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Jane Austen
**Sense and
Sensibility**

THE
COMPLETE
CLASSICS

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Read by **Juliet Stevenson**



NAX36112D

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Cover picture: Madame Riesener and her sister, Madame Longroy, 1802 (Oil on Canvas)
by Henri Francois Risener (1767-1828) courtesy of The Bridgeman Art Library

Jane Austen

Sense and Sensibility

'I am never too busy to think of *Sense and Sensibility*. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child...!' Thus joked Jane Austen in a letter to her sister Cassandra describing her work on the story, and indeed the care and attention she lavished on this, the work which was to be her first published novel, was akin to a mother's love and devotion to her first-born.

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775, the seventh child of the family. At that time, her father was Rector of the Hampshire village of Steventon, near Basingstoke. She became a well-educated young woman: together with her sister Cassandra she was sent to good boarding schools in her early years, before continuing her education at home with her father. *Sense and Sensibility* was many years in its production and is said to have begun its life, together with *First Impressions*, Jane Austen's early version of *Pride & Prejudice*, some time in the 1790s, when Jane was still a very young woman. At this point it was written in the epistolary style, the series of letters it described being entitled *Elinor and*

Marianne. By 1799 a maturing Austen had redrafted her work into the style we know today – a novel describing events mostly from Elinor's view-point – and further revisions followed between 1809 and 1810 before the work was accepted for publication by T. Egerton in 1811. Jane Austen made £140 from this first edition before she further revised it prior to the publication of the second edition in 1813.

Jane was thirty-six by the time *Sense and Sensibility* was first published but her early years had already seen her producing works for the amusement and entertainment of her family. She particularly enjoyed penning burlesques of popular romances, and *A History of England by a Partial, Prejudiced and Ignorant Historian* was one of her early, unpublished works which suggests her natural gift for gentle irony. Not surprisingly then, satirical irony is apparent throughout *Sense and Sensibility*. Jane led a calm and unremarkable life. She spent many years living in quiet, rural villages, though she did live for a while in fashionable, elegant Bath after her father retired in 1801. Following his

death in 1805 she also lived in Southampton but, in 1809, together with her mother and sister, she moved to the village of Chawton in Hampshire. Consequently much of her life consisted of nothing more exciting than conversation (or, more accurately, gossip), needlework and reading – often aloud, in her own drawing-room or in those of other people. Private dances or balls and occasional visits to fashionable seaside towns would have provided the only real highlights. Clearly, then, the setting for *Sense and Sensibility* was typical of the society with which Jane was most familiar and provided her with a background against which her characters are able to be seen more clearly. During the course of the novel she satirizes the social conventions and attitudes of the time, especially towards money and marriage, her own thoughts on these being subtly conveyed to the reader through Elinor and her point of view. On several occasions we read of Elinor listening politely, as social etiquette demanded, to the abhorrent opinions of characters such as John Dashwood, her only defence against these being a reply laced with irony, the true meaning of which is completely missed by such an insensitive and unintelligent character.

Austen was also in the habit of including in her work many events from real life but these were so skilfully taken apart and reworked that their origins could never have been recognised. The theme of females left financially dependant on brothers after their father's death was one which was to touch Jane herself since, after the death of her father, she and her mother relied on Jane's brother Edward to provide them with their home in Chawton.

In 1755 Dr. Johnson described 'Sense' as '...the power by which external objects are perceived,' – a reasoned or practical response to a situation, whilst 'Sensibility' was a theme which featured strongly in works written in the eighteenth century and at that time was considered to mean an emotional perception of a situation. Gently satirizing these latter works, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* might well be seen as a story of two sisters who are representative of these two characteristics, Elinor of sense and Marianne of sensibility. However, this would be too simplistic a view and we must in addition consider the development of these two characters as the story unfolds. In Elinor, we can in any case, see a degree of sensibility as well as sense, since sensibility can include the commendable emotion of

sympathy, and it is this balance between the two which makes her such a worthy character. Nevertheless a maturing of this balance is evident in Elinor as the novel progresses, whilst Marianne learns, as the story unfolds, to control her emotional behaviour through the development of sense. This complements her sensibility, thus making her actions more socially acceptable. Austen also uses both sense and sensibility to colour the other characters in the story; thus we note, for example, that Lucy Steele, having only sense, can see the suffering she causes Elinor but has no sensibility to allow her to sympathise with, and temper, the pain she inflicts. John and Fanny Dashwood are also characters who have no sensibility, and who ill-use sense, whilst Willoughby and Mrs Dashwood are, like Marianne, governed by sensibility. In Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars, as in Elinor, sense and sensibility achieve a happy balance.

