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Opening extract from

Sense and Sensibility

Written by

Jane Austen

Retold by Gill Tavner

Illustrated by

Ann Kronheimer

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THE CHARACTERS



Elinor Dashwood

Elinor believes that emotions should be controlled. Will she be strong enough to hide her own heartache and offer the help her sister needs?



Marianne Dashwood

Marianne has a passion for life. Will her enthusiasm lead her into trouble? Upon whom should she rely?



Edward Ferrars

Gentle Edward longs to be a clergyman. Trapped by a promise made long ago, will he ever find happiness?



John Willoughby

Willoughby is handsome and passionate, and seems an ideal match for Marianne. But can she trust him?



Colonel Brandon

Colonel Brandon is middle-aged, wealthy, shy and generous. Can such a man ever gain Marianne's love?



Lucy Steele

Why does Lucy seek Elinor's friendship? Should Elinor trust her as a friend, or fear her as a rival?



Sir John Middleton and Mrs Jennings

Sir John and his mother-in-law are anxious to help Elinor and Marianne find happiness. Will their match-making succeed, or cause heartache?



SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Our cottage has been very quiet since my two older sisters left. Mama and I often sit together, discussing the events of the last two years. Oh, don't feel sorry for us. We spend half of our time visiting Elinor and Marianne, and even when we are here we are not short of invitations. Our neighbours, Sir John Middleton and his mother-in-law Mrs Jennings, used to show very little interest in me, but now that my sisters are married they seem to have decided that, at the age of fifteen, I am old enough to be their next match-making project. You know how adults can be.

I must admit that I enter this bewildering adult world with some trepidation. After two years watching the confusion, intrigues and intense emotions of my sisters' paths to true love, I cannot help but feel apprehensive about what the next few years might hold in store for me.

Two months ago, when all the heartbreak ended and my second happily married sister left home, I wasn't sure how to fill my time. Now, however, I have decided upon a project. I am going to write it all down, just as I saw it unfold.



When father died, a complication in his will meant that he left all his money to our brother, depending on him to be generous to the rest of us. He wasn't. He moved his family into our beautiful old home at Norland, leaving us to find a modest cottage on a relative's estate in Devon. The day we left Norland, Marianne and I were in agonies of grief as we walked around the grounds.

'Oh, dear Norland; oh, happy house,' wept Marianne. 'Oh, dear trees.' We pressed our cheeks against their trunks, the rain running down them mingling with our tears.

Elinor found us.

'Marianne, Margaret, we must control our emotions for Mama's sake.'

'Oh, unfeeling Elinor,' sighed Marianne, 'you have not our strength of feeling, or you would not be so calm. And you have more reason than we do to be sad, as you will be so many miles from Edward.'

A shadow momentarily clouded Elinor's face. 'Marianne, you know that I greatly esteem Edward Ferrars, indeed I like him, but we really must exert ourselves.'

'Esteem? Like? Oh, cold-hearted Elinor!' retorted Marianne as we all walked back towards the house. After some thought she added, 'I suppose Edward lacks the qualities to inspire stronger feelings. He is kind and honourable, but his eyes lack fire; he lacks passion; he is tame and spiritless.'

'You are unfair to him,' replied Elinor.

When we reached the house, we discovered

that Edward had arrived to bid us farewell. 'So,' he said, looking sadly at Elinor, 'you really are going to Devon. It is so far from here.' Even though Marianne and I tactfully left them alone for ten minutes, Edward did not propose.

Later, in the coach, Elinor excused Edward's low spirits. 'His mother wants him to be wealthy and important, but all Edward wants is a quiet life as a clergyman.'



'Even so,' said Marianne, 'I believe that men ought to feel strongly, to show rapturous delight or deep despair. I shall be satisfied with nothing less in a man.'



We settled surprisingly quickly into Barton Cottage. Our wealthy cousin, Sir John Middleton, occupied Barton Grange, a short walk away. 'Such lovely girls,' he beamed, 'I'm sure you have left some broken hearts behind. Come for dinner next week. We will cheer you up. My wife is keen to meet you, and my mother-in-law will soon discover the secrets of your hearts.'

With gratitude but little enthusiasm, we accepted his invitation. Without any real enjoyment, we met his cold wife and dutifully admired his young son. Elinor and Marianne endured his mother-in-law's teasing. 'Now then, Margaret,' laughed Mrs Jennings,

the sound of their laughter reaching Elinor's cottage. I can't help thinking he's a little too old for such behaviour, but perhaps I'm wrong.



Now they all live close together, a short journey away from Barton. As I said at the beginning, we spend a great deal of time there. We will be travelling again tomorrow. Before that, tonight, Sir John Middleton is throwing a party. He is eager to introduce me to a distant cousin of his. Mrs Jennings is sure that I'll like him.



TAKING THINGS FURTHER

The real read

This *Real Read* version of *Sense and Sensibility* is a retelling of Jane Austen's magnificent work. If you would like to read the full novel in all its original splendour, many complete editions are available, from bargain paperbacks to beautifully-bound hardbacks. You may well find a copy in your local charity shop.

Filling in the spaces

The loss of so many of Jane Austen's original words is a sad but necessary part of the shortening process. We have had to make some difficult decisions, omitting subplots and details, some important, some less so, but all interesting. We have also, at times, taken the liberty of combining two events into one, or of giving a character words or actions that originally belong to another. The points below will fill in some of the gaps, but nothing can beat the original.

- Margaret does not narrate the original *Sense and Sensibility*. She has a very minor role, is not confided in by her sisters, is rarely present, and does not accompany them to London.

