

**Sense vs. sensibility:
which is the victor?**



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Human nature undeniable has many facets is undeniable. Whether or not some character traits are superior to others, however, is debatable. One such deliberation is whether sense invariably triumphs over sensibility. Through her characters Catherine Morland in “Northanger Abbey” and Marianne Dashwood in “Sense and Sensibility,” Jane Austen boldly attempts, and succeeds, in answering this question. Each heroine faces the extraordinary challenge of leaving their childhood worlds of fantasy behind to develop as a rational adult and find “sensibility.” Austen also designs characters that are purer paradigms of reason and rationality, exposing innate flaws in either inclination through opposing characters. The resulting friction demonstrates that sense and sensibility do not necessarily surpass each other. Rather, their real value comes from their mutual role in maturation. Thus, neither trait is considerably useful unless influenced by its counterpart. Although both Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood are Austen’s models of sensibility, neither girl bears much similarity towards the other. Catherine is a naïve country girl with little guidance and no rational concept of human nature. Marianne, on the other hand, is not so blameless. Her impropriety is a result of indulging her emotions according to her personal code of morality. Whatever their differences, both girls are invariably misled by the influence of amorous literature. Their ecstatic delight in prose and poetry leads them to believe that the real world can be superimposed on the template of a romance novel. The reader sees this in Catherine as she envisions herself making a thrilling discovery when exploring Northanger Abbey. In Marianne’s case we are told that “all her opinions are romantic” (62) and that she depends upon her instincts to alarm her of misconduct. As she says, “...if there had been any real impropriety in

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what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure" (72). As the novels progress, it becomes blatantly obvious that without the introduction of common sense, Catherine's understanding and Marianne's disposition will never be corrected. By the same token, a complete loss of sensibility would render them heartless and devoid of compassion, much like the callous characters of Isabella Thorpe or Fanny Dashwood. Together, these ideas suggest that the process of maturation is a continual cycle of sense and sensibility acting upon each other. Thus, it is through Catherine and Marianne that Austen emphasizes the need for sense. To project the value of moderate sensibility, however, she uses Elinor Dashwood. Elinor is the embodiment of rationality, exactly the opposite of her sister Marianne. Where Marianne is governed by her feelings, Elinor is controlled by reason and conviction. In a number of ways Elinor has already acquired the wisdom and discernment of an esteemed elder. To the reader's surprise, however, even Elinor's fastidious opinions undergo an emotional evolution. This long metamorphosis transforms her from an uncommonly sensible woman into a sympathetic heroine. This change is made clear, for example, when her judgment errs in the seriousness of Marianne's late illness, as well as when her estimation of Willoughby softens when he explains himself to her at Cleveland. Also worth noting, however, is that neither Elinor nor Marianne espouse their early sentiments toward first and second attachments. In the end, it is Elinor who learns the strength of a first attachment, while Marianne realizes the fullness of a second. The flaws of sense and sensibility are best illustrated, however, when both Elinor and Marianne fail to deal with their disappointed love by virtue of natural

inclination. Elinor finally sees for herself how she underestimated the sacrifice of repressing her sensibility; Marianne becomes aware of how her own indiscretion demoralized her conduct. It is with this new awareness of self that a process of healing begins for each woman. Despite the importance of tempering sense with sensibility, it is significant that both *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* are written from a point of view where sense is an anchor. With this in mind, we see how sense is used as a lens to examine human nature. The role of reason here is to reveal the involuntary tendencies of the heart and mind. This sensible approach is also used because it offers structure without excluding the exchange of emotion between various characters. In the context of the novels, this is manifest through Elinor's and Marianne's growing consciousness. As their separate but similar experiences evoke this awareness of self, we see how sense and sensibility work in tandem toward maturation. Indeed, this appears to be the very heart of Austen's intention. As Marilyn Butler says, "[Austen] does not value the personal process of learning to reason as an end in itself" (Butler 177). If this were the case, then the novels would conclude with little or no care to Elinor's own alteration. Austen's design proves itself to be even more intricate, however, as we see the unfolding of the denouement. Specifically, characters that remain unchanged by life experiences are doomed to a false feeling of happiness. This is evident through her presentation of characters like General Tilney or John Willoughby, who seem perfectly mercenary in comparison to Catherine, Elinor or Marianne. This is the reality that the girls eventually become aware of as they combine the logistics of sensible behavior with expressions of sensibility. That they can come to this conclusion is evidence of their maturation; what is more, however, is that

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they are now more understanding of human nature and its inclination to make sacrifices under the stress of society. It is precisely because they still have their sensibilities, then, that these women can rise above the socially constructed ideology (i. e. Catherine and Elinor), or the personally designed one (Marianne), that previously limited them from uniting sense and sensibility in perfect balance. The main idea that Austen ends up presenting to her readers, then, is that possessing an equal amount of sense and sensibility kindles a seasoned understanding of the verities of life. Standing on this level foundation offers an unobstructed view of other truths, like how a sensible society governing the human race is both a blessing and a curse. This premise also reveals that the best way to avoid losing one's humanity to social institutions, regardless of context, comes by self-awareness through maturation. As illustrated by Austen, to know oneself is to keep reason and raptures in check with one another. Moreover, achieving this balance is the means to a greater end.