

Sense and Sensibility Discussion Questions

1. In this novel Austen parodies the 18th-century cult of sensibility, which valued strong emotions over reason and intellect. Consider the significance of the novel's title. How are the qualities of sense and sensibility represented in the main characters?
2. Discuss the entailment of Norland, the Dashwood estate. Could the Dashwood sisters' father have done more to provide for the future of his wife and daughters?
3. How does John Dashwood fulfill the promise to his father to "take care" of his half-sisters and stepmother? How is he influenced?
4. Who is the heroine of the novel? Is Elinor too good to be true, too perfect? Is Marianne too flawed to be the heroine?
5. Although Elinor Dashwood is not a first-person narrator, most of the story is told through her eyes and thoughts. Do you think Austen agrees with Elinor's viewpoint?
6. What is your opinion of Marianne at the beginning and then at the end of the novel?
7. What qualities does Marianne find appealing in Willoughby? Compare Marianne's initial impression of Colonel Brandon.
8. Austen's parody of the cult of sensibility is primarily embodied in Marianne. What mistakes does Marianne make in being guided by the tenets of sensibility? How does it affect her judgment of Elinor?
9. How and why does Marianne become ill? In the end, does Marianne examine her own conduct? Does she grow as a character to become self-aware?
10. How did you feel about Willoughby when he first entered the novel? What clues does Austen provide about his character? Is his apology to Elinor at the end of the book believable? Do you feel sorry for him? Should Elinor have told her sister what he said?
11. It has been said that *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel full of secrets. Identify a few of the secrets and discuss the role they play.
12. How was a secret engagement viewed in Austen's era? Compare and contrast the conduct of Lucy Steele and *Emma's* Jane Fairfax, as well as that of Edward Ferrars and Frank Churchill.
13. What do you think of Edward? How are his actions toward Elinor similar to those of Willoughby toward Marianne?

14. Will Edward make a good clergyman? How does he compare to Austen's other clergymen: Edmund Bertram, Mr. Elton, and Mr. Collins?
15. Do Elinor and Edward ever show emotion?
16. How does Jane Austen use money to reveal character? What does Austen suggest about money and its role in the marriage market through her characters?
 - a. Consider John and Fanny Dashwood
 - b. Elinor
 - c. Marianne
 - d. Their mother, Mrs. Dashwood
 - e. Edward
 - f. Mrs. Ferrars
 - g. Lucy Steele
 - h. Col. Brandon
 - i. Willoughby
 - j. The Middletons
17. What is your opinion of the mothers in the novel: Mrs. Dashwood, Mrs. Jennings, Mrs. Ferrars, and Lady Middleton?
18. Some critics think that Austen, in a rare mistake, forgot about the youngest Dashwood sister, Margaret, when she revised the novel from her earlier draft, "Elinor and Marianne." Does Margaret play any role in the plot or the development of other characters?
19. Scholars believe that *Sense and Sensibility* was first written in epistolary form (as a series of letters from one character to another). There are 26 references to letters in the novel. When and why does Austen quote a full letter instead of merely reporting that a letter was sent or received? How do letters further the novel's plot and characterizations?
20. Do you think the ending is contrived? Is Robert Ferrars's marriage to Lucy credible? Do you find Marianne's decision to marry Colonel Brandon to be a plausible conclusion? Who, if anyone, makes a romantic marriage?
21. In the end, does sense triumph over sensibility? Or is Austen sympathetic to both perspectives? What does each sister come to learn from the other?
22. Bonus question: How old is Mrs. Henry Dashwood at the beginning of the novel? (40)