

## About This Volume

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Robert C. Evans

This volume on Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility*, like all the other volumes in the Critical Insights series, is divided into several parts. It opens with an introductory essay, moves to a deliberately brief biography of Austen, transitions to a "Critical Contexts" section consisting of four essays (each with a distinctive focus), and then presents eleven different "Critical Readings." Next comes a "Resources" section consisting of a chronology of Austen's life, a listing of her works, and a secondary bibliography. The volume concludes with a biography of the editor, biographies of the contributors, and a comprehensive index.

The introductory essay to the current volume is written by Collins Hemingway, who offers a helpful survey of many different aspects of Austen's life and career in general and of *Sense and Sensibility* in particular. He discusses the novel's varied historical and cultural contexts as well as its characters, plotlines, and reception, and he also comments on the particular strengths of various editions. Hemingway concludes by asking why students and others should continue reading Austen and so "many thousands of readers across the world [do] read and reread her books in many languages? Because," he answers, "she was the first English novelist to portray characters who come across as recognizable people carrying on recognizable lives, dealing with the same kind of personal issues that women, especially, face today." He observes that "[e]ven critics who puzzled over the 'lack of action' in her novels nonetheless noted that her characters behaved and thought like the people they knew in their own villages and towns." He observes, for instance, that "Sheila Kaye-Smith, writing 125 years after Austen, came to love the novels because the same laws of human nature operate in Austen's world as in our own. Like all readers, Kaye-Smith finds sensible companions whose 'thoughts and feelings are in close alliance with what I personally think and feel'" (5). That "close alliance

## ***Sense and Sensibility* and the Position of Women in the Romantic Era**

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Joyce E. Kelley and McKenna Odom

Jane Austen's first published novel opens with a scene of patrilineal disaster: the Dashwood sisters lose their home at Norland Park because their half brother, Mr. John Dashwood, and his greedy wife, Fanny, inherit the estate and decide to keep almost all of the fortune for their own four-year-old son. Encouraging her husband to allow these four female relations only an income of five hundred pounds a year, Fanny comments, denying the needs of her own sex in a statement of sadistic cruelty disguised as envy: "what on earth can four women want for more than that?—They will live so cheap! [. . .] They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be!" (12). Subsequently, because Elinor has no income to speak of, she is seen as an inappropriate match for a man she comes to esteem: Fanny's brother Edward. In short, by chapter 4 the Dashwood girls appear doomed to a life of thrift and denial, and their only hope is in the charity of a kind relation and a marriage to a man with money who can overlook their own relative poverty. The widow Mrs. Jennings, who takes the older two Dashwood sisters under her wing, declares that she hopes to "get one of you at least well married before I have done with you" (109), though, of course, the girls seem very young by today's standards: Marianne is still 16 and Elinor only 19.

The plot of *Sense and Sensibility* thus relies heavily upon the hindered position of women in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society. It reveals women leading lives largely controlled by men—though many of these men are manipulated, in turn, by conniving women delighted to get the upper hand. The novel relies on the reader's understanding of society's conventions regarding women and the reader's ability to acknowledge his or her own

## **Green with Envy: The Story of Money in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility***

Edwin Wong

Your days are filled with dinner parties and excursions. Will you pair the finest South African wines with salmon or cod, boiled fowls or veal cutlets? Then a season in London followed by a stay in Cleveland. While awaiting smart bachelors and gentlemen of quality, you perform gentility by reading poems by William Cowper, writing letters, drawing, needleworking, and playing pianoforte. At parties, you dance, gossip, and while away hours playing whist or walking through pleasure gardens. When Adam Smith was talking about the division of labor, you were talking about the division of leisure. You envy the peers of the realm—ancestral landlords at the top of the food chain—but, in turn, are envied by the middle class and the laboring poor. You are the gentry, a class of flâneurs, rentiers with annual incomes from £200–£5,000 (Burnett 149–50). Since noblesse oblige compels you, you acquire wealth through inheritance and marriage. Jane Austen's 1811 novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, is ostensibly about the coming of age of Elinor Dashwood and her sister Marianne at the turn of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> But it is really about how human nature is not driven by greed, but by envy. In a world of endless idleness, feelings of inadequacy run rampant because envy sets fire to the flames.

### **The Pyramid of Wealth—A Meditation on Envy—Lake Wobegon**

The old relinquish their wealth and the young enter the fray, some to gain money, and others to give it away. To facilitate inheritance and marriage, characters, like cattle at livestock markets, are marked for exchange. Wealth is a known attribute: directories, available by subscription, contain names, addresses, fortunes, and stock holdings of potential spouses.<sup>2</sup> Characters are often mistaken, but never about money.<sup>3</sup> Love and inheritance is a loaded game played with cards

## Comparing and Contrasting Two Scenes from the 1995 and 2008 Films of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

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Jordan Bailey

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* was the focus of a stunningly successful 1995 film adaptation directed by Ang Lee and starring Emma Thompson (who also wrote the screenplay). So well-received was this film that it has been the topic of several books and numerous essays. This film not only helped spark a revival of interest in Austen's writings but also helped encourage and call attention to further adaptations of Austen's novels, both for film and for television. The most successful of these was a 1995 "mini-series" devoted to *Pride and Prejudice*, written by Andrew Davies and starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle. In fact, Davies's version of *Pride and Prejudice* was so popular that he was later invited to script a televised version of *Sense and Sensibility* directed by John Alexander, which was broadcast in Britain and the United States in 2008. This production was also much applauded, so that fans of Austen's novel now have two first-rate adaptations to enjoy—and to compare and contrast.

This essay examines just a few minutes from each of the films. These minutes involve the moment in the novel when Edward Ferrars, who is secretly in love with Elinor Dashwood, happens to visit Elinor when Elinor just happens to be talking with Lucy Steele, to whom Edward is secretly engaged. To say that Edward and Elinor are deeply uncomfortable in this episode is an understatement, but things become even more complicated when Marianne, Elinor's sister, also enters the scene and urges Edward to stay when it is clear that he (for one reason) and Lucy (for another reason) would prefer to leave as quickly as they can. In crafting this episode, Austen created one of the dramatic high points of the novel—an episode brimming with tension, mixed feelings, and complex, conflicting motives and impulses.

## **“Sense and Sensibility” in *Sense and Sensibility*: The Use of a Key Phrase by Jane Austen’s Contemporaries and Its Relevance to Elinor\_\_\_\_\_**

Robert C. Evans

Critics have often noted that Jane Austen’s decision to give the title *Sense and Sensibility* to her first published novel seems to imply, at least at first, that the two terms are opposites. “Sense,” it is commonly assumed, is the word most appropriate to Elinor Dashwood in Austen’s novel, because Elinor tends to be rational, calm, level-headed, and thoughtful. On the other hand, “sensibility” is usually thought to be most appropriate to Marianne, Elinor’s sister, because Marianne is often emotional, impulsive, “romantic,” and passionate. Many novels of Austen’s day used opposites in their titles, and Austen seems to have been alluding to this tradition in giving her own work the title it now bears. But critics are often quick to point out that Austen’s title should not be taken to imply that Elinor and Marianne are complete opposites or that the book simply favors one term (“sense”) over the other (“sensibility”). For these critics, the novel is not a “thesis-driven” text designed to make a simplistic case for reason over emotion. Rather, it is a book that finds some fault with Elinor’s supposedly *excessive* reasonableness just as it finds fault with Marianne’s *excessive* emotionalism. By the end of the novel, according to this view, both sisters have moved toward the middle and have achieved a kind of happy medium between too much sense and too much sensibility.

In this essay, I want to show that people in Austen’s time (and earlier) often used the phrase “sense and sensibility” not to suggest opposites but almost to suggest synonyms: “sense” and “sensibility” were often *both* used to imply reason and reasonableness, and when the combined phrase “sense and sensibility” was used, “sensibility” was often intended to *intensify* (not contradict) *sense*. In light of such usage, I would like to suggest that Elinor, to a great degree,

## Self-Command and Selfishness: Civility and Wildness in *Sense and Sensibility*

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Nicolas Tredell

“Self-command” and “selfishness” are terms that recur on several key occasions in *Sense and Sensibility*. “Self-command” is one of the qualities attributed to Elinor Dashwood both by the authorial voice of the third-person narrator and by Elinor’s sister Marianne, who knows what the term means but, for most of the novel, consciously rejects it for herself as an ethical imperative—indeed, for Marianne, rejecting it is itself an ethical imperative, because it inhibits what we might call “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” to borrow a phrase from William Wordsworth’s 1800 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (266), an inaugural text of Romanticism that he co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and that Jane Austen might have read. Wordsworth was speaking of such “overflow” as a quality of good poetry; but letting powerful feelings spontaneously brim over in actual life, or in fictional representations of it, could be seen as a form of selfishness. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the narrator applies “selfishness,” and its concomitant adjective “selfish,” to Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood and Lady Middleton, whereas Elinor applies it to Lucy Steele and, later, to John Willoughby—who, in his confrontation with Elinor, has already applied it to himself. But we could also apply the terms to Marianne, when she rejects “self-command” for the rapturous rush of feeling, and even, as we shall see, to Elinor herself when she practices “self-command” in a way that could be interpreted as self-gratifying and as a form of what today might be called “virtue signalling.”

