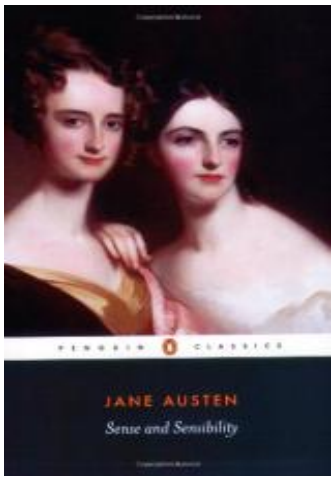
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Sense and Sensibility

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

Though the domain of Jane Austen?s novels was as circumscribed as her life, her caustic wit and keen observation made her the equal of the greatest novelists in any language.

Born the seventh child of the rector of Steventon, Hampshire, on December 16, 1775, Austen was educated mainly at home. At an early age she began writing sketches and satires of popular novels for her family?s entertainment. As a clergyman?s daughter from a well-connected family, she had ample opportunity to study the habits of the middle class, the gentry and the aristocracy. At 21, she began a novel called ?The First Impressions,? an early version of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. In 1801, on her father?s retirement, the family moved to the fashionable resort of Bath. Two years later she sold the first version of NORTHANGER ABBEY to a London publisher, but the first of her novels to appear in print was SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, published at her own expense in 1811. It was followed by PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (1813), MANSFIELD PARK (1814) and EMMA (1815).

After her father died in 1805, the family first moved to Southampton then to Chawton Cottage in Hampshire. Despite this relative retirement, Jane Austen was still in touch with a wider world, mainly through her brothers; one had become a very rich country gentleman, another a London banker, and two were naval officers. Though her many novels were published anonymously, she had many early and devoted readers, among them the Prince Regent and Sir Walter Scott. In 1816, in declining health, Austen wrote PERSUASION and revised NORTHANGER ABBEY. Her last work,

SANDITION, was left unfinished at her death on July 18, 1817.

Austen was buried in Winchester Cathedral. Her identity as an author was announced to the world posthumously by her brother Henry, who supervised the publication of NORTHANGER ABBEY and PERSUASION in 1818.

Critical Praise

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

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