**‘Sense and Sensibility’**

**The story:** Following the death of their father, the Dashwood sisters lose their family estate to their older stepbrother and necessarily move to Devon to a modest home where, despite being the ‘poorer relatives’, Austen reveals them as almost the only characters capable of rational thought and intelligent conversation. The two elder sisters are presented as embodiments of ‘Sense’ (Elinor) and ‘Sensibility’ (Marianne) and through them, Austen appears to place both of these guiding principles on trial as the two girls handle strikingly similar challenges and disappointments in love in dramatically different (and arguably equally inept?) ways.

**The characters:** Beyond Marianne and Elinor, Austen presents a variety of character types, revealing: the greed and protectionism of some of the upper middle classes (Fanny and John Dashwood, Robert and Lady Ferrars); the affable eccentricities of others (Sir John and Mrs Jennings); the posturing of the dandy and the selfish narcissism of the aspiring Romantic (Robert F and Willoughby); the pragmatic and calculating rising lower classes (Lucy Steele); the intolerably doting and dull mother (Lady Middleton, Fanny D); the heroic and stoical former military man (Col. Brandon); the playful or domineering matchmaker (Mrs Jennings and Lady Ferrars). The range, richness and lightness of touch with which Austen presents her array of characters gives her comedic brilliance full reign

**The value and dangers of being led by sense:** Sense**,** at it’s best, is shown to encompass balance, maturity and a kind of ‘common sense’ recognition of the value of others as well as the necessity to act in a way that shows this respect; it involves the moderation of your behaviour, impulses, emotions and desires for the sake of the happiness and wellbeing of all. At its worst it leads to either a stunting emotional martyrdom or a self-seeking prioritising of your own needs (Elinor recognises Lucy Steele’s actions as grounded in ‘sense’).

**The value and dangers of being led by sensibility:** Sensibility is evident in all of the Dashwoods’ responsiveness to beauty and in their emotional intelligence. Early in the novel it is satirised as a driving force behind fatuous Romantic idealism and the more ‘forced’ qualities of aesthetic appreciation evidenced in Marianne and Willoughby’s contempt for (but, ironically, also use of) the jargon of the picaresque. However, Austen also links a pure aesthetic judgement to moral sense when Marianne passionately defends her sister’s artwork despite the breaking of social conventions involved in her defence. This is presented as the right thing to do both as a defence of aesthetic quality but also as an act of sisterly solidarity.

**The necessity of balance:** Expect any essay focusing on the title to talk about how Austen secures a recognition that both temperaments need tempering with each other in order to allow for a fulfilling and balanced emotional life.

**Contemporary ideas/ events influencing the novel**

The cult of the picturesque: a handbook for the appreciation of harmonious beauty in nature (more the beautiful than the sublime)

Romanticism vs Classicism in terms of setting the aesthetic agenda

Wollstoncraft’s: “I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.”

The democratisation of culture: Growth of libraries and picture galleries (Dulwich picture gallery)

The threat of revolution: Austen’s aunt’s husband recently faced the guillotine in revolutionary France

The enclosures: John Dashwood has recently ‘enclosed’ many of the lands around the family estate

**The pleasures of the novel:** The dialogue! (Austen started lit. career writing plays and it shows), the range of comedic devices; the ravishing wit of the Dashwoods; the withholding and gradual revelation of back story and other crucial information to understand character and motivation often through the doubling of perspectives of the same moments; the scintillation of raffish and scandalous behaviour; the loveliness of the characters; the generic certainty that resolution will be delivered; the elegance of the balanced sentences.

**The style features**

Austen’s use of: dialogue, idiolect, politeness features in talk, verbal sparring, indirect free style, irony, humour and wit, satire, passive aggression, third person narrative voice, humour, physical description, landscapes and setting, letters, mystery, red herrings, contrasting character pairings, caricature, balanced sentences.

**Ideas animating the text:**

The importance of educating women and of female intelligence and wit; the necessity of extending women’s ability to have power at least over themselves

The value of purposeful employment and the dangers of being idly rich

The importance of aesthetic judgement in demarcating your value as an individual

The poverty of many marriages but the necessity of pragmatism in the process of finding a partner

The restrictiveness of Georgian social and moral codes but their importance in surviving and in learning your ‘place’ in a way that is respectful to others

The blinding nature of love

That women can be witty and ironic but should never develop challenges to patriarchal structures (or even men)

That the wealthy can be recognised as greedy, self-serving/protecting and unjust but that protest and revolt are unwise

The importance of curbing individual will for the sake of social harmony

That adherence to duty is a noble thing

That extreme characteristics are dangerous in any form and that balance and equilibrium should be sought in all things