

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Sense and Sensibility (Unabridged)

by
Jane Austen

Book Information

Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility (Unabridged)

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Interest Level: UG

This is a classic novel of manners and morals in eighteenth-century England.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, England; Emotions, Love; Emotions, Sadness; Family Life, Sisters; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Romance, Romance (All); Series, Modern Library Classics

Main Characters

Colonel Brandon a country gentleman who becomes a trusted and loyal friend of the Miss Dashwoods and eventually marries Marianne

Edward Ferrars Mrs. John Dashwood's brother, a kind and sensible man, who loves Elinor, but is bound by a youthful engagement to Lucy Steele

Elinor Dashwood a sensible and caring young woman of marriageable age who falls in love with Edward Ferrars

Fanny Dashwood John's wife, who influences her husband to treat his father's family poorly

John Dashwood the late Mr. Dashwood's son from a previous marriage, who allows his wife to manipulate him into banishing his sisters and step-mother from Norland

John Willoughby a dashing and romantic young gentleman, who falls in love with Marianne, but abandons her to marry a wealthy woman

Lady Middleton Sir John's wife, who is sophisticated, but dull and rather cold

Lucy Steele a young woman of questionable breeding, who tortures Elinor with talk of her engagement to Edward, but finally marries his brother

Marianne Dashwood Elinor's sister, an emotional girl who falls passionately in love with John Willoughby and suffers greatly as a result

Mrs. Dashwood the girls' affectionate and reliable mother, who loses her husband and home at the beginning of the story

Mrs. Jennings Lady Middleton's mother, who is talkative and impetuous, but truly kind and solicitous of the Miss Dashwoods

Sir John Middleton a kind, sociable, but shallow cousin of Mrs. Dashwood, who offers the family the use of Barton Cottage

Vocabulary

curricle a light, two-wheeled carriage drawn by two horses side by side

gaucherie awkwardness or tactlessness

Michaelmas the feast of the archangel, Michael, celebrated on September 29

penury lack of money, property, or necessities

sangfroid from the French meaning "cold blood;" cool self-possession or composure

sanguine cheerful and confident, optimistic and hopeful

vouchsafe to be gracious enough to give or grant

Synopsis

As the story opens, the Dashwood sisters and their mother are leaving their childhood home to take a small cottage in Devonshire. Their change in fortune comes about as the result of the death of Mr. Dashwood and the self-interest of his son and heir, John Dashwood.

At Barton cottage, the family falls in with their benefactors, Sir John and Lady Middleton, and the guests of Barton Park, and they find life pleasant and comfortable.

One day, Marianne is rescued from a fall by the dashing John Willoughby, and the two instantly find

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in each other kindred spirits. Before long, their engagement is assumed by all. One visitor at Barton is not happy with this news. Colonel Brandon has fallen in love with the vivacious Marianne, but the young lady perceives him as a man well past his prime. Elinor, meanwhile, longs for Edward, the man with whom she had an "understanding," and wonders why he fails to visit the cottage.

When Mrs. Jennings invites the elder Miss Dashwoods to visit her in London, Elinor is reluctant, but Marianne jumps at the chance to be "in town" with Willoughby. Weeks pass without a meeting, and finally, Willoughby is seen at a dance in the company of another young lady. Willoughby's subsequent cold letter to Marianne informs her he will marry another, and Marianne is plunged into a violent grief that eventually robs her of her health.

In the meantime, Elinor learns that Edward has been engaged for four years to a frivolous relative of Mrs. Jennings named Lucy Steele. Elinor becomes Lucy's confidante and behaves with studied forbearance in the face of this grave disappointment.

A crisis occurs in the life of the Dashwoods when Marianne contracts an illness and goes quickly from bad to worse. When it appears that the end is near for her, Willoughby appears once again. He explains that he has loved Marianne all along and married only for money. Marianne makes a surprising recovery, and the girls return to Barton cottage. While Marianne is convalescing at home, Elinor reveals Willoughby's protestation of regard for her, and it brings comfort to Marianne.