To an extent, we can correlate “self-command” and “selfishness” with the two qualities announced in the novel’s title, “sense” and “sensibility.” The novel may seem, as it did to its very first (anonymous) reviewer in *The Critical Review* in February 1812 (Bautz 9–10), to offer a clear-cut binary opposition between those two title nouns that the two sisters who respectively embody them

## Propriety, Privacy, and Power in *Sense and Sensibility*

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Melissa Anderson

The plot of Jane Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, depends largely on a number of secrets that directly affect the marital possibilities of the novel's two young female protagonists, Elinor and Marianne. Indeed, a great deal of information that is vital to understanding what is happening in the novel, about Willoughby's past history with Eliza Williams, and about Edward's secret engagement to Lucy Steele, for example, remains unknown to most of the characters in the novel for the majority of the narrative. Other secrets, such as the true state of affairs between Marianne and Willoughby, remain secret to even the reader for a good portion of the text. It seems clear that some of the secrets in the text are used as narrative devices, as ways for Austen to control the narrative and the expectations of both the reader and the characters within the novel. Since we know it as Austen's first published novel and one of her earliest written novels, in some sense *and Sensibility* can be seen as a writer's experiment with the narrative device of the secret, with concealing and revealing information for best effect. Alongside the narrative experiment with secrets, however, is a history of notions of propriety and privacy that evolved over the course of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century when Austen was writing. In the period under study, propriety, a word that occurs frequently in the text in various forms, could refer to an adherence to social convention or to moral principles, and not always at the same time (Nardin, *Those* 13). Privacy was an even more complicated and ambiguous concept during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Keeping personal information private could be a way to avoid inflicting your problems on others, or it could be a way of hiding feelings and information from others (Spacks 113); in the novel it is used in both ways by various characters. William

## Jane Austen's Colonel Brandon on the Screen\_\_\_\_\_

Christopher Baker

In a letter to W. S. Williams on April 12, 1850, Charlotte Brontë famously criticized Jane Austen:

Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands, and feet. What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly it suits her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—this Miss Austen ignores. (qtd. Austen xxvi)

For many of the characters in *Sense and Sensibility* this judgment seems accurate, for their inner lives must be deduced by the reader from their conversations that are concerned almost entirely with the vagaries of their wealth, health, marital status, and social station. Despite the verbal sarcasm, innuendo, misdirection, and deception she is so expert at portraying, Austen does gesture towards deeper layers of personality, yet they are levels of feeling typically connected to material values, as in her comment on John Dashwood, whose “nature was calm, not open to provocation; and he never wished to offend any body, especially any body of good fortune” (Austen 219). What begins as a compliment ends as an ironically negative judgment from Austen’s narrator, who sees keenly and speaks aptly as Brontë says, but who rarely finds anyone who possesses a mature, compassionate inner life that Austen’s fictional avatar Elinor Dashwood—the sister of sense—wishes to praise. However, one character who does earn Elinor’s respect despite his reluctance to engage in the flow of mundane chatter around him is Colonel Brandon, whose conversation and behavior compose the most telling denial of Brontë’s accusation of heartlessness even though he is mistakenly assumed by many to be simply an aging, stodgy bachelor. Brandon’s willingness to express and act on his desire



## ***The Real Jane Austen: A Praiseworthy Filmed Documentary***

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Robert C. Evans

Most teachers are aware of the varied “ways” in which students learn. Although some enjoy and profit from simple reading, others find reading, by itself, difficult and/or insufficient. This is one reason that textbooks, both at the elementary level and then even on into college, are often profusely illustrated. Pictures sometimes *are* “worth a thousand words.” Reading printed text accompanied by relevant illustrations can make the relevant material both easier to understand and especially easier to remember. The fact that many people are “visual learners” is one reason that schools have long relied on various kinds of “visual aids,” including old-fashioned “filmstrips,” later “slide projectors,” and even later (often huge) film projectors equipped with large metal reels. Students of a certain age will remember their teachers wheeling such contraptions into class, pulling down a large white screen, and then getting on with the show.



Fig. 1. Film strip projector.  
Photo by RockClaw1030, via Wikipedia.

- 1800** Jane's father decides to retire and move to the resort city of Bath.
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- 1801** Jane, Cassandra, and Mrs. Austen join the Rev. Austen in Bath. Jane's brother takes over his father's job as rector in Steventon.
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- 1802** Jane unexpectedly receives a proposal of marriage. She initially accepts it but changes her mind by the next day.
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- 1804** Jane may be working on her unfinished novel *The Watsons*.
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- 1805** In January, Rev. Austen suddenly dies.
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- 1809** The Austen women take up residence at Chawton Cottage, a small home owned (along with various much larger properties) by their now-wealthy brother Edward, who had been adopted by the wealthy Knight family when he was a boy.
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- 1810** *Sense and Sensibility* is accepted for publication.
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- 1811** *Sense and Sensibility* is published.
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- 1813** The revised *Pride and Prejudice* is published. Jane finishes another novel (*Mansfield Park*).
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- 1814** Jane begins working on another novel (*Emma*). *Mansfield Park* is published.
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- 1815** Austen finishes *Emma* and begins working on *Persuasion*. *Emma* is published.