

## Overview for Parents

Some students come to Jane Austen with a smile and spring in their step, loving her novels and continuing to love them throughout their lives. Others come with a heavy sigh and shuffle and you feel like you almost need to drag them to the table and constantly answer their questions about why we need to read and study her novels. The aim of this Novel Study Guide is to help students in both camps appreciate, and learn from, her enduring works.

One comment I've often heard from teenagers is that there seem to be a lot of characters to keep track of in Jane Austen's novels. In this novel there are two main characters – Elinor and Marianne Dashwood – and the novel is about these two sisters and how they interact and respond to those around them. Austen was a master of what we call “drawing room characters”, adding in characters to make us chuckle or roll our eyes and having a commentary on society at the time. However, younger readers can find it challenging to see how these characters ‘fit in’ and can get them muddled up if they aren't reading carefully.

If your teenager finds reading the book challenging and seems to be having difficulty knowing who's who, then why not consider watching the film adaptation of the movie together? While different to reading and studying the book, it can be helpful to watch the movie to get a feel for the overall story and see how the characters are portrayed, and may encourage your teenager with their reading of the novel. It is not a substitute for reading the book but may enhance their reading experience.

Each lesson focuses on different aspects of the book, guiding your teenager through this, and some links to external sources are provided too, which they can find in the Complementary Links. Each lesson also provides a writing assignment for your child to complete. Please discuss with them what your expectations are for this in terms of length and the format they are to present it to you. You may even want to read along too and enjoy the lessons together with your child, like a small book club together! It is a great way to model to our children good reading habits and also demonstrate the joys of chatting about books.

Jo Lloyd

## Introduction to Students

This Novel Study Guide is based on the schedule of readings included in the Weekly Planner, so please check that you've read the required chapters before coming to the weekly Novel Study lesson. I do encourage you to get a book that allows you to underline parts in pencil and make notes in the book if you can. (Obviously don't do this if you are borrowing a library book!) Making notes and underlining parts of a book helps us to be active readers, almost like you are on the hunt for clues (which you will be next term when we come to detective fiction). The object isn't just to suffer through and read the book (which is sometimes misunderstood to be something akin to 'chick-lit'), but to be a good reader and take note of her writing style and the plot, so making pencil notes as you go can be a useful tool in doing so.

There is one lesson for Novel Study per week, scheduled on Day Four, to allow you time to have completed your required reading for the week before coming to the lesson.

This Novel Study Guide will give you contextual and background information about Austen and her style and about the book. This helps to understand and enjoy the book more but also see the benefits in studying this novel in particular. It does include a writing assignment each week so please chat with your parents about what their expectations are for this.

Jo Lloyd

## Lesson 1: An Introduction to Austen and the Dashwood Sisters

*'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife'.*

It is with the famous line that Jane Austen begins her novel *Pride and Prejudice* and it is with that famous line that too many students come to all her books thinking that they are just going to be about love and marriage (despite the fact that there is nothing in that famous line that even suggests love).

Jane Austen was a gifted author and made a huge contribution to the development of the novel as we know it today. Her writing is witty and shows us what satire can look like, all while she offers a commentary on English society at the time that it was progressing from the Neo-Classical era into the Romantic period. This is Austen's view on Regency England.

This is a time of long tresses and dresses, balls and elegant dancing, where characters live in large English estates or in small destitute cottages. Importantly, this is a time when a woman had no claim to any money or property after she married: any money she held, excepting her dowry (which was intended for her financial provision), became her husband's once she married and he held control of all such assets. Austen offers a view on all of this from her perspective as a Christian woman who herself never married. Her father was a Rector in the area of Hampshire for the Church of England and, by many accounts, was a doting father who enjoyed reading from his marvellous library to Jane and her older sister Cassandra. Jane enjoyed writing parodies and sketches to amuse her family and while her life has been described as "uneventful, placid, and circumscribed"<sup>1</sup>, she was very sensitive to the life around her and it was that life and culture around her that inspired her novels.

