

*Sense and Sensibility*  
at PlayMakers:  
A Study Guide for Students

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Students in ENGL 340: Studies in Jane Austen

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# The Playwright



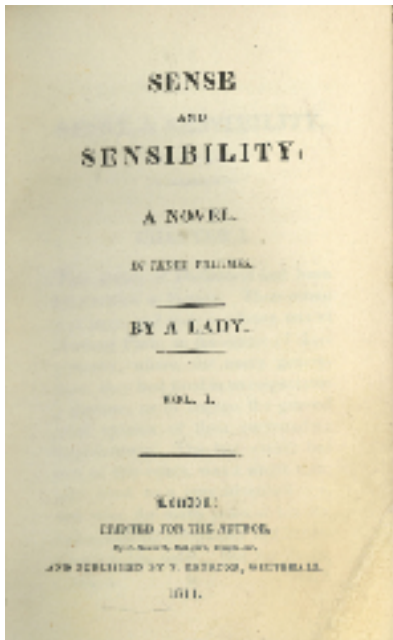
Kate Hamill was raised on the farms and fields of upstate New York, though currently, she is an actor and playwright based out of New York City. As an actor, she tends to play truth-tellers, oddballs, and misfits. As a writer, she specializes in stories about people who struggle to reconcile the demands of society with the dictates of their consciences. Her most successful written work, to date, is her critically-acclaimed adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*. In New York she also

played the character Marianne in the play.

## The Play

A playful new adaptation of Jane Austen's beloved novel follows the fortunes (and misfortunes) of the Dashwood sisters – sensible Elinor and hypersensitive Marianne – after their father's sudden death leaves them financially destitute and socially vulnerable.

Set in gossipy late 18th-century England, with a fresh female voice, the play is full of humor, emotional depth, and bold theatricality. *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY* examines our reactions, both reasonable and ridiculous, to societal pressures. When reputation is everything, how do you follow your heart?



## The Novel

*Sense and Sensibility* was the first of Austen's novels to be published. It was originally titled *Elinor and Marianne*, but Austen changed its name before publication. The novel emphasizes the love shared by two sisters with differing personalities, and follows the disruption and repair of their relationship as they navigate their romantic entanglements in opposing manners.

Austen published the novel in 1811, anonymously: "By a Lady," as you can see on this frontispiece.

## The Author- Jane Austen



Jane Austen, one of England's most important and celebrated authors, was born on December 16, 1775. Austen, the seventh of eight children, grew up in a middle-class house in Hampshire, England, where her love for literature blossomed in her household library that contained over 500 books! In adulthood, Austen traveled to London to visit her brother, where she was introduced to the theatre and other social events. She also met her publisher here, Thomas Egerton. In 1811, Austen successfully published her novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. (It was the first novel she published, although not the first novel that she wrote.)

Her later published works include: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Northanger Abbey*. In 1815, Austen began to show signs of the life-threatening Addison's Disease, which caused her to slow down with her writing. In 1817, Jane Austen passed away, leaving her closest sister, Cassandra, as her heir. Her two pieces, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, were published along with a short piece to reveal who Austen was and all that she had written. Austen's works have been adapted by playwrights for the stage and the screen for decades, and have become beloved classics around the world.

Jane Austen would have been shocked to find her face on the new ten pound note in England pictured here!



## Timeline of Jane Austen's Life

<b>1775</b>	<b>Jane Austen was born on December 16 in Hampshire County</b>
<b>1785</b>	<b>Jane and Cassandra, Jane's sister, study in Reading for a short time, then return to Steventon where Jane will remain for much of the next 15 years.</b>
<b>1787</b>	<b>She begins writing a variety of works known as her Juvenilia</b>
<b>1791</b>	<b>She writes <i>The History of England</i> and says it is penned "by a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant Historian"</b>
<b>1795</b>	<b>She writes <i>Elinor and Marianne</i>, an early draft of <i>Sense and Sensibility</i></b>
<b>1796</b>	<b>She writes <i>First Impressions</i>, an early draft of <i>Pride and Prejudice</i></b>
<b>1797</b>	<b>Her father offers <i>First Impressions</i> to a London Publisher; it is rejected without being read</b>
<b>1797</b>	<b>She begins to revise <i>Elinor and Marianne</i>, retitling it <i>Sense and Sensibility</i></b>
<b>1799</b>	<b>She writes <i>Susan</i>. It is accepted by a publisher, but not published</b>
<b>1801</b>	<b>Her father retires from the church and the Austens move to Bath in Somerset county</b>
<b>1802</b>	<b>She receives and accepts a marriage proposal from a family friend, Harris Bigg-Wither, then changes her mind and retracts her acceptance the next day</b>
<b>1803</b>	<b>She sells a revised version of <i>Susan</i> to another London publisher. He agrees to publish it, but never does</b>
<b>1805</b>	<b>Her father dies</b>
<b>1806</b>	<b>Jane, her mother, and her sister, Cassandra, move to Southampton in Hampshire county</b>

