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# SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

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JANE AUSTEN

Includes detailed explanatory notes,  
an overview of key themes, and more

# SENSE AND SENSIBILITY



*Jane Austen*

*Supplementary material written by  
Karen Davidson*

*Series edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson*

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Sense and Sensibility:* ROMANTICISM VERSUS PRACTICALITY

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*Sense and Sensibility* was Jane Austen's first published novel and, like *Pride and Prejudice*, the product of some fifteen years of careful revision. First drafted in 1795 under the title *Elinor and Marianne*, the manuscript was an epistolary work—a novel in the form of an exchange of letters—that was read aloud for the entertainment of Austen's family. Several years later she redrafted the manuscript with a third-person narrative and issued the title that so succinctly expresses the opposing temperaments of its two heroines: *Sense and Sensibility*.

Austen was thirty-six years old when Thomas Egerton accepted the *Sense and Sensibility* manuscript for publication. The novel was to be published on commission, meaning Austen incurred all printing costs and had to pay a fee to the publisher. This was not an ideal arrangement, as the cost was more than a third of her family's annual income of 460 pounds. Fortunately for us, the novel received several favorable reviews, and by 1813 all 750 copies had sold out. From 1833 to the present, *Sense and Sensibility*, like all of Austen's novels, has been continuously in print.

*Sense and Sensibility* is certainly Austen's darkest novel and for many years existed in the shadow of Austen's more cheerful novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Only in the twentieth century have critics come to appreciate the novel for its passion and startling social commentary. Though Elinor and Marianne Dashwood do indeed represent the opposing literary movements of Austen's day—Elinor, imbued with characteristic Augustan sense; Marianne, with an excess of romantic sensibility—they are not merely emblematic. They are women in distress who exist in a world of little security.

Commentators have suggested that the authorial voice in *Sense and Sensibility* is as close as we may come to an "uncensored" Austen. This may be true, given the fact that Austen's first draft of the novel was completed when she was about the same age as her character, Elinor, and likewise facing an uncertain future.

### **The Life and Work of Jane Austen**

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, in the small village of Steventon, Hampshire, the seventh child of the Reverend George Austen and Cassandra Leigh. She had six brothers—James, Edward, Henry, Charles, Francis, and George—and one sister, Cassandra, with whom she remained very close throughout her life. Though the family was not wealthy, her father's position as a clergyman provided the Austen family with a comfortable middle-class income and full reign of the English countryside we see depicted in her novels.

Though Austen received very little formal education—a year with her sister, Cassandra, at the Abbey School in Reading in 1785—the Reverend Austen was a literary man who encouraged her studies from a very early age. She read widely as a child and young woman, enjoying the novels of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and perhaps most



notably Fanny Burney (the title for *Pride and Prejudice* came from a phrase in Burney's *Cecilia*.) Her early work—penned between the ages of twelve and seventeen, and later published in three volumes as the *Juvenilia*—consisted of parodies and skits, or “burlesques” that were read and acted for the enjoyment of her family.

In 1796, after the completion of *Elinor and Marianne*, the epistolary novel that would later become *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen visited her brother in Kent and upon her return to Steventon began work on *First Impressions*, in which her heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, also takes a trip to Kent. The novel is thought to have been an epistolary work in this early draft because of the abundance of letters we see in the revised *Pride and Prejudice*. *First Impressions* was completed in August 1797, and submitted to the London publisher Thomas Cadell in November by Austen's father. It was returned, unopened, shortly thereafter.

After the Reverend George Austen's retirement in 1801, the family sold nearly everything they owned and moved to Bath. A year later, Austen had a narrow brush with marriage. In December 1802, she accepted a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither, a friend of some of her acquaintances. The next morning, however, she changed her mind. In 1803, *Northanger Abbey* was sold to the publisher Crosby and Co. for ten pounds, though the years following reflect a lull in Austen's writing. She seemingly wrote nothing between 1804 to 1811, which some believe to be a rather dark time in Austen's life—a series of moves, financial strife, and the rumor of an affair with a tragic end. It was in 1807 that Mrs. Austen and her daughters moved to Southampton and from there to Chawton, where they settled in 1808 in a cottage on the estate of Austen's brother Edward.

