

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in **Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility**

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. Colonel Brandon, a friend of John Middleton—the Dashwood family's host—falls in love with Marianne at first sight, but remains reserved and dignified, no competitor for the dashing Willoughby. Brandon's trusted kindness to the whole Dashwood family renders him a rock of stability in the romantic dramas of Marianne, whom in the end he marries.

Character Brandon presents himself as reserved, careful, serious, responsible and dependable at different moments in the story. From the outset he is weighed down by a passion for Marianne, who resembles his cousin Eliza, with whom he had been deeply in love. But he cannot express this passion, and has to watch Willoughby gain the flirtatious love of still juvenile Marianne. Eventually, though, Brandon's steady benevolence toward Marianne, and her own maturing, enable him to win her, and to bring out the full, sensitive personality that has been suppressed in him since, in the very beginning, he proved to be the only character sensitive to Marianne's evening 'song presentation.'

Parallels Colonel Brandon, reserved, seemingly wounded by his past, comes on quiet, but by the end of the novel, after having impacted the lives of all the characters, with his generosity and long sightedness, emerges as the husband of the very Marianne, his junior, who had at the novel's opening found him unmarriageably old. Both his stodginess and his staunchness ally him with a figure like Colonel Pargiter in Virginia Woolf's *The Years*, 1937, or even with the old Professor, *Uncle Vanya*, 1897, in Chekhov's play of the same name. There is a bit of Shakespeare's Polonius in Brandon, venial but chugging along on wise saws. Sophocles' Creon (in *Antigone*, 441 B.C.) shares with Brandon an avuncular grumpiness, grounded in accumulated wounds, and a well earned pessimism about life.,

Reserved / careful At the get acquainted party for the Dashwoods, Marianne is asked to sing for the group after dinner. Her performance was 'highly applauded,' by all but Colonel Brandon. He was the only person who heard her 'without being in raptures.' He paid Marianne the respect of reserved attention, unlike the others, who applauded perfunctorily, or the boisterous Sir John who was 'loud in his admiration.' The Colonel's 'pleasure in music...was estimable when contrasted against the horrible insensitivity of the others.' We are not yet aware of that personal sadness, which adds to the Colonel's 'gravity,' but we sense that his readiness to 'pay her only the compliment of attention' has its roots in his private life.

Serious / responsible During the frequent social evenings, that bring the Dashwoods together with Sir John and the Colonel, Marianne and Willoughby talk incessantly together, leaving Elinor in conversation with Colonel Brandon. The Colonel, who is smitten with Marianne, asks Elinor about her sister's opposition to 'second attachments.' Elinor replies, in essence, that Marianne believes in love at first sight and forever—she is a young romantic. We are not yet aware of the Colonel's hidden concern, his own previous love affair with his father's ward, and its disastrous outcome. The colonel is surrounded by a mysterious sadness, which adds to his gravity.

Serious / responsible The Middletons, Brandon, the Dashwoods and Willoughby plan an outing to Whitwell, which is interrupted by an unexpected letter which arrives in the post for Colonel Brandon. 'While they were at breakfast the letters were brought in. ...there was one for Colonel Brandon—he took it, looked at the direction, changed color, and immediately left the room.' Nothing could persuade him to change his immediate decision, to leave at once on an urgent matter of business. The group will soon learn, after the Colonel leaves, that the matter of business concerns Brandon's 'natural daughter,' but of that the Colonel will say nothing. He leaves in a rush, clouded (still) in mystery.

Dependable and emotional As Marianne is recovering from a serious illness—brought on by her misery at hearing of Willoughby's marriage—she receives a visit from Colonel Brandon—to whom she wishes to express her gratitude for having brought her mother to her. On seeing her his 'emotion was such as, in Elinor's conjecture, must arise from something more than his affection for Marianne.' The narrator helps us appreciate that Brandon is deeply saddened by the resemblance between Marianne and Eliza, Brandon's former love, from whom his father had separated him, and who had died in lamentable circumstances.

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

Overview In her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Jane Austen confronts us with a pair of sisters, Marianne ('sensitivity') 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 marries Elinor.