Jane and Cassandra were said to have enjoyed a great relationship and that she drew on her perspective of sisterhood for the portrayal of Elinor and Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*. This was the first novel she published and, remarkably, Austen started writing this novel when she was only in her

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<sup>1</sup> This is how Jane Austen was described in the 1961 forward to *Sense and Sensibility* published by Signet Classics

teenage years. Also note that she originally thought it should be titled *Elinor and Marianne* but it was changed to its current title before publication.

### Elinor and Marianne

At 19 years, Elinor is the oldest sister to Marianne (17 years) and Margaret (the youngest sister), and together with their mother, they have been living in Norland Park in Sussex. The character of Elinor is all about having good sense. She is the dependable daughter who takes responsibility to care for her family. She is clear-headed and sensible and seems to take over managing the family and household once her father dies. The character of Marianne reflects more one's personal sensibilities and sensitivities and is often seen in modern times as being not just more impulsive, rushing headlong into situations, following her heart, not her head, but also more symbolic of how women should be (as opposed to Elinor). In Austen's time however, the character of Elinor was to represent the Neo-Classic way of life while Marianne represents the ushering in of the Romantic age. They weren't designed to compete with each other, or suggest one is better than the other, but rather to show their inherent differences to her then contemporaneous audience who themselves were experiencing social change.

The three girls have been greatly loved and cared for by their father, Mr Henry Dashwood, as women in that era relied upon. This is an era when men held the titles to property and men held great family riches and thus women relied on them to provide and care for them appropriately. Which returns us to our opening line for this lesson and the "truth universally acknowledged" that men with fortune are in need of a wife, which of course readers can smile at, knowing it is indeed the other way around: this is an era where women are in need of men with great fortune.

Before their father died, the girls' half-brother, Mr John Dashwood, had promised their father that he would take care of his half-sisters and his father's second wife. On his father's death bed Mr John Dashwood appreciated his father's concern that his death would leave them vulnerable and his desire for them to stay in their family home and gave his promises to him accordingly.

However, as the novel begins, we see that, after their father's death, the women face a very different future than their father had intended as Mrs John Dashwood dwindles down the amount that the women are to be given.

### Mrs John Dashwood

Mrs John Dashwood is presented as a forceful character, descending upon Norland Park immediately after the funeral, with no word of forewarning to the women, clearly claiming her husband's inheritance. It is in Mrs John Dashwood that we see Jane Austen's writing come alive as her writing invokes us to immediately have a reaction to this character. We see how she immediately takes over as mistress of Norland Park and relegates the women for whom this has been their family home, to the status of mere visitors. We also see how she observes the deepening friendship and attachment between Elinor and Edward (Ferrars) and immediately thinks of the large fortune her brother is to receive rather than viewing this in a positive attitude. This is a great character in which readers see Austen's ability to create characters that are nearly caricatures of people she would have seen in her circles of society and the way she uses these characters to make comment on that society. Her is a woman clearly stating that three daughters and their mother wouldn't have much need of money for keeping house while showing her huge draw on that funds for keeping her household when she only had one young son. She is a character that readers are meant to dislike, identifying her cold heart and calculating ways and she is a great contrast to the other Dashwood girls.

### Vocabulary

Write down definitions for the following words included within the allocated chapters:

- ❖ moiety
- ❖ sanguine
- ❖ annuity
- ❖ indecorous
- ❖ indefatigable
- ❖ barouches
- ❖ approbation

### Your Writing Assignment

By now you see that the protagonists here are Elinor and Marianne. It is these two sisters, and their relationship, that are the main characters of the novel. These first four chapters set the reader up to know about their father and his death, how the fate of themselves, along with their mother and younger sister, lies in the hands of their half-brother John Dashwood (though really his overbearing wife, Mrs John Dashwood), and Elinor's fondness for Edward Ferrars.

For your writing assignment, write a character profile on both Elinor and Marianne, finding portions from the first few chapters that give us glimpses about their appearance and also their character and countenance. Consider whether you tend to naturally gravitate to, and identify with, one sister over the other and reflect on why this may be the case. Note that Austen wants us to see them both together, not to pit one against the other for the conflict in the story, hence the title *Sense and Sensibility*: it isn't one or the other, but both sisters together.