- Their brother, John Dashwood, is married to Edward Ferrars' unpleasant sister.

- Jane Austen ensures that we understand that Elinor and Marianne have not been brought up to pursue men.

- Colonel Brandon's admiration for Marianne is evident early on. The reader respects him as a sensitive, sensible man. Amongst their new acquaintances, he is one of the few people Elinor really enjoys talking to.

- Colonel Brandon's story is more complicated than in the *Real Read* retelling. His true love was forced to marry his brother, but the marriage was unhappy. She had a child, Eliza, by another man. Before she died, Colonel Brandon promised to take care of the three-year-old Eliza. Marianne reminds him of his former love.

- At one point Colonel Brandon has to rush to London. Everybody wonders why. We later learn that he had just had news of Eliza's relationship with Willoughby.

- Lucy Steele has an older sister, Ann. It is Ann, rather than Lucy, who frequently talks about 'beaux'. Lucy has enough sense and taste to correct her.

- After the ball in London, Willoughby sends a cold letter to Marianne. We later learn that it was his fiancée, Miss Grey, who dictated it.

- Edward's mother wants him to marry a wealthy lady called Miss Morton.

- Whilst Lucy and Edward are still engaged, there is a very awkward meeting between Lucy, Elinor and Edward. Jane Austen depicts the scene with wonderful humour.

- News of Edward's engagement reaches Marianne and Elinor before news of the marriage.

- When Colonel Brandon believes that Edward will marry Lucy, he offers to help him.
- While Marianne is dangerously ill, Willoughby arrives. He explains his actions to Elinor. He did love Marianne, but still decided to marry for money. Although Elinor feels some sympathy, she still considers him a selfish man.

Back in time

Sense and Sensibility is one of Jane Austen's first novels, written when she was in her early twenties.

In Jane Austen's time, the relationship between marriage and money was very important. Women of her class were neither expected nor educated to work for a living. They therefore depended upon their family. Marrying a wealthy man was the most respectable way to gain independence and achieve comfort.

The moral code governing relationships between men and women was very strict. This is why Marianne's open behaviour with Willoughby is inappropriate without an engagement.

Even writing him a letter is unacceptable. To have been physically forward with him would have been seen as leading Marianne towards the same ruin as that faced by Eliza.

Jane Austen was writing at a time of major change. Revolutions in France and America demonstrated the potential destructiveness of new ways of thinking. Although Jane Austen does not include politics in her novels, we can see the influence of the ideas which surrounded her.

The period before Jane Austen's adulthood has become known as 'the age of reason'. Self-control was highly valued. In fashionable formal gardens even nature was tightly controlled. However, a new age, that of 'feeling' or 'sensibility', was just beginning. This new way of thinking valued freedom, passion and wild landscapes. We can see that Elinor represents the importance of reason and control, whilst Marianne represents emotion. Although Elinor, like Marianne, experiences strong feelings, she has learned to control them.

Finding out more

We recommend the following books and websites to gain a greater understanding of Jane Austen's England:

Books

- Gill Hornby, *Who was Jane Austen? The Girl with the Magic Pen*, Short Books, 2005.
- Jon Spence, *Becoming Jane Austen*, Hambledon Continuum, 2007.
- Josephine Ross, *Jane Austen's Guide to Good Manners: Compliments, Charades and Horrible Blunders*, Bloomsbury, 2006.
- Dominique Enwright, *The Wicked Wit of Jane Austen*, Michael O'Mara, 2007.
- Lauren Henderson, *Jane Austen's Guide to Romance: The Regency Rules*, Headline, 2007.
- Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels*, Frances Lincoln, 2003.

Websites

- www.janeausten.co.uk

Home of the Jane Austen Centre in Bath, England.

- www.janeaustensoci.freeuk.com

Home of the Jane Austen Society. Includes summaries of, and brief commentaries on, her novels.

- www.pemberley.com

A very enthusiastic site for Jane Austen enthusiasts.

- www.literaryhistory.com/19thC/AUSTEN

A selective and helpful guide to links to other Jane Austen sites.

Film

- *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), script: Emma Thompson, director: Ang Lee.

Food for thought

Here are some things to think about if you are reading *Sense and Sensibility* alone, or ideas for discussion if you are reading it with friends.

In retelling *Sense and Sensibility* we have tried to recreate, as accurately as possible, Jane Austen's original plot and characters. We have also tried to imitate aspects of her style. Remember, however, that this is not the original work; thinking about the points below, therefore, can help you begin to understand Jane Austen's craft. To move forward from here, turn to the full-length version of *Sense and Sensibility* and lose yourself in her wonderful portrayals of human nature.

Starting points

- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Do you have more sympathy for Elinor or for Marianne? Why? Do your feelings change as you read the book?

- By which of her sisters do you think Margaret is more influenced? Does this change during the story?
- How do you feel about Lucy Steele? Why?
- Edward says that Marianne loves 'crooked, twisted, blasted trees', whereas he prefers them 'tall, straight and healthy'. How accurately do these images reflect their characters?
- Did it surprise you that Marianne could grow to love Colonel Brandon? Why?

Themes

What do you think Jane Austen is saying about the following themes in *Sense and Sensibility*?

- emotion and self-control
- honour and integrity
- love and marriage
- the importance of wealth

Style

Can you find paragraphs containing examples of the following?

- a person exposing their true character through something they say
- humour
- gentle irony, where the writer makes the reader think one thing whilst saying something different; this is often a way of gently mocking one of the characters

Look closely at how these paragraphs are written. What do you notice? Can you write a paragraph in the same style?

