Concept Analysis

Sense and Sensibility

By Jane Austen


Summary

Volume I opens with the death of Mr. Henry Dashwood’s uncle. This uncle’s great fortune is willed to Henry’s first wife’s son, John. Henry dies and his fortune is unfortunately left to John’s disposal. This leaves his wife and their three daughters (Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret) with very little money and without a comfortable place to live due to the circumstances imposed by John Dashwood’s controlling and uncharitable wife. The four ladies are invited to live with a distant relative, Mr. Middleton, in a distant countryside, Devonshire. They accept and move away leaving the girls’ attachment and love for their home, and Elinor’s heart with Edward Ferrars.

Once arrived at their Barton Park cottage in Devonshire, Marianne meets John Willoughby by chance and the two unabashedly court one another very publicly, all the while Mr. Middleton’s friend Colonel Brandon is in love with Marianne. Friends of the Middletons arrive, and one, Lucy, reveals to Elinor that she is engaged to Edward. Willoughby must suddenly leave for London on business.

In volume II Elinor and Marianne travel to London with Mrs. Jennings, Mrs. Middleton’s mother. Colonel Brandon informs Elinor about a rumor of engagement between Willoughby and Marianne, though Marianne has revealed nothing of the sort to her family. When the two lovers encounter one another at a party Willoughby rudely dismisses her and later writes her a letter denying he ever loved her. Brandon shares Willoughby’s history of debauchery and they discover he is engaged to a rich Miss Gray because he squandered his fortune. Elinor shares the information she knows about him with Marianne and she once love-sick girl realizes her folly and dismisses him.

Volume III details the girls’ trip to visit friends at Cleveland on their way home from London. Marianne becomes very sick there. Willoughby comes and apologizes revealing that he married only so a dreadful secret about him would not be revealed, he really did love Marianne. Mrs. Dashwood and Brandon come and are relieved to see Marianne recovering.

Upon arriving home at Barton Park, they find Lucy is engaged not to Edward, but to Robert Ferrars because he will receive a majority of the family inheritance. Edward and Elinor become engaged as do Marianne and Colonel Brandon. They all marry and live close to Mrs. Dashwood and Margaret.

Organizational Patterns

The novel is divided into three volumes. Volume I, the largest of the three, has 22 chapters and 132 pages, volume II, 14 chapters with 113 pages, and volume III has 14 chapters and 123 pages. The first volume deals mainly with the introductions of a majority of the characters, especially the main ones, and the initial romantic attachments. Volume II details Marianne and Elinor’s trip to London and the disappointment of Marianne’s love. The final
volume resolves the relationship blunders with neat matches between the kind Brandon and Marianne and Edward and Elinor.

**The Central Question or Enduring Issue**

What characteristic is more necessary to possess: reason (sense) or passion (sensibility)?

Elinor and Marianne as main characters represent the dichotomy suggested by the title. Elinor, the older sister, acts always with reason, restraint, prudence, and all around level-headedness. The younger, Marianne acts with passion, emotion, intensity, and impulsiveness. The two are opposites, but with subtle blending. Elinor displays emotional care and Marianne is not entirely oblivious to the need to be proper at times.

**Issues related to this Study of Literature**

**Themes**

**Classicism and Romanticism**

The time period during which Austen wrote this novel was during the conversion between classicism and romanticism and so the theme of reason versus passion has historical resonance. The two girls represent these two persuasions. Elinor represents the opinion sense: rationality, insight, judgment, moderation, and balance as she never loses sight of propriety, economic practicalities, and perspective, while Marianne is of sensibility as she embraces romance, imagination, idealism, excess, and a dedication to the beauty of nature. Austen gestures toward both her predecessors and contemporaries in the novel.

**Money/Inheritance**

Austen was well aware of the injustice of the laws of her time. Women had no right to inheritance or land ownership and so had to focus their marital pursuits toward marrying for economic comfort. The Dashwood women had relatively little money for their needs and the life they were accustomed to because of their father’s death and with no dowry, their chances of marrying well were greatly lessened.

