**Sense and Sensibility** is a novel by the English novelist Jane Austen. Published in 1811, it was Austen's first published novel, which she wrote under the pseudonym "A Lady". The story is about Elinor and Marianne, two daughters of Mr. Dashwood by his second wife. They have a younger sister, Margaret, and an older half-brother named John. When their father dies, the family estate passes to John, and the Dashwood women are left in reduced circumstances. The novel follows the Dashwood sisters to their new home, a cottage on a distant relative's property, where they experience both romance and heartbreak. The contrast between the sisters' characters is eventually resolved as they each find love and lasting happiness.

Through the events in the novel, Elinor and Marianne encounter the sense and sensibility of life and love.

### Plot summary

**Mr Dashwood dies leaving three daughters and a widow**

When Mr. Dashwood dies, his estate, Norland Park, passes directly to his only son and child of his first wife, John. 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 renounce. John and Fanny immediately take up their place as the new owners of Norland, while the Dashwood women are reduced to the position of, rather 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.

**The Dashwoods Move to Devonshire with Sir Middleton and Co.**

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 Colonel Brandon, at thirty-five, to be an old bachelor incapable of falling in love, or inspiring love in anyone else.

**Marianne sprains her ankle meets Willoughby**

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 this to be 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.

**Elinor disappointed by Edward Ferrars’s visit**

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. Soon after Edward departs, Anne and Lucy Steele, the vulgar and uneducated cousins of Lady Middleton, come to stay at Barton Park. With malicious intent, and clearly aware of their attachment, Lucy informs Elinor of her secret four year engagement to Edward Ferrars, displaying proofs of her veracity. Elinor comes to understand the inconsistencies of Edward’s behaviour to her and acquits him of blame. She is charitable enough to pity Edward for being held to a loveless engagement by his gentlemanly honour.

**Marianne goes to London and writes to Willoughby and he sends her letters back**

As winter approaches, Elinor and Marianne accompany Mrs. Jennings’ to London. Upon arriving, Marianne writes a series of letters to Mr. Willoughby which go unanswered. When they finally meet, Mr. Willoughby greets Marianne reluctantly and coldly, to her extreme distress. Soon Marianne receives a curt letter enclosing their former correspondence and love tokens, including a lock of her hair and informing her of his engagement to a young lady of large fortune. Marianne is devastated, and admits to Elinor that she and Willoughby were never engaged, but she loved him and he led her to believe he loved her. In sympathy for Marianne, and to illuminate his character, Colonel Brandon reveals to Elinor that Mr. Willoughby had seduced Brandon’s fifteen-year-old ward, and abandoned her when she became pregnant.

**The Steele’s sisters’ visits to John and Fanny Dashwood**

In the meantime, the Steele sisters have come to London as guests of John and Fanny Dashwood. Lucy sees her invitation to the Dashwoods’ as a personal compliment, rather than what it is, a slight to Elinor. In the false confidence of their popularity, Anne Steele betrays Lucy’s secret. As a result the Misses Steele are turned out of the house, and Edward is entreated to break the engagement on pain of disinheritance.

**Edward is disinherited**

Edward, honourably, refuses to comply and is immediately disinherited in favour of his brother, gaining widespread respect for his gentlemanly conduct, and sympathy from Elinor and Marianne who understand how much he has sacrificed.

**Marianne becomes ill**

In her misery over Mr. Willoughby's marriage, Marianne neglects her health and becomes dangerously ill. Traumatised by rumours of her impending death, Mr. Willoughby arrives drunkenly to repent and reveals to Elinor that his love for Marianne was genuine. Threatened with disinheritance because of his immoral behaviour, he felt he must marry for money rather than love, but he elicits Elinor’s pity because his choice has made him unhappy.

**Marianne becomes sensible**

When Marianne is recovered, Elinor tells her of Mr. Willoughby's visit. Marianne comes to assess what has passed with sense rather than emotion, and sees that she could never have been happy with Mr Willoughby’s immoral and expensive nature. She comes to value Elinor’s conduct in a similar situation and resolves to model herself after Elinor’s courage and good sense.
Upon learning that Lucy has married Mr. Ferrars, Elinor is grieved, until Edward himself arrives to reveal that Lucy has jilted him in favour of his wealthy brother, Robert Ferrars. Edward and Elinor are soon married and in a very few years Marianne marries Colonel Brandon.

Characters

Henry Dashwood — a wealthy gentleman who dies at the beginning of the story. The terms of his estate prevent him from leaving anything to his second wife and their children. He asks John, his son by his first wife, to look after (meaning ensure the financial security of) his second wife and their three daughters.

Mrs. Dashwood — the second wife of Henry Dashwood, who is left in difficult financial straits by the death of her husband. She is 40 years old at the beginning of the book. Much like her daughter Marianne, she is very emotive and often makes poor decisions based on emotion rather than reason.

Elinor Dashwood — the sensible and reserved eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood. She is 19 years old at the beginning of the book. She becomes attached to Edward Ferrars, the brother-in-law of her elder half-brother, John. Always feeling a keen sense of responsibility to her family and friends, she places their welfare and interests above her own, and suppresses her own strong emotions in a way that leads others to think she is indifferent or cold-hearted.

