

To what extent is
chapter 1 of sense
and sensibility a
fitting introduction for
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In this novel, Austen is setting out rules of conduct for women in a time when England was moving from a period of long stability to sudden and total change. Unless people knew how to behave, she thought, chaos would ensue. England was entering the Industrial Revolution, having just seen the French Revolution and the American War of Independence. A new literary style was sweeping the nation, one to which Austen was much opposed: Romanticism. A dichotomy had arisen from the popularity of Romanticism within the literary groups of the time.

It is possible to label these two groups as 'Sense' and 'Sensibility'. (The Gothic style also came about at this time, championed by those who had suddenly discovered freedom [both literary and, in some cases, physical] with the fall of oppressive governments surrounding England - Austen also wrote anti-Gothic novels, like *Northanger Abbey*.) Austen was definitely in support of 'Sense', which this novel shows so clearly. Austen argues her case for sense over sensibility by polarising the main protagonists on the subject.

Marianne represents sensibility in all its dramatic, baroque and over-the-top glory, whilst Elinor represents sense (not cold, emotionless logic, but a tactful reason about situations). Although Austen shows the reader the downsides of both poles, sensibility is harshly and heavily punished and in the end sense wins out when Elinor gets to marry the man she wants and Marianne gives up sensibility and accepts an unconvincing happy ending with a socially respectable result. Austen, then, is writing not a novel, but a book of behaviour for women in this tumultuous time, much in keeping with little girls' conduct books of the time.

The first chapter so brilliantly allows for these developments later in the book by not mentioning them at all, or at least not until the closing paragraphs in which the reader is introduced to Elinor and Marianne. This first chapter is primarily concerned in setting up Austen's character in the book, that of satirical social commentator and moral guide. And this character is set up within the opening paragraph. Austen's behaviour as author in this chapter almost contradicts Elinor later on.

The way the aristocratic Dashwood family interact with each other on human terms is mocked and pulled apart by Austen's scathing irony; these first paragraphs could almost be in defence of sensibility! Relationships are described in contractual terms: no longer is your son family, he is clientele; no longer do you love, you esteem. Family isn't about affection, it's about affectation. Appearance and finance are all that matter on the Norland estate, respectability and wealth. People are spoken of in terms of utility and actions are taken for the sole purpose of acquiring wealth.

Any affection shown with that is an added bonus, purely accidental and by no means essential to the relationship. There is one sentence at the end of the first paragraph in which are contained almost all of the social morals with which Austen holds qualm, and she makes her qualms clear with her irony and diction: "The constant attention of Mr. And Mrs. Henry Dashwood to his wishes, which proceeded, not merely from interest, but from goodness of heart, gave him every degree of solid comfort his heart could receive". "The constant attention", not constant affection, or even constant love, no, "constant attention".

They waited on him, served him as best they could to ensure a large chunk of inheritance, but not to worry, they did not do this "merely from interest, but from goodness of heart". This sentence does not redeem their greed, but rather reinforces it, that "merely" adds dimensions to this sentence which implies that even if they were good of heart, they were still selfish and out for all they could get. Finally, the comfort they offer the old man is only "solid", no more than materialistic. They do not enrich him spiritually or intellectually, only materially.

Austen has now set out the rules for the following novel, without even bringing her protagonists to light. Austen is by far the most important character in the book, and her characterisation, therefore, is the most important. It is essential for the reader to know Austen before the reader knows Elinor or Marianne, or else the aim of this book to teach people how to behave would be lost. The fact that Austen seems to be pulling apart the social order whilst Elinor is in whole-hearted support for retaining the social order may seem perplexing, but I think a solution comes if one understands Austen as a person of moderation.

She punishes Elinor also (though less harshly than Marianne) for being too restrained. In so many passages in the book there is an awful feeling of imprisonment on the part of Elinor as she is unable to do anything socially unacceptable. Therefore, there is contradiction between Austen and Elinor, but that is because Elinor is not Austen, she is not perfect or correct or a paragon of what Austen believes correct behaviour for a woman. Sense is

supported, but room for emotion must be allowed or one is not human, says Austen, but cold and dead.