel Brandon. During this time, Marianne's elder sister, the prudent and discreet Elinor, and Edward Ferrars, Fanny's brother, have formed an attachment. However, she is outwardly reserved about her affections, especially after learning that he has been secretly engaged to Lucy Steele for several years. Although Edward loves Elinor, he is determined to honor his commitment to Lucy. When the engagement is revealed, Edward is disowned, and Colonel Brandon offers him a living as a clergyman. Later Elinor is told that Mr. Ferrars has married. Believing that the Mr. Ferrars in question is Edward, she is both shocked and relieved to discover that Lucy has wed Edward's brother, Robert. Edward arrives at Barton Cottage and proposes to Elinor, who accepts.

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