In 1811, while living at Chawton, Austen began to write again and redrafted *Sense and Sensibility*. At the urging of Henry and Cassandra, Austen allowed Henry to send the

manuscript to the publisher Thomas Egerton. *Sense and Sensibility* was published the same year. The next six years were very prolific. She completed *Mansfield Park* in 1813, which was published the following year. She also began her revision of *First Impressions* in 1813 and published it as *Pride and Prejudice*. She began *Emma* in 1814, completed it by 1815, and published it in 1816.

She was working on her sixth and last novel, *Persuasion*, when her brother Henry became ill. She moved to London to nurse him, but not long after, her own health began to fail. She and Cassandra then moved to Winchester to be closer to her doctor, though he apparently could not help her, and on July 18, 1817, she died, just five months short of her forty-second birthday.

## Historical and Literary Context of *Sense and Sensibility*

### *Revolution and the Regency Period*

When Austen first began writing *Elinor and Marianne*, the world was undergoing a period of great change. The United States had declared its independence only twenty years earlier, and Napoleon was rising to power in France, just across the English Channel from Austen's Britain. Yet none of these significant events is mentioned directly in the work. Some critics have argued that Austen limited her novels to a world that was too narrow, while others believed Austen addressed these major political events in the subtext of her novels. We know she was certainly not immune to the events in France, as her cousin's husband was guillotined during the Reign of Terror, the period during which France's ruling faction ruthlessly exterminated potential enemies. The period lasted from September of 1793 until the fall of Robespierre on July 27, 1794. During the last six weeks of the Terror alone (the period known as the "Red

Terror") nearly fourteen hundred people were guillotined in Paris.

The late eighteenth century was also a painful transition period in terms of industrialization. People were on the move; populations of large towns and cities were growing as never before. Fortunes were being acquired "by trade" rather than inherited by birthright. Though these changes may not have had an immediate impact in the world of Austen's quiet countryside, England's social hierarchy was shifting as the merchant class gained economic power and the landed aristocracy suffered economic losses.

Critics conjecture that the absence of politics in Austen's work may have more to do with the fact that she was publishing during the repression of England's Regency Period, when an author could easily be accused and convicted of sedition. The Regency Period began in 1811 when George III was declared incurably insane and his son, the Prince of Wales, took the title Prince Regent and ruled in his father's stead. George III died in 1820, and the Prince Regent was crowned George IV. No era in English history has captured the imaginations of readers quite like the Regency Period. It was a time of impeccable manners, eloquent speech, and refined tastes. The arts proliferated with the painting of John Constable and J. M. W. Turner, and the writings of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and, of course, Jane Austen. Full of beauty and romance, it was also a time of great repression and extraordinary violence. For roughly the first half of the Regency Period, until Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, England and France remained at war. The social unrest in England—and the political upheaval in the world at large—left its mark on every level of society. Even fashion changed, for a time, to reflect the consciousness of a new world. Gone were the restrictive corsets and heavy brocades of the years before and after this period. For the time, women favored lightweight flowing gowns



with an empire waist reminiscent of the classical styles of Ancient Greece. Men's fashions turned to clean lines: dark fitted tailcoats, gleaming white trousers, and a top hat to set it all off.

Elaborate codes of conduct governed every social interaction in upper-class society during the Regency Period. Whether making an introduction at a ball, or ascending a flight of stairs with a person of the opposite sex, specific behavior applied. Upper-class women did not visit men, unless it had to do with a business matter. In fact, if a woman was unmarried and under thirty, it was considered inappropriate for her to be seen in a man's company without the presence of a chaperone, or to write to a man outside her family unless she was engaged to him. A woman of Austen's day could not legally own property, so without the benefit of a good reputation, women had little hope of an advantageous marriage, and thus a secure future. Reputation was tantamount to life. These regimented ideas of appropriate gender behavior factor greatly into Austen's work. During her lifetime, authorship was not a respectable means of earning income for a woman of her class. As a woman of leisure, Austen was not meant to make a living at all, and few people outside her family knew she was an author. She wrote behind closed doors, or behind a door that creaked when it was opened, in any case, to warn her of approaching visitors.