Marianne Dashwood — the romantically inclined and eagerly expressive second daughter of Mr and Mrs Henry Dashwood. She is 16 years old at the beginning of the book. She is the object of the attentions of Colonel Brandon and Mr. Willoughby. She is attracted to young, handsome, romantically spirited Willoughby and does not think much of the older, more reserved Colonel Brandon. Marianne undergoes the most development within the book, learning her sensibilities have been selfish. She decides her conduct should be more like that of her elder sister, Elinor.

Margaret Dashwood — the youngest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood. She is thirteen at the beginning of the book. She is also romantic and good-tempered but not expected to be as clever as her sisters when she grows older.

John Dashwood — the son of Henry Dashwood by his first wife. He intends to do well by his half-sisters, but he has a keen sense of avarice, and is easily swayed by his wife.

Fanny Dashwood — the wife of John Dashwood, and sister to Edward and Robert Ferrars. She is vain, selfish, and snobbish. She spoils her son Harry. Very harsh to her husband’s half-sisters and stepmother, especially since she fears her brother Edward is attached to Elinor.

Sir John Middleton — a distant relative of Mrs. Dashwood who, after the death of Henry Dashwood, invites her and her three daughters to live in a cottage on his property. Described as a wealthy, sporting man who served in the army with Colonel Brandon, he is very affable and keen to throw frequent parties, picnics, and other social gatherings to bring together the young people of their village. He and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings, make a jolly, teasing, and gossipy pair.

Lady Middleton — the genteel, but reserved wife of Sir John Middleton, she is quieter than her husband, and is primarily concerned with mothering her four spoiled children.

Mrs. Jennings — mother to Lady Middleton and Charlotte Palmer. A widow who has married off all her children, she spends most of her time visiting her daughters and their families, especially the Middletons. She and her son-in-law, Sir John Middleton, take an active interest in the romantic affairs of the young people around them and seek to encourage suitable matches, often to the particular chagrin of Elinor and Marianne.

Edward Ferrars — the elder of Fanny Dashwood’s two brothers. He forms an attachment to Elinor Dashwood. Years before meeting the Dashwoods, Ferrars proposed to Lucy Steele, the niece of his tutor. The engagement has been kept secret owing to the expectation that Ferrars’ family would object to his marrying Miss Steele. He is disowned by his mother on discovery of the engagement after refusing to give up the engagement.

Robert Ferrars — the younger brother of Edward Ferrars and Fanny Dashwood, he is most concerned about status, fashion, and his new barouche. He subsequently marries Miss Lucy Steele after Edward is disowned.

Mrs. Ferrars — Fanny Dashwood and Edward and Robert Ferrars’ mother. A bad-tempered, unsympathetic woman who embodies all the foibles demonstrated in Fanny and Robert’s characteristics. She is determined that her sons should marry well.

Colonel Christopher Brandon — a close friend of Sir John Middleton. In his youth, Brandon had fallen in love with his father’s ward, but was prevented by his family from marrying her because his father was determined to marry her to his older brother. He was sent into the military abroad to be away from her, and while gone, the girl suffered numerous misfortunes partly as a consequence of her unhappy marriage, finally dying penniless and disgraced, and with a natural (i.e., illegitimate) daughter, who becomes the ward of the Colonel. He is 35 years old at the beginning of the book. He falls in love with Marianne at first sight as she reminds him of his father’s ward. He is a very honorable friend to the Dashwoods, particularly Elinor, and offers Edward Ferrars a living after Edward is disowned by his mother.

John Willoughby — a philandering nephew of a neighbour of the Middletons, a dashing figure who charms Marianne and shares her artistic and cultural sensibilities. It is generally understood that he is engaged to be married to Marianne by many of their mutual acquaintances.

Charlotte Palmer — the daughter of Mrs. Jennings and the younger sister of Lady Middleton, Mrs Palmer is jolly but empty-headed and laughs at inappropriate things, such as her husband’s continual rudeness to her and to others.

Thomas Palmer — the husband of Charlotte Palmer who is running for a seat in Parliament, but is idle and often rude. He is considerate toward the Dashwood sisters.

Lucy Steele — a young, distant relation of Mrs. Jennings, who has for some time been secretly engaged to Edward Ferrars. She assiduously cultivates the friendship with Elinor Dashwood and Mrs Willoughby. Limited in formal education and financial means, she is nonetheless attractive, clever, manipulative, cunning and scheming.

Anne/Nancy Steele — Lucy Steele’s elder, socially inept, and less clever sister.

Miss Sophia Grey — a wealthy but malicious heiress whom Mr. Willoughby marries in order to retain his comfortable lifestyle after he is disinherited by his aunt.

Lord Morton — the father of Miss Morton.

Miss Morton — a wealthy woman whom Mrs. Ferrars wants her eldest son, Edward, and later Robert, to marry.

Mr. Pratt — an uncle of Lucy Steele and Edward’s tutor.

Eliza Williams — the ward of Col. Brandon, she is about 15 years old and bore an illegitimate son to John Willoughby. She is the daughter of Elizabeth Williams.

Elizabeth Williams — the former love interest of Colonel Brandon. Williams is Brandon’s father’s ward, and is forced to marry Brandon’s older brother. The marriage is an unhappy one, and it is revealed that her daughter is left as Colonel Brandon’s ward when he finds his lost love dying in a poorhouse.

Mrs. Smith — the wealthy aunt of Mr. Willoughby who disowns him for not marrying Eliza Williams.