<b>1809</b>	<b>Jane, her mother, and Cassandra move to a cottage in Chawton, Hampshire county</b>
<b>1810</b>	<b>She finishes revising <i>Sense and Sensibility</i></b>
<b>1811</b>	<b><i>Sense and Sensibility</i> is published in October and is moderately successful</b>
<b>1811</b>	<b>She begins revising <i>First Impressions</i> into what is now <i>Pride and Prejudice</i></b>
<b>1813</b>	<b><i>Pride and Prejudice</i> is published in January; it sells very well and is the most popular of her novels during her lifetime</b>
<b>1813</b>	<b>She finishes writing <i>Mansfield Park</i></b>
<b>1814</b>	<b><i>Mansfield Park</i> is published</b>
<b>1815</b>	<b>She is praised by the Prince Regent, who invites her to dedicate a future work to him</b>
<b>1815</b>	<b><i>Emma</i> is finished and published – and dedicated to the Prince</b>
<b>1816</b>	<b>She or her brother, Henry, buys back the manuscript of Susan and she begins revising into what is now <i>Northanger Abbey</i></b>
<b>1816</b>	<b>She finishes <i>Persuasion</i>, and her health begins to fail</b>
<b>1816</b>	<b>In a period of better health, she begins writing <i>Sandition</i>, which is ultimately left unfinished</b>
<b>1817</b>	<b>Jane Austen dies on July 18<sup>th</sup> and is buried in Winchester Cathedral</b>

## Fun Facts about Jane Austen

1. The word “baseball” is first attested (which means the first time it is written down) in Austen’s first published novel, *Northanger Abbey*.
2. Despite all of her novels about romance, she never married. However, she was engaged once, but only for one night.
3. Jane Austen was beloved by soldiers because she represented a sense of home. Soldiers read her books in the trenches during World War I.
4. Winston Churchill even went so far as to say Jane Austen helped him through WWII.
5. Two of her brothers became admirals in the British Navy.
6. Her cousin’s husband was guillotined in the French Revolution. Which is a little disheartening. Or I guess you could say, disheadening.
7. Austen had a near death experience at seven years old from diphtheria (a serious infection).
8. Once while traveling, she temporarily lost all of her unpublished manuscripts because she lost her writing desk.
9. Her face is now on the British 10-pound (English money) note.
10. She was the niece of a convicted shoplifter. But at least that gal got to keep her head.

## Sense vs. Sensibility

In *Sense and Sensibility*, we see two opposing personalities in Elinor and Marianne: one is characterized by sense while the other shows more sensibility. While these words seem similar, the



characteristics of sense and sensibility are not, in fact, synonymous.

Sense, as one might imagine, is represented through reason, wisdom, and prudence, qualities exhibited by Elinor.

Sensibility, on the other hand, is portrayed by strong feelings and emotions, fitting Marianne's personality quite well.

Through this depiction of Elinor and Marianne as complete opposites who exhibit the two extremes of a specific

characteristic, Austen makes us question the virtues, and negatives, of both extremes by pitting them against each other.

In a twist of irony, Elinor and Marianne experience a kind of reversal of personalities towards the end as they realize the positives of each. See if you notice this change in the sisters towards the end of the play!



## While You Watch:

### ACTIVITY 1:

Fill in this chart about the good and bad sides of each quality as you watch the play...

	“SENSE” Having Reason, wisdom, prudence, caution...; thinking before acting or talking....	“SENSIBILITY” Being spontaneous, feeling things deeply, being emotional...
PRO		
CON		

### ACTIVITY 2:

How do the different costumes in the play represent “Sense” and “Sensibility” in the play?

Write your answer here:

### ACTIVITY 3:

What’s the big deal about tea and tea cups? Why are tea cups so often on the stage or characters talking about having tea? What do you think tea meant to Jane Austen’s society? What does it mean to you?