**Marriage**

Marianne laughed at Elinor’s prudence in her view of a “good” marriage, but at the time there was no socially acceptable way for a woman to gain an income to support her livelihood except by marriage. Marianne feels early on that she “shall never see a man whom [she] can truly love” because she “require[s]a man who sings well, dances admirably, rides bravely, reads with passion and whose tastes agree in every point with [her] own.” In the end she realizes her romantic idealism is not sensible in her marriage choice. She, like Elinor marries for security more than for affection.

**Expectations and Reality**

Always the realist Elinor has little trouble navigating through trials, while Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne allow their passionate expectations to lead their actions. These two romantics constantly are disappointed by their imaginations and encounter a great deal of drama along the way.

**Other themes**

The Individual and Society and Appearance and Reality

**Setting**
The novel begins at the Dashwood home at Norland Park in Sussex, England. It is a beautiful place with many fond memories for the Dashwood girls, but they move far away to Devonshire. They live in a small cottage on the estate of Mr. Middleton called Barton Park. They enjoy spending time in the beautiful hills around their home. In volume II Elinor and Marianne travel to London, England to visit with friends and stay at the home of Mrs. Jennings. Colonel Brandon’s home is at Delaford that Marianne moves to when she marries him. Edward and Elinor move to the parsonage on the estate when they marry.

**Point of View, Narrative Voice**

*Sense and Sensibility* is written as a third person framework which uses the past tense. The form Austen utilizes in the novel is free indirect discourse.

**Literary Terms**

**Direct Discourse**
Direct reporting of what someone said in context. It is usually marked by quotations.

**Indirect Discourse**
The narrator reports the action: events are reported events indirectly without the use of quotes.

**Free Indirect Discourse**
The narration represents the characters’ speech and/or thoughts by combining direct discourse with the narrator’s commentary (indirect discourse). The style is subjective, but each character’s mind is understood without lengthy narrative explanation.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

A theme in the novel is the individual and society; students can surely relate to the issues and situations encountered by the characters throughout the story that address this. In Austen’s time it was extremely important to be well accepted by society. Certain actions that transgressed the social mores and conventions of the time could ruin a person entirely. Students today find it very important to be socially acceptable as well and often understand the importance of appearances. Often Marianne’s actions are definitely outside of the realm of socially acceptable. Her relationship with Willoughby disregards propriety and causes embarrassment to Elinor who must compensate for Marianne’s social transgressions. Willoughby is also a transgressor. His interaction with women blatantly disrespects the rules of society. Not only did he dismiss Marianne after openly and unabashedly showing his affection toward her, but he had other shady rendezvous. He seduced and impregnated Colonel Brandon’s young foster daughter and then left her poor and alone. His benefactress became aware of his actions and revoked her monetary support. To maintain his status, he had to marry a rich woman that could support his lavish lifestyle. Many of the students will understand the great lengths these and other characters went to in order to maintain their social well-being. Money plays a great role in *Sense and Sensibility* and likely also in the social image of the students.

As mentioned the characteristics of reason and passion are addressed within the story. Students will recognize these traits in themselves and be able to analyze which is more important to them and whether or not this is affected by circumstance as it is for many of the characters in the novel, especially Marianne and Elinor.

Many of the students will identify with the confused and varied romantic feelings of the characters in the work. Adolescence is a time when attraction to others grows. Many students
feel as Elinor does, that they will find someone well suited for their needs. Others (most) probably feel like Marianne, that they will never find someone perfect for them, but then are swept away in story-tale romances, then crushed tragically. Some have or will experience disappointments like Brandon, play with love like Willoughby, and much more.

Other relationships are also of great importance to students and *Sense and Sensibility* illustrates many varied relationships. There is likely a character or parts of characters that the class can identify with.

