

Edward (in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*) introvert

Overview In her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Jane Austen confronts us with a pair of sisters, Marianne ('sensibility') and Elinor ('sense') whose marital searches and complex interrelations are the triggers of the book. From the start, Elinor is partial to Edward, who has come to live with her mother, Mrs. Dashwood, and the family. Prior to the opening of the narrative, Edward has proposed to the niece of his tutor, Lucy Steele, and the engagement has been kept secret, from fear that Edward's mother would go crazy if she learned of his disadvantageous engagement. Much later in the story, the mother learns of the engagement, and disowns Edward, who in the end marries the very Elinor who has had faith in him from the outset.

Character Edward presents himself as retiring, lacking self-confidence, understated, idle, non-committal, lacking artistic sense. (Elinor Dashwood, who is soft on Edward from the start, insinuates that Edward is putting on more than a little of this character profile, out of laziness and desire to take it easy.) He is in no sense a bad guy, but rather wishes to keep out of the fray of life, and in that soft sense is anti-social, not in the intellectually sharp edged sense of an Alcestis (in Moliere's *The Misanthropist*, or of Hippolytus, in Euripides' *Phaedra*, who is appalled by female sexuality). It is totally in character, for Edward, to refuse to admit to any artistic sensitivity, and to depreciate his own efforts to give an account, to Elinor, of a walk he has just taken, in the beauties of nature.

Parallels We first meet Edward as a quite innocent resident in the Dashwood household, though by the end of the novel, after he has married Elinor, he is a mature householder. In his shy but subtle earlier stages, with Marianne and Elinor, Edward can make us think of a great number of young men starting out to find themselves: Telemachus, the young son of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, Hamlet, in Shakespeare's play, open minded and worried, and challenged by a heavy fate that awaits him on his life way; Oliver Twist, born in the workhouse, but setting out to discover what the new industrial city of London can make of him; Fred Vinci in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, 1872, charming but far too eager to have things fall into his lap; Henry Fleming, who starts out eager to fight but loses his nerves in battle, in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, 1894..

Illustrative moments

1 Retiring Edward enters the narrative on a downer note. Though he moves in with Mrs. Dashwood—who both likes him and sees him as a marriage prospect for her daughter, Elinor—he lacks confidence in dealing with his half-sisters, Marianne and Elinor. 'He had no particular graces of person or address. He was too diffident to do justice to himself.' Upon further acquaintance, it seems, Edward was to grow more open and easy to like—Elinor falls for him and eventually marries him—but we see him through many a stage of melancholy, and of stubborn-honorable refusal to renege on his youthful engagement.

2 Understated On a later occasion, Edward leaves the women at home, so that he can go into the village to see to his horses. Upon returning from that walk, and having praised the beauties of the nature he passed through, Edward rejects Marianne's request that he should explain in more detail what he enjoyed on the walk. 'You must not inquire too far, Marianne—remember I have no knowledge in the picturesque, and I shall offend you by my ignorance and want of taste if we come to particulars. I shall call hills steep, which ought to be bold...I call it a very fine country.'

3 Idle Mrs. Dashwood, who is partial to Edward, suggests that he would be happier if he had an occupation. (This is long before Edward has been granted a parsonage by Colonel Brandon.) Edward replies that he agrees, and has looked around. He alludes to the various career options he has had to

disregard—the law, the navy, the army—out of lack of talent or interest. ‘I was therefore entered at Oxford and have been properly idle ever since.’ He refuses to take seriously Mrs. Dashwood’s point, that as Edward is leaving their society at that point, it would be advantageous to his friends to know where he going and what he plans to do.

4 Direct Marianne expostulates to Edward on the beauties of Barton Valley, to which the Dashwoods have moved. ‘Look at those hills! Did you ever see their equals? To the left is Barton Park, amongst those woods and plantations. .And there beneath that farthest hill, which rises with such grandeur, is our cottage.’ Edward replies: ‘It is a beautiful country...but these bottoms must be dirty in winter. ‘ When Marianne shrinks before such an insensitive response, and asks how he can speak of dirt, in view of such beauty, Edward replies, smiling: ‘Because...among the rest of the objects before me, I see a very dirty lane.’

Reading <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/161/161-h/161-h.htm>

Discussion question

Is anti-social the right descriptor for Edward? After all, he does marry Elinor in the end. Is there something essentially in common between the held-back quality of Edward’s personality and that of Elinor?

Does Edward’s laid-back manner reflect his patrician background? Is he affected? Or is he direct?

Does Edward have a problem with women? Is that the root of his difficulty in expressing himself vigorously around Marianne and Elinor?