Creative response to

Sense and Sensibility

This document shows how a creative response to a novel can take the form of letters written by a character. In this case the text is Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility. The example includes:

- a detailed explanation of how to approach the task through a close study of the text
- an annotated piece of creative writing – two letters written by a character from the novel
- links between the creative response and a close analysis of the text.

See Chapter 6 of Insight’s Literature for Senior Students (2nd edition, 2010) for more on creative responses to texts.

The task

Write two letters by Fanny Dashwood, one to Elinor and one to Mrs Dashwood, composed after she has learned of Elinor’s engagement to Edward.

Preliminary activities

- Write down what one character (Fanny Dashwood) might say about another (Elinor) if given the opportunity.
- Identify some of the text’s main ideas and the writer’s views and values.
- Make notes on elements of Austen’s style.
- Read some critical reviews – particularly those offering differing critical perspectives.

A character profile

This creative response focuses closely on one character from the text. A very good way of deepening your knowledge and understanding of this character is to construct a profile of them.
Creative response to *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of the text</th>
<th>Key quotes and elements of characterisation</th>
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</table>
| Authorial comments on the character: Fanny Dashwood (frequently referred to as Mrs. John Dashwood) | • ‘Had he [John Dashwood] married a more amiable woman … But Mrs. John Dashwood was … more narrow-minded and selfish.’ (p.7)  
• ‘Mrs. John Dashwood now installed herself mistress of Norland; and her mother and sisters-in-law were degraded to the condition of visitors.’ (p.10)  
• ‘Lady Middleton was equally pleased with Mrs. Dashwood. There was a kind of cold hearted selfishness on both sides, which mutually attracted them …’ (p.216)  
• ‘Mrs. Dashwood had never been so much pleased with any young women [Lucy and Nancy Steele] … and did not know whether she should ever be able to part with them.’ (p.238) |
| What the character says (key quotes) | • ‘Your sisters will marry, and [the money] will be gone for ever.’ (p.11)  
• ‘… even if really his sisters! And as it is—only half blood!’ (p.11)  
• ‘They [Elinor’s paintings] are very pretty …’ But then again, the dread of having been too civil … probably came over her …’ (p.221) |
| How she speaks | • Decisive tone – commands and dominates her husband: ‘Well, then, let something be done for them …’ (p.11)  
• Also uses flattery, manipulation: ‘But you have such a generous spirit!’ (p.11) |
| What others say or think about her | • ‘So acutely did Mrs. Dashwood feel this ungracious behaviour, and so earnestly did she despise her daughter-in-law [Fanny] …’ (p.8)  
• John Dashwood (Fanny’s husband) says: ‘Such a woman [Lady Middleton] as I am sure Fanny will be glad to know.’ (p.215)  
• Lucy Steele says: ‘They [Mrs Ferrars and Fanny] are such charming women!’ (p.226)  
• On hearing of Edward and Lucy’s secret engagement, Mrs Jennings says about Fanny: ‘what a blow it was to all her vanity and pride. She fell into violent hysterics …’ (p.242) |
| What the character does | • Cunningly dispossesses her husband’s family  
• Shows no sensitivity or tact when taking over Norland Park  
• Cultivates friendships with wealthy and titled characters such as Lady Middleton  
• Actively interferes in Edward’s life, discouraging his choice of profession and his choice of a wife because she considers them socially unacceptable  
• Shows false affection for Lucy in order to snub Elinor |
| Relationships with other characters | • Has similar values and attitudes to her mother, Mrs Ferrars  
• Often admired by other unpleasant characters (Lucy, Lady Middleton)  
• Disliked by admirable characters (Elinor, Marianne, Mrs Dashwood, Mrs Jennings) |
## Creative response to *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen

| Values Fanny represents (and Austen condemns) | • Relentless pursuit of wealth and status: Fanny and others who share these qualities are depicted as heartless, arrogant and superficial  
| • Need for preservation of class boundaries |
| Values endorsed by Austen | • Importance of property and family, but not at the expense of happiness and personal integrity  
| • Need for ‘civilised’ behaviour but not at the expense of a degree of personal autonomy or integrity  
| • Importance of moral values and personal integrity, including:  
| o a sense of responsibility to family  
| o respect for others based on their integrity and honesty, not on their wealth and status |
| Author’s tone when describing Fanny | • Critical, amused, ironic, disapproving  
| • Strong sense of omniscient authorial voice positioning readers and promoting the author’s values |
| Author’s style (use of language) | • Formal language, complex sentences, sophisticated vocabulary  
| • Witty observations about characters – mostly commenting on their flaws  
| • Spelling and vocabulary of Austen’s period  
| • Use of linguistic ‘symmetries’ to suggest (through language) the need to balance opposing tendencies, e.g.:  
| o Tony Tanner’s example (Appendix, p.375) is Marianne’s statement to her sister: ‘Do not, my dearest Elinor, let your kindness defend what I know your judgment must censure.’  
| o The opposition of ‘defend’ and ‘censure’ mirrors other oppositions (or antitheses), which, through the development of the two sisters, attain a degree of equilibrium at the end of the novel.  
| o This reveals Austen’s concern with the need for balance and compromise.  
| o Fanny does not achieve this balance and her language is simple – and often judgmental. |
| Other elements of style (e.g. setting, imagery) | • Focus on characters’ eyes (glances, meaningful looks), hand gestures, pauses and silences to convey ideas and emotions which cannot (or ought not, in this society) be verbally expressed  
| • Differences between London and rural settings (‘civilised’ and ‘natural’ worlds) and the characters who inhabit them |
| Tensions between oppositions: Fanny is strongly connected with highlighted words | sense/sensibility  
| duty/freedom  
| love/pragmatism  
| city/country  
| honour/dishonour  
| reason/emotion  
| honesty/deceit  
| superficiality/reality  
| restraint/display  
| refinement/vulgarity  
| private/public  
| society/the individual  
| spoken/unspoken  
| poetic/prosaic  
| self-interest/compassion  
| culture/nature |
Write a brief plan of the response

Consider:

- **what** Fanny Dashwood would say (showing your understanding of character)
- **how** she would say it (showing your understanding of style)
- **why** would she say it (showing your understanding of issues and ideas in the text).

The following table provides examples of answers to these questions. Produce a similar table for a character whose point of view you will represent in a creative response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What she would write</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Fanny not happy – Elinor not good enough, though at least she won’t be a burden on Fanny and John</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Not initially happy with Robert’s choice of Lucy either</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Edward not advancing himself socially</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Colonel Brandon might be worth knowing</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>How she would write</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Tone – often bossy and arrogant, cold and unfriendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flattering and insincere</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Selfish and demanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Over-protective of Harry (but uses concern for his welfare to her own advantage)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Shows Austen’s condemnation of her character and the values she embodies through use of dramatic irony and caricature</td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why she would write in a certain way</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fanny’s language should:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• show her unpleasant character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• convey her lack of understanding of Elinor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• display her shallow and materialistic values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• deepen our understanding of her character – and perhaps enable a reflection on London society’s materialistic values.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Austen’s language (not just Fanny’s)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>felicity (happiness) partiality want (lack) indeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tolerable upon my word uncivil disapprobation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a twelvemonth discourse every body former/latter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shewed chuse quitted your’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undoubtedly ancle doted worthless hussey worthles hussey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expence by no means inconsiderate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Form of the response**

The creative response comprises two letters from Fanny Dashwood, one to Elinor and one to her mother, Mrs Ferrars.

These letters show a detailed knowledge and understanding of the character and the text’s main ideas – and they also ‘deepen’ our understanding of some of the issues and ideas, rather than simply retelling what we *already* know.

- It is often useful to draw on some secondary sources which explore ideas in more depth.
- This response draws on ideas from Tony Tanner’s introduction (the Appendix in the 2003 edition), particularly those about:
  - secrets and illnesses at the heart of the narrative
  - the need for restraint.
- Also look at *Pride and Prejudice* to see how letters were written in Austen’s novels.
- The response includes linking paragraphs which would integrate the letters smoothly into the original text.
Sample creative response

Upon receiving the unwelcome, but not entirely unexpected communication from her brother regarding his engagement to Miss Dashwood, Mrs. John Dashwood sat stiffly at her writing table composing a letter in response to Edward’s invitation for John and Fanny Dashwood to visit the Parsonage. Mr. John Dashwood would, had his wife agreed, have willingly acquiesced, for there was also the matter of Marianne’s future to be decided. Mr. Dashwood was tolerably fond of his half-sisