

Sense and Sensibility

Jane Austen

Book Summarization

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Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen

Book Resume

"Sense and Sensibility" by Jane Austen follows the Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne, as they navigate love, loss, and societal expectations. After their father's death, they move to a modest cottage with their mother and younger sister. Elinor, representing 'sense,' forms an attachment with Edward Ferrars, while Marianne, embodying 'sensibility,' falls for the dashing John Willoughby. Elinor's romantic hopes are dashed when she learns Edward is secretly engaged. Meanwhile, Marianne is jilted by Willoughby, who marries for wealth. Both sisters suffer heartache, but ultimately find happiness with more suitable partners. Elinor's steadfastness is rewarded when Edward's engagement ends, and they marry. Marianne, chastened by her experiences, finds contentment with the reliable Colonel Brandon. The novel contrasts reason and emotion, highlighting the importance of balance.

Main Character Analysis

Elinor Dashwood, the eldest of the Dashwood sisters, is the main protagonist of Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility." She is characterized by her prudence, self-control, and keen sense of responsibility. Elinor is rational and considerate, always prioritizing the well-being of others, particularly her family. Her motivations stem from her desire to maintain social propriety and emotional composure, even in the face of adversity. Throughout the story, Elinor grapples with her unspoken love for Edward Ferrars, showcasing her strength and resilience in silently enduring her emotional turmoil. Her development is marked by her growing understanding of the importance of balancing reason and emotion, ultimately leading her to express her feelings more openly and advocate for her own happiness.

Main Themes

"Sense and Sensibility" by Jane Austen explores several main themes, including reason vs. emotion, love and marriage, social class and reputation, and the role of women in society. Here's how these themes are explored in the narrative:

1. Reason vs. Emotion

The title itself highlights this theme, with 'Sense' representing reason (Elinor) and 'Sensibility' representing emotion (Marianne).

- Elinor Dashwood embodies reason and self-control. She hides her love for Edward Ferrars and her heartbreak when she learns of his secret engagement.

- Marianne Dashwood represents emotional excess and romantic sensibilities. She openly displays her feelings for Willoughby and is dramatically devastated when he leaves her.

- Example: When Marianne is abandoned by Willoughby, she becomes seriously ill, demonstrating the destructive power of unchecked emotions. Meanwhile, Elinor remains steady and supports her family, illustrating the strength of reason.

2. Love and Marriage

Austen explores the complexities of love, desire, and marriage, highlighting the differences between romantic love, practical marriage, and marriages of convenience.

- Example: Colonel Brandon's love for Marianne is steadfast and genuine, unlike Willoughby's fickle passion. Edward Ferrars' secret engagement to Lucy Steele shows the entanglements of duty and desire.

3. Social Class and Reputation

The narrative delves into the rigid class system of early 19th-century England and the importance of maintaining one's reputation.

- Example: The Dashwoods' fall in social status after their father's death highlights the precariousness of their position. Willoughby's abandonment of Marianne and his past seduction of Eliza Williams show the consequences of damaging one's reputation.

4. The Role of Women in Society

Austen examines the limited opportunities and dependence of women in a patriarchal society.

- Example: After their father's death, the Dashwood women are left impoverished and dependent on the goodwill of others. Their struggle emphasizes the vulnerability of women who lacked social and economic power. Elinor and Marianne's marriages at the end of the novel are presented as a means of securing their futures, illustrating the few options available to women of their time.

Through these themes, Austen offers a nuanced exploration of the societal expectations and personal desires that shape her characters' lives, ultimately presenting a balanced view of sense and sensibility.

Book Analysis

Author's Writing Style

Jane Austen is renowned for her wit, irony, and social commentary, all of which are evident in 'Sense and Sensibility.' She employs a third-person narrator who is objective yet often ironic, allowing Austen to subtly critique her characters and their society. Her language is formal yet engaging, with intricate sentences and precise word choices that reveal characters' thoughts and feelings. She uses dialogue masterfully to advance the plot and reveal character dynamics.

Historical and Cultural Context

Published in 1811, 'Sense and Sensibility' is set in late 18th-century England, during the Georgian era. This period was marked by strict social hierarchies, economic instability, and limited opportunities for women. The novel explores these realities, particularly the dependence of women on marriage for financial security and social status. The story takes place against the backdrop of the English gentry, with scenes unfolding in the countryside and in London, highlighting the contrast between rural and urban lifestyles.

Impact on Literature

'Sense and Sensibility' is one of Austen's most influential works and has significantly impacted literature. It helped establish the novel of manners, focusing on the minutiae of everyday life and social interactions. Austen's innovative use of irony, her nuanced character development, and her exploration of women's experiences have inspired countless authors and contributed to the development of the modern novel.

Critical Reception

Critically acclaimed upon its release, 'Sense and Sensibility' has continued to garner praise. Notable critics like George Henry Lewes and Virginia Woolf admired Austen's realism and psychological insight. Modern critics appreciate her feminist undertones, exploration of class dynamics, and subversive

commentary on societal norms. The novel has been adapted into numerous films, TV series, and stage productions, testifying to its enduring appeal.

Themes, Characters, and Setting

Themes

- **Sense vs. Sensibility:** The novel explores the balance between reason ('sense,' embodied by Elinor Dashwood) and emotionalism ('sensibility,' embodied by Marianne Dashwood). Austen ultimately advocates for a middle ground between the two.

- **Marriage and Social Status:** The story critiques the societal expectation for women to marry well to secure their futures.

- **Reputation and Virtue:** Austen examines the importance of personal integrity and societal reputation, particularly for women.

Characters

- **Elinor Dashwood:** The embodiment of 'sense,' Elinor is rational, prudent, and considerate. Her steadfastness and resilience make her a pillar of strength for her family.

- **Marianne Dashwood:** Representing 'sensibility,' Marianne is passionate, romantic, and impulsive. Her emotional excesses lead to personal growth and eventual maturity.

- **Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon, and John Willoughby:** The male love interests represent different aspects of romance, duty, and honor, challenging the Dashwood sisters' views on love and marriage.

Setting

The rural settings of Norland Park and Barton Cottage contrast with the urban environment of London, reflecting the differences between the peaceful, intimate atmosphere of the countryside and the bustling, socially complex city. This contrast underscores the emotional journeys of the characters and their evolving perspectives on life and love.

Overall Message or Significance

'Sense and Sensibility' underscores the importance of balance, self-awareness, and personal growth. Austen encourages readers to critically examine societal norms and expectations, advocating for a nuanced understanding of human nature. Through the Dashwood sisters' journeys, Austen illustrates the value of moderation and the integration of both sense and sensibility in navigating life's challenges. The novel remains significant for its exploration of timeless themes and its influential role in shaping literary traditions.