

**Context Class I: Law, Inheritance, and *Sense and Sensibility***  
**Discussion Questions**

1. Take a moment to review the first two chapters of the novel. What is the purpose of these chapters? Why provide such a detailed description of the Dashwood inheritance scheme?
2. Given that it was customary for landowners to settle estates in a settlement contract at marriage, why settle Norland in a will? How does the power of the will extend beyond the law in the novel? Consider, in particular, Fanny's exchange with John in Chapter 2.
3. What do the first two chapters reveal about (a) the objectives of landowners at the turn of the nineteenth century, (b) the familial and social tensions surrounding the strict settlement or other inheritance plans that required longstanding financial commitments (e.g., the annuity for life), and (c) the impact of the law on defining the rights, duties, and expectations of parents and siblings?
4. To what might we attribute Austen's pointed interest throughout her novels in inheritance strategies and the legal disabilities of female and certain male heirs?
5. Consider the novel's treatment of wealthy widows: Mrs. Jennings has the power to manage and dispose of her large jointure. More significantly, each of Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Ferrars has the power to manage and dispense with her family's estate/wealth. How does each character exercise her power and what are the effects? Why authorize mothers and female relatives to undertake a role traditionally reserved for the father or male relative?

You might consider the following passages in your discussion: **Volume II, Chapter XI, p. 212** (Chapter 33): the two paragraphs beginning with "Is Mrs. Edward Ferrars..." (J. Dashwood and Elinor on Mrs. Ferrars); **Volume II, Chapter XI, p. 213-14** (Chapter 33): the seven paragraphs beginning with: "Having now said enough" (J. Dashwood and Elinor on Mrs. Jennings); **Volume III, Chapter I, p. 249-50** (Chapter 37): paragraph beginning with "What poor Mrs. Ferrars suffered ..." (J. Dashwood on Mrs. Ferrars' reaction to Edward's engagement to Lucy); and **Volume III, Chapter VIII, p. 299, 301-02** (Chapter 44): paragraph beginning with "I insist on your hearing the whole of it ..."  
**and** the two paragraphs beginning with: "Well, sir, and what said Mrs. Smith?" (Exchange between Willoughby and Elinor on his dependence on Mrs. Smith and on Mrs. Smith's reaction to the news that he had ruined young Eliza).

6. Consider the novel's treatment of the heiress and the non-heiress: Miss Grey, Willoughby's future wife, is said to have £50,000; Miss Morton, the favorite of Mrs. Ferrars to marry her sons, is known to be vested of £30,000; and Eliza the elder is described as having had a large fortune. In contrast, Elinor, Marianne, and Lucy Steele have no fortune. How does each character's inheritance, or lack thereof, define her character and shape the plot? How does Austen's portrayal of the courtship process differ for the heiress and the non-heiress? Discuss the novel's treatment of the (sometimes) competing interests of romance and economics in the nineteenth-century marriage.

You might consider the following passages in your discussion: **Volume II, Chapter VIII, p. 184-85** (Chapter 30): six paragraphs beginning with "The lady then—Miss Grey..." (Mrs. J. and Elinor on Miss Grey); **Volume II, Chapter IX, p. 194-95** (Chapter 31): paragraph beginning with: "If I am not deceived by the uncertainty..." (Colonel Brandon on the marriage of the elder Eliza); and **Volume III, Chapter V, p. 278-79** (Chapter 41): seven paragraphs beginning with: "We think *now*" (J. Dashwood and Elinor on Miss Morton); **Volume II, Chapter XI, p. 211** (Chapter 33): two paragraphs beginning with "Indeed I believe you" (J. Dashwood and Elinor on the prospect of her marrying Colonel Brandon); and **Volume III, Chapter XIV, p. 349-50** (Chapter 50): first line of paragraph beginning with "The whole of Lucy's behaviour" (narrator on Lucy during the courtship process).

7. Taken as a whole, what does the novel suggest about the law's relationship to the family dynamic and the courtship process? What do the numerous references to inheritance and yearly income indicate about how England's upper classes defined themselves and others in the period?