### *A Realist Among Romantics*

Austen's novels have long defied strict classification in terms of their literary context. She wrote and lived during a period when the world—and English literature—was in transition. Some say she is a true original with no predecessors and no progeny. Others note the influence of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and especially Francis Burney, writers from the Age of Reason, a period that dominated early-

eighteenth-century English literature and gave rise to the development of the novel as a literary form. The Age of Reason emphasized the common sense of society rather than individual imagination, and the literature of this period was generally characterized by the ideals of self-control, reason, propriety, and etiquette. In stark contrast was the romantic movement, which followed, with its emphasis on individual freedom, self-expression, and spiritual enlightenment. All of Austen's novels were published contemporaneously with the works of romantic writers such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. However, her carefully crafted portrayals of England's rural gentry, with their satiric depictions of the upper class, set her apart from her contemporaries and more in line with writers from the Age of Reason. She did, however, recognize the importance of the individual in the context of society and, in that sense, bridges both schools of thought and continues today to exist in her own unique realm.

Austen was the first English writer to give the novel its distinctly modern character in the realistic treatment of ordinary people in the ordinary situations of everyday life. During Austen's life, however, few people really recognized the nature of her achievement. One of her famous contemporaries, renowned writer Sir Walter Scott, clearly did appreciate Austen. In his review of her novel *Emma*, he wrote: "We bestow no mean compliment upon the author of *Emma* when we say that keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events, arising from the consideration of minds, manners, and sentiments, greatly above our own. In this class she stands almost alone."

## CHRONOLOGY OF JANE AUSTEN'S LIFE AND WORK

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- 1775: Jane Austen born December 16 in Steventon, Hampshire.
- 1785: With her sister, Cassandra, Austen attends the Abbey School in Reading, England.
- 1787: Austen begins to amuse her family with stories like *Frederic & Elfrida* and *Jack & Alice*. Her writing during the period until about 1793 was later published as the *Juvenilia*.
- 1790: Austen writes *Love and Friendship*.
- 1791: Austen writes *The History of England*.
- 1792: Austen writes *Lesley Castle*, *The Three Sisters*, *Evelyn* and *Catharine*.
- 1796: Austen writes her first preserved letter, to Cassandra. *Elinor and Marianne* (the first version of *Sense and Sensibility*) completed. In October, she begins *First Impressions* (later to be titled *Pride and Prejudice*).
- 1797: *First Impressions* completed; manuscript rejected sight unseen by a London publisher.
- 1798: Austen begins *Susan*, the manuscript that would later become *Northanger Abbey*.
- 1801: Jane's father retires; family moves to Bath.

- 1802: Jane accepts a proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither then breaks the engagement the following morning.
- 1803: Publisher buys *Susan* for ten pounds but does not publish it.
- 1805: Jane's father dies.
- 1811: Publication of *Sense and Sensibility*.
- 1813: Publication of *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel receives excellent reviews. Austen reports that she has now earned 250 pounds from her writings, including 140 from *Sense and Sensibility*. The author finishes *Mansfield Park* in the summer.
- 1814: Publication of *Mansfield Park*.
- 1816: Publication of *Emma*. Despite poor health, Austen works on *The Elliots*, which was later titled *Persuasion*.
- 1817: Jane and Cassandra move to Winchester to be near Jane's physician. Jane begins *Sanditon*, but is unable to continue working. Jane Austen dies on July 18 and is buried in Winchester Cathedral on July 24. Her final illness is now generally said to be Addison's disease, but might also have been lymphoma.
- 1818: Cassandra and Jane's brother Henry arrange to have *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* published jointly in a four-volume edition.



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Sense and Sensibility*

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- 1775: America declares independence from the British government.
- 1776: Declaration of Independence signed.
- 1778: France forms an alliance with the American rebels.
- 1783: Britain recognizes the independence of the American states.
- 1789: The French Revolution begins.
- 1792: France declares war on Austria. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published.
- 1793: Bastille stormed. Louis XVI executed. Reign of Terror under Robespierre. England wars with France; the Napoleonic Wars begin.
- 1794: Execution of Robespierre. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* published.
- 1799: Napoleon becomes First Consul of France.
- 1801: Great Britain and Ireland Unite as the "United Kingdom."
- 1804: Napoleon crowned emperor.
- 1805: Battle of Trafalgar.

- 1811: The Regency Period begins. The Prince of Wales acts as regent for George III, who has been declared incurably insane. *Sense and Sensibility* published.
- 1812: War with the United States.
- 1813: *Pride and Prejudice* published.
- 1815: Napoleon defeated at Waterloo.

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# SENSE AND SENSIBILITY