At the same time, a servant reports seeing "Mr. and Mrs. Ferrars" - Edward has married Lucy Steele! Although long anticipated, the reality of Edward's marriage is an extreme trial for Elinor. It is then that Edward himself appears at Barton Cottage, and after a confusing exchange between the two, it is revealed that Lucy married Mr. Robert Ferrars. Elinor then joyously accepts Edward's proposal of marriage.

Elinor joins her husband in the parsonage of Delaford, where he has accepted the "living." Marianne eventually responds to the tender attentions of Colonel Brandon, and the story ends with the two sisters married to the men who seem the best for them.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why was Elinor so determined to bear Lucy's confidences about her engagement to Edward without revealing her own feelings?

There were several reasons for Elinor's remarkable forbearance. First, the reader gets the impression that Lucy strove to deliberately flaunt her engagement under the guise of friendship, presumably because she knew of Elinor's affection for Edward. Elinor likely did not want to give Lucy the satisfaction of seeing her contrivance work. Secondly, Elinor was concerned for her family and knew that seeing her hurt would upset them. Finally, Elinor likely felt a little chastened and foolish, assuming a relationship with Edward that, to all appearances, was quite one-sided.

Literary Analysis

When Marianne was thought to be dying, Willoughby came to confess his misdeeds. In his speech to Elinor, what was it that softened her opinion of him?

Willoughby confessed that it was his own weakness and lack of character that forced him into marrying Miss Grey, even though he had loved Marianne all along. He told Elinor that he had been forced to write the cold letter to Marianne by his wife, and that, in fact, she had dictated the words herself. Finally, he tells her he will pay for his conduct for the rest of his life. "Domestic happiness," he said, "is out of the question."

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Inferential Comprehension

In Chapter 18, Edward and Marianne share an interesting conversation about the attributes of a certain landscape view. Reread the dialogue. How do their opinions about the value of a beautiful "prospect" (view) clarify their basic characters?

Marianne comments that it has become fashionable to extol the virtues of natural landscapes with excessive, flowery language. She confesses that she finds natural beauty so great that she can sometimes find no words to describe it. Edward, on the other hand, appreciates a pleasant view, but is just as moved by the sight of "a troop of tidy, happy villagers." Their characters represent the romantic versus the practical, "sensitivity" versus "sense."

Constructing Meaning

What do you think the author's attitude is about "sensitivity"?

She likely feels it must be tempered by reason and good sense. In the character of Marianne, Jane Austen portrays a young girl who gives free reign to her sensibilities, first allowing herself to fall headlong in love with Willoughby and then indulging in an almost theatrical period of grief over the loss of his affections. She does this without regard to the feelings of her family, and it seems the cause of an almost fatal illness. In the end, Marianne gains a measure of sense to temper her feelings, and this is demonstrated by her marriage to the honorable Colonel Brandon.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting After reading literature from various time periods, it is often interesting to learn more about life and culture at the particular time and place of the novel setting. *Sense and Sensibility* takes place in the English countryside and London of the late 1700s or early 1800s. Ask students to research English culture and life in this time period. What were the expectations for young ladies and gentlemen of the era?

Understanding the Author's Craft If conversation was an art form during the time

period of this novel, letter writing was even more so. The author makes generous use of letters to reveal events and characters in *Sense and Sensibility*. As an exercise in using historical patterns of speech and writing dialogue, ask students to write a letter from Elinor to Mrs. Jennings, inviting her to visit at the Delaford parsonage.

Understanding the Author's Craft It often serves a valuable instructional purpose to review literary criticism and analysis after reading classic literature. Ask students to review two different works of literary criticism on the subject of this book. Using what they have read and their own opinion of *Sense and Sensibility*, ask students to write a short essay on Jane Austen's literary strengths.

Comparing and Contrasting A film version of *Sense and Sensibility* was produced in 1995, and it won an Academy Award for its screenwriter, Emma Thompson. View the film as a class, paying particular attention to the following questions. Is the film completely faithful to the plot as presented in the book? What, if anything, did the screenwriter choose to leave out? Are the characters of Elinor and Marianne more or less developed than they were in the book? Which version of the story provides the more meaningful representation of the theme of the story?