Character Edward initially presents himself as retiring, lacking self-confidence, understated, idle, non-committal, and short on artistic sense, and yet when we follow his quiet development, to the end, we see that the two subtlest characters in the book, Edward and Elinor, are brought together in marriage. Edward is given a parsonage, by the insightful Colonel Brandon, and goes on to what we suppose is a happy marriage. We increasingly appreciate the fidelity of Edward who, as a young man, got engaged to the unsuitable Lucy Steele, but who refused throughout the tale, until Lucy's marriage, to break that long in the past engagement. Edward is the ultimate in faithful.

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; Henry Fleming, who starts out eager to fight but loses his nerves in battle, in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, 1894..

Retiring / lacking in self-confidence 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.

Retiring / 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.'

Idle / Non-committal about his future 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.

Lacking artistic sense and 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.'

Elinor (Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility)

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. Marianne is the lady of sensibility—emotion, vivacity, impulsiveness, empathy--while Elinor, her sister, is the 'sensible' lady, prudent, careful in what she says, analytic in the care she gives to interpreting situations and making decisions.

Character From the beginning of the novel Elinor presents herself as wise, effective, persuasive, intuitive, realistic, empathetic, insightful, self-commanding, self-analytical. In other words, she is mature from the start, and contrasts sharply with her bubbly, flirtatious sister, Marianne, in tandem with whom she will develop throughout the novel. No wonder that the careful and practical Elinor, who stood up for her shy and beloved boyfriend, Edward, would in the end marry that same Edward. Elinor is fond of good choices, and moves carefully to guarantee them, without being a stick in the mud. As she begins, so she ends, modest and reliable.

Parallels Elinor is a challenge for parallels, for she is created out of Jane Austen's unique culture world and imagination. But we can approach from an angle: Portia, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, 1596, is romantic/loving, caring, and sensible/prudent, like Elinor; *Iphigeneia*, in Goethe's *Iphigenie*, 1781, has like Elinor the qualities of good sense, infinite patience, and love; Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, 1918, features a tough and sensible young woman, on the American prairies, who loves her heart out quietly; Kate Chopin's Edna, in *The Awakening*, 1899, shares with Elinor the determination to see the world her own way, and to affirm its value, step by step. None of these parallels begins to exhaust the subtlety of Austen's Elinor, but each shares a robust portion of Elinor's rare soul.

Intuitive / realistic Marianne and Willoughby appear to be deeply in love, early in the tale, and yet as it turns out they are only infatuated with one another. Elinor and her mother return from a walk to find a disturbed Willoughby waiting in the parlor to say good bye, and Marianne upstairs crying. Elinor's senses go straight to the truth, and assume a romantic break-up. She defies her mother's more optimistic reading, that Willoughby's protectress, a dominating older lady, has urgent need of him. Elinor notes that 'suspicion of something unpleasant is the inevitable consequence of such an alteration as we have just witnessed in him (Willoughby).' When asked whether she thinks Willoughby was just playing around with Marianne, Eleanor replies: 'I want no proof of their affection, but of their engagement I do.' One can hardly imagine a crisper formulation of what before long we know will be obvious.

Empathetic / insightful Edward, Elinor's suitor, has returned from a walk in the hills, which he has found delightful, but when asked by Marianne why he is unable to find the words to describe his experience, he apologizes, saying that he lacks the necessary gift. When her sister Marianne criticizes Edward about his statement, Elinor intervenes. 'I suspect,' she says, 'that to avoid one kind of affection Edward here falls into another.' She goes on to explain that because most people tend to ooh and aah about nature, without knowing what they are saying, Edward refuses to adopt such trite and socially required exaggerations, and 'affects greater indifference and less discrimination in viewing them (the beauties of nature) than he himself possesses.'

Self-commanding Midway through the novel, Edward parts from Elinor and the whole Dashwood family is pained—as they had been, for Marianne, when Willoughby left. The parting ‘left an uncomfortable impression on Elinor’s feelings especially, which required some trouble and time to subdue.’ She was, however, *determined* to subdue her feelings—not just to cope with them—‘to prevent herself from appearing to suffer more than what all her family suffered on his going away.’ As the days pass, shows that by sticking to routine, and maintaining balance in her small family society, Elinor was able, if not to ‘lessen her grief’ to ‘keep it from increasing,’ and to see to it that ‘her mother and sisters were spared much solicitude on her account.’ Her actions were both ‘moral’ and self-controlling.

Self-analytical When Edward broke with Elinor, and left her, Elinor used mind games to cope with her own loss. She acted to retain the freedom of her mind, so that rather than being inwardly chained by the obsession of loss—especially of a loss which she was not in a position to understand—she could assure that ‘the past and the future, on a subject so interesting (Edward’s departure), must be before her, must force her attention, and engross her memory, her reflection, and her fancy.’ Elinor’s reflection takes her into waters where her mind sorts through its own history: she found ‘every day afforded her leisure enough to think of Edward, and of Edward’s behavior, in every possible variety—with tenderness, pity, approbation, censure and doubt...her mind was inevitably at liberty.’

Marianne (Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*)

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Character Marianne, who presents herself as emotional, impulsive, romantic, distracted and hypersensitive, develops steadily throughout *Sense and Sensibility*. Her love affair with Willoughby brings out the irresponsible romantic in her, but when she has been sufficiently burned, by the antics of this philanderer, she is open to her own needs for a stable relationship. Long overshadowed by her premature sister, Elinor, Marianne discovers late in her story that after all she belongs to the Colonel Brandon, whom she had formerly thought too old to marry. Marianne begins as a teen ager, but grows rapidly, and is ready for change.

Parallels Marianne is the image of the high spirited, romantic young lady, with a keen interest in herself and a taste for defiance. She brings to mind Homer’s Nausicaa, the charming ingénue who welcomes Odysseus to the island of the Phaeacians, in the *Odyssey*, as well as Sophocles’ Antigone, 441 B.C., in the play of the same name. Indeed different faces of Marianne—the romantic, the defiant, the selfish-- are reflected in various modern reinterpretations of Sophocles’ play: in the Antigone of Jean Anouilh, transporting the girl into a wartime resistance scenario. Then after all what more sharply recalls the romantic youngster in Antigone, than an impetuous girl like Dante’s Francesca in the *Divine Comedy*, 1320, to whom at a moment of passion her lover Paolo became the whole world?

Emotional / impulsive Mrs. Dashwood, eager to guarantee security for her two daughters, recommends that Marianne, her younger, should look favorably on Edward, who has come to live with the family. Marianne reflects on Edward, who had offered up the previous night’s family reading session, and she responds with an immediate fixed opinion of the young man. She reacts impulsively against her mother’s suggestion. ‘Edward is very amiable,’ she says, but then immediately she pours forth her reservations—that he is not very handsome, that he is spiritless, that ‘he has no real taste’-- he reads poetry like a zombie, she adds, referring to his lifeless rendition of the passionate poetry of Cowper. Marianne reacts quickly and impatiently, against the suggestion she may have a future with Edward.

Romantic Marianne and her younger sister Margaret set off for a walk across the Downs; a rainstorm sets in, and the girls race down the hills toward home. The ground is wet, and Marianne slips in the mud,

turning her ankle. Just as she falls a handsome young country gentleman, Mr. Willoughby, comes rushing up the hill to their aid. He is dressed like the perfect sportsman. He takes Marianne in his arms and carries her home; she is charmed by his looks and his behavior. Marianne is susceptible for such a picture book romantic encounter, and from that time on, until their unfortunate separation not too long after, she thinks of Willoughby night and day, and their romantic passion surges.

Distracted Willoughby leaves Marianne, for an undisclosed emergency, just as the lovers' ardor seems most intense. Marianne is crushed, and withdraws sulking from family life. In her effort to cheer up her sister, Elinor induces Marianne to walk with her in the country. On the walk Marianne is unable to free herself from her delusional depression, and makes a perceptual error that shows how distracted she is. Seeing 'a man on horseback riding toward them,' Marianne rapturously exclaimed, 'it is he, it is indeed:--I know it is!'. In her mind Marianne can see only Willoughby, and is deeply distraught when she realizes it is Edward who is dismounting and coming toward them.

Hypersensitive Elinor and Marianne, who has been a nervous wreck since the departure of Willoughby, go with Mrs. Jennings to London, to spend the winter. Marianne busies herself, as far as she can, with writing letters to Willoughby—letters to which she gets no response. One day, with the best of intentions, Mrs. Jennings brings Marianne a letter, 'something that I am sure will do you good.' 'In one moment her (Marianne's) imagination placed before her a letter from Willoughby, full of tenderness and contrition.' Marianne's imagination replaces reality for her. But then 'the work of one moment was destroyed by the next,' for the letter turns out to be from her mother. Sadly deceived, Marianne can hardly bear it. 'The tears 'streamed from her eyes with passionate violence.'