Jane Austen never married although she was reputed to have become romantically attached in 1802. The man in question died in 1803, and in that same year Jane received a proposal of marriage from a wealthy Hampshire landowner. She accepted his proposal, only to retract it the following morning. In *Sense and Sensibility* love and

marriage provide an important theme, with Austen describing the Dashwood sisters' journeys towards finding suitable marriage partners. During their journeys they encounter troubles created for them by Lucy and Willoughby who themselves each marry unsatisfactorily, doing so only for material gain.

Throughout *Sense and Sensibility* the events and situations are viewed through Elinor's eyes but Austen nevertheless cleverly directs the reader's sympathies towards Marianne. Although she uses Elinor to convey her opinions of social conventions of the time, many people consider that Jane Austen saw herself as Marianne and her older, more staid sister Cassandra as Elinor. Both Jane and Marianne, as well as being the younger sister, were lively, emotional girls who had a natural talent for music and who loved poetry, whilst Cassandra and Elinor were both more prim and restrained, both also showing a talent for things artistic. In describing contrasts between sisters, Austen was adhering to a tradition of female writers of the time and even chose her heroines' names from such works. *The Recess* by Sophia Lee featured an Elinor, as did Ann Radcliffe's *The Sicilian Romance*, whilst a Marianne was to be found in

Gossip's Story by Jane West.

Jane Austen was very modest about her gift for writing, describing her work as '...that little bit (two inches wide) of ivory, in which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour'. On publication *Sense and Sensibility* was only mildly popular with the general public although other writers, particularly Sir Walter Scott, were full of praise for Jane's work. There is no doubt, however, that she was especially skilful in her use of language and this is particularly apparent in the clever way in which she matches her language to all her characters: for example, we note the Steele sisters' grammatical errors and Colonel Brandon's polite reply to Mrs Jennings's vulgar description of her pregnant daughter Charlotte's 'fine size', and so expand our store of knowledge about these individuals.

Jane Austen's other great novels were published in the following order: *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, *Mansfield Park* in 1814, *Emma* in 1816, and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1818. However, the dates of publication give no clues as to when the novels were actually written, and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were, in fact, published posthumously by Jane's brother, Henry. He was the one to formally

reveal her authorship since the four titles published in her lifetime were done so anonymously, the title page of *Sense and Sensibility* bearing the words 'By a Lady', at Jane Austen's own request. This may well have been in order that she could avoid any criticism directed at the author for the satirical writing apparent in the work.

By 1816 Jane Austen had become seriously ill with tuberculosis and *Persuasion* was written whilst her health was rapidly failing. She was taken to Winchester to be under the care of the best doctors but within two months of arriving there she died, on July 18th, at the age of 42. Modestly successful in her lifetime, it was not until the twentieth century that her works became established favourites.

Notes by Helen Davies



Juliet Stevenson has worked extensively for the RSC and the Royal National Theatre. She won an Olivier Award for her role in *Death and the Maiden* at the Royal Court, and a number of other awards for her work in the film *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. Other film credits include *The Trial*, *Drowning by Numbers* and *Emma*. She has recorded *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *To The Lighthouse*, *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and performs the title role in *Hedda Gabler*.

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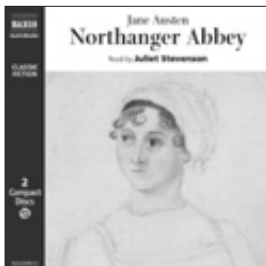


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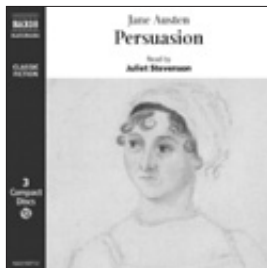


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Jane Austen
Sense and Sensibility

Read by **Juliet Stevenson**

When Mrs Dashwood is forced by an avaricious daughter-in-law to leave the family home in Sussex, she takes her three daughters to live in a modest cottage in Devon. For Elinor, the eldest daughter, the move means a painful separation from the man she loves, but her sister Marianne finds in Devon the romance and excitement which she longs for. The contrasting fortunes and temperaments of the two girls as they struggle to cope in their different ways with the cruel events which fate has in store for them are portrayed by Jane Austen with her usual irony, humour and profound sensibility.



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