Write your answer here:



## Gossip and Social Pressure

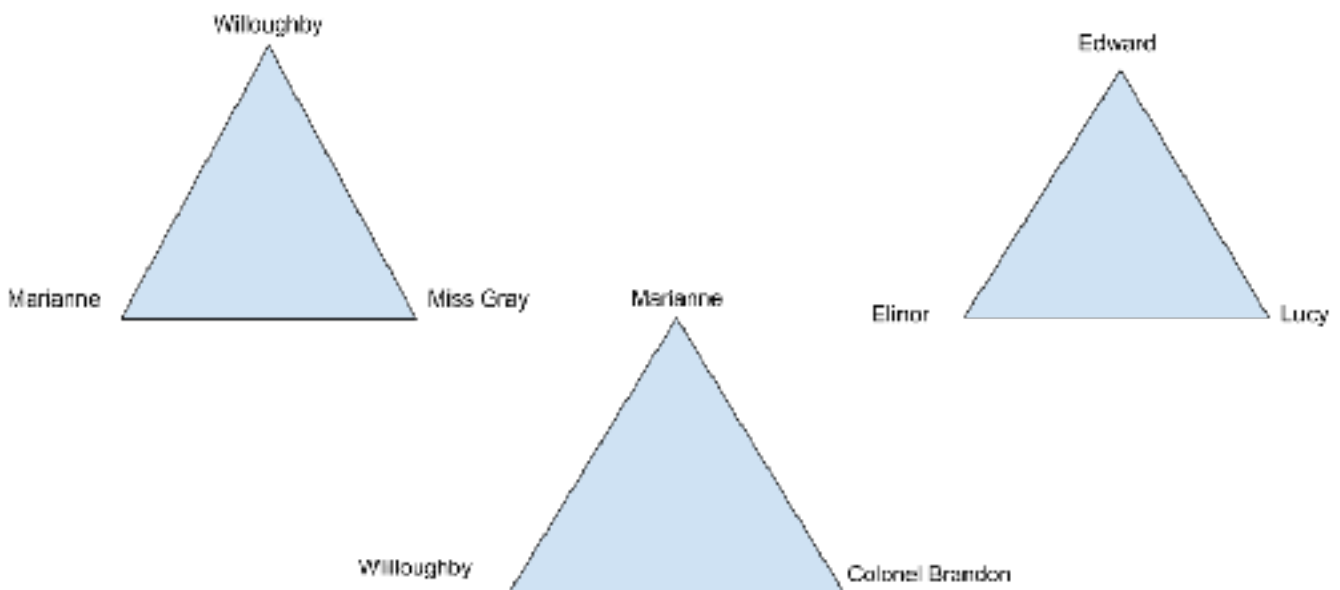


The theme of gossip and social pressures highlighted in Hamill's adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* are relevant in today's culture. Characters in *Sense and Sensibility* who perpetuate rumors and spread gossip cause problems for other characters. Social pressure, as well, created issues for characters who wished to do one thing but were constrained by societal norms surrounding things such as friendship and marriage.

Most middle schoolers and high schoolers have negatively experienced the role of gossip and social pressure in school, which can be tough and discouraging. Rumors are constantly spread about people in your schools, which are continued through gossip; social pressures can also be seen through outfit trends and social media, as a couple of examples. Who in *Sense and Sensibility* are the subjects, or perpetrators, of gossip and social pressures? How do you relate?

## Love Triangles

A love triangle is a complicated romantic situation involving multiple people. See if you can see these triangles in action as you watch the play...



## Character List:

(Several of the Cast Members Play Multiple Characters)



**ELINOR DASHWOOD:** As stated in *Sense and Sensibility*, “Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother...She had an excellent heart; her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them.”



**MARIANNE DASHWOOD:** As stated in *Sense and Sensibility*, “Marianne’s abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor’s. She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything: her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent.”



**MARGARET DASHWOOD:** As stated in *Sense and Sensibility*, “Margaret, the other sister, was a good-humored, well-disposed girl.” Basically, Margaret is the sister who is overlooked most of the time.



**MRS. DASHWOOD:** The mother of Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, who, as stated in *Sense and Sensibility*, had an “eagerness of mind” that “generally led to imprudence.” She loves her daughters very dearly and wishes the very best for them, without much attention to controlling her feelings and opinions.

**HENRY DASHWOOD:** The father of Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret whose death at the beginning of the beginning of the story cause his daughters to be in need of a residence (away from their conniving sister-in-law) and well-to-do husbands.



**JOHN AND FANNY DASHWOOD:** The half-brother and sister-in-law of Marianne and Elinor who inherit Norland Park. John is a push-over, though with very kind intentions, and Fanny is manipulative and selfish, paying little attention to the needs of her sisters-in-law or her mother-in-law.



**EDWARD FERRARS:** As stated in *Sense and Sensibility*, “He was not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing. His understanding was good, and his education had given it solid improvement. But he was neither fitted by abilities nor disposition to answer the wishes of his mother and sister, who longed to see him distinguished.”



**MRS. FERRARS:** The wealthy, manipulative mother of Edward, Fanny, and Robert who wishes them to marry well and distinguish themselves.



**ROBERT FERRARS:** A conceited coxcomb and the younger brother of Edward and Fanny.



**MISS SOPHIA GREY:** A wealthy heiress whose only known quality is her huge amount of money.

**LADY MIDDLETON:** A distant relation of the Dashwoods who lives at Barton Cottage with her husband Sir John Middleton and their four spoiled children.



**SIR JOHN MIDDLETON:** The jovial and kind, as well as well-meaning, but vulgar distant relation of the Dashwoods who invites them to live in a cottage on his estate, named Barton Park.



**MRS. JENNINGS:** Lady Middleton's gossipy but well-intentioned mother of Lady Middleton who invites the Dashwood sisters to stay with her in London and makes it her "project" to marry them off as soon as possible.



**COLONEL BRANDON:** Colonel Brandon, the friend of Sir John. His appearance was not unpleasing, in spite of his being an absolute old bachelor in the opinion of Marianne and Margaret.

**MRS. CHARLOTTE PALMER:** Mrs. Jennings' talkative and foolish daughter who invites the Dashwood sisters to stay at her home in Cleveland on their way from London to Barton.

**MR. THOMAS PALMER:** Mrs. Palmer's gruff, unemotional husband.



**ANNE STEELE:** Lucy Steele's older, unmarried sister who is very talkative, usually in relation to nonsensical things, and per Elinor's description in *Sense and Sensibility*; she exhibits "a vulgar freedom and folly" that "left her no recommendation."



LUCY STEELE: Mrs. Jennings' cousin and a sly, selfish, and insecure young woman whose “beauty” or “shrewd look” did not deceive Elinor “to her want of real elegance and artlessness.” Add to this list her manipulative nature and her thoroughly unpleasant person is recognized.



JOHN WILLOUGHBY: An attractive but deceitful young man. A favorite among women, or a womanizer if you will. He was possessed of a “manly beauty and more than common gracefulness,” that “were instantly the theme of general admiration” among the Dashwood women when he first encountered them.

### Activities:

1. Act out an Argument:

Divide into pairs. One person should take the role of Colonel Brandon and the other person should take the role of Willoughby. You should then argue each other's case for marrying Marianne. (Instructions can be expanded...)

2. Find two Examples in Contemporary Society that Relate to the Novel:

At home find two newspaper clippings or web articles that relate to someone marrying for love and someone marrying for money. Discuss how much society has changed since the eighteenth century. (Instructions can be expanded)

3. Marriage:

Why do you think marriage was important at this time in history? Is it less important now? Consider what your answer would be and discuss your thoughts in groups.

4. Read the questions in the first column and fill in the answers in the other columns according to how you would answer, Elinor would answer, and Marianne would answer!

<b>Question</b>	<b>How would you answer?</b>	<b>How would Elinor answer?</b>	<b>How would Marianne answer?</b>
<b>What does it mean to be “passionate” in making decision?</b>			
<b>What does it mean to use “sense” in making decisions?</b>			
<b>Can true love occur twice?</b>			
<b>Is love something that just happens to you?</b>			
<b>What is most important in deciding to marry someone?</b>			

## FUN WORD FACTS:

1. What is a “Coxcomb” (In description of Robert Ferrars)?

Why would this word refer both to the fleshy top of a rooster’s head and a vain young man?



2. What are “beaux” (pronounced “bows”)? Anne Steele refers to them constantly....

Clue: The word means “beautiful men” in French. (Answer: boyfriends or admirers; men to flirt with...)

HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE PLAY!

Ask your teacher about entering the playwrights’ essay contest for middle and high school students who have seen this play!



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Source of Character List Outline:

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