Willoughby (Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*)

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. Willoughby enters the story as one of the potential searched for mates. He is a handsome country sportsman, and first comes to attention when Marianne, descending a muddy hill in the Downs, slips in the mud and sprains her ankle. He lifts her up in his arms and carries her home, leaving Marianne and her mother and sisters spellbound. From that point on this attractive philanderer, who is capable of kindness and generosity, plays an important role in the Dashwood family, alternately breaking Marianne's heart and finding his way back into it.

Character From the time he rescues Marianne from a fall in the mud, Willoughby is dramatic, charming, manly, a true gallant. In the course of the novel, long after Marianne has fallen hopelessly in love with him, Willoughby makes it evident why he up and walked out on Marianne in the midst of their romance. He is a philanderer, with multiple female interests, and little stability. In the course of time, however, he comes to realize he has made a bad marriage, and makes clear that he has always loved Marianne, a confession in which there seems to be some truth. In the end, though badly married, the hedonist Willoughby makes do, and quite well, with the life of a country gentleman.

Parallels Any number of 'pretty boys' dot ancient Greek and Roman literature, and all of them share something with the gallant philanderer, John Willoughby. Paris, the lover of Helen in Homer's *Iliad*, sets fire to Troy with his handsome looks; Giton, the swinger servant of Encolpius in Petronius' *Satyricon*, breathes youthful male sexuality. The 'pretty boy' is often enough, like Willoughby, also a con man, a hypocrite like Tartuffe (in Moliere's play of the same name) or like Iago (in Shakespeare's *Othello*) who fakes pretends to support Othello, while whipping up his jealousy. *The Music Man* (1962), by Meredith Wilson, features a con man, Harold Hill, who could have stolen Willoughby's girlfriend right out from under him.

Able / attractive Willoughby is a delight to Marianne, whose ankle is sprained and who must remain at home for a while. Willoughby visits her daily. He and Marianne are on the same page when it comes to current books and even passages in books; they share the same tastes in music, and love to dance. Nor

does Marianne misjudge this lively mid twenty-year old, though her judgment of him is not deep. 'Willoughby was a young man of good abilities, quick imagination, lively spirits, and open, affectionate manners. He was exactly formed to engage Marianne's heart...' If Willoughby had any prominent fault, and Elinor suspected this one, it was that he was too outspoken and frank; but that 'fault' he shared with Marianne, who admired it in him because it was hers.

Gallant / responsive Marianne too hastily descends the muddy hill on her way home from walking with Margaret, and slips, spraining her ankle. Willoughby is just ascending the hill, handsome and rugged with his two pointers and his gun. At once he renders his services, picks her up in his arms, and 'quitted not his hold til he had ...carried her down the hill,' and seated her in a chair in her house, to the astonishment (and fascination) of her mother and older sister. The situation to which Willoughby so swiftly responded was right up his alley, allowing him to display his manly and romantic skills. He complied perfectly, like a character in a romance novel—which he was.

Charming /sympathetic Marianne—and indeed the whole Dashwood family-- delights in the regular visits of Willoughby. Still obliged to favor her ankle, Marianne finds that Willoughby does everything possible to make her recovery pleasant. The two of them trade tastes in music and dance fashions, and find that 'their taste was strikingly alike.' 'Willoughby, on his side, gave every proof of his pleasure in their acquaintance...' 'His society became gradually her most exquisite enjoyment.' He was, in short, a regular house guest, and knew exactly how to ingratiate himself with the entire family.

Philandering / disloyal Upon arriving in London, still perplexed by Willoughby's sudden abandonment of her, Marianne began to inundate Willoughby with letters. Yet she receives no response to these letters, and grows desperate for news of her former lover. Then one day Marianne and her sister go to a party and find Willoughby, standing a short distance from them. At first he pretends not to recognize Marianne, and greets her coldly, then, when she asks if he has not received her letters, 'his complexion and all his embarrassment returned...and he turned hastily away with a slight bow and joined his friend.' His philandering nature has caught up with him.