**Vocabulary Issues**

*Sense and Sensibility* was written in the early 1800s and published in 1811. The type of language it is written in is typical of Austen’s time, but will be foreign to most contemporary readers. This offers a great deal of opportunity for word study. The text is engaging, but it is important to have a background knowledge of the vocabulary and even the history so that students will be able to adopt and alignment within the text. The vocabulary includes difficult words or words with different than the typical meaning and words that are specific to the time period. For example: barouché, jointure, post, Michaelmas, hartshorn, and much, much more.

Austen’s writing style is very descriptive with rich vocabulary and constructions, but it is long-winded which causes further confusion for readers. These constructions provide many examples of superior writing that create vivid imagery and provide for excellent teaching opportunities. Teaching students how to decode and even imitate the writing will help them better understand Austen’s writing.

**Background Knowledge**

It may be helpful to have a mini-lesson on the history of the 1800s that includes social customs including courting, patronage, family relationships, marriage etc. so that they can understand why the characters act and interact in the ways they do. Students need to understand the positions of males and females within the society as well. This background knowledge will not only allow students to understand the events of the novel better, but it will help them make text-to-world connections as they compare and contrast the differences of this world and their own.

Students should be instructed about the neo-classicist and romantic movements both in literature and in other contexts. This greatly influences the way the novel is written and so should be part of the study of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Vocabulary should be part of background instruction so students have a basis of comprehension, but should continue to be built up throughout the reading of the book.

It may be important to provide some instruction about direct and indirect discourse, dialogue, and narration. Understanding these things will enrich reading and classroom discussion.

**Implications for Student Diversity**

*Sense and Sensibility* has no mention of ethnic or racial diversity, contrarily, the cast of characters is very homogeneous. The social class and wealth of characters does present diversity. At the time it was frowned upon to marry below oneself, but relationships were formed despite this tenet. This is mirrored in today’s society.
There is no mention of characters with physical or mental special needs within the novel. Students with mental special needs and average students alike will need extensive scaffolding to understand and be engaged in this book.

**Gender Issues**

There are great divisions between the social roles of men and women within this novel. Both sexes fall into stereotypical roles of the time that students should be familiar with in order to understand interactions within the text. This topic should be addressed through a historical context. In building background knowledge for the students it will be important to teach about the gender roles of the time and compare and contrast them to today’s.

**Research Issues/Project Ideas**

**The Great Debate**

Students should select a side, sense or sensibility, and prepare to debate with their classmates which characteristic is most important to have and in what situations. They should use support and examples from the novel and from other sources to enrich their discussion.

**Represent a Persuasion**

*Sense and Sensibility* is written with a lens typical of its period and displays persuasions through its characters. Students will be placed in groups and given twenty minutes in class to create a visual representation of neo-classicism or of romanticism. They will be provided craft supplies and will present to the class with a description of their object and an explanation of why it represents the theme well.

**Enrichment Resources**

The movie *Sense and Sensibility* put out in 1995 would be a fantastic resource to show the students a visual representation of the novel. This would help students be able to understand the more difficult parts because they can see, hear, and even follow along in their books.

[Http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/6/1957/frameset.html](http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/6/1957/frameset.html) is a website that sheds light on much of “Miss Austen’s English” and the vocabulary in the novel as it details obsolete words and expressions.

Websites such as [http://www.mollands.net/](http://www.mollands.net/) and [http://www.janeausten.co.uk/](http://www.janeausten.co.uk/) are produced by Austen aficionados and scholars. They discuss ideas, vocabulary, time period, and many more topics that will enrich the study of the novel a great deal. The forum discussions are especially enlightening on some of the more difficult topics in the novel.

[Http://www.austen.com/](http://www.austen.com/) gives a great deal of other resources for students to discover.

There are a great deal of resources addressing key themes, vocabulary, Austen’s biography, chronology of the historical context of *Sense and Sensibility*, critical interpretation and reviews, along with much more right in many of the publications of the novel. The 2004 Pocket Book’s publication of *Sense and Sensibility* is an especially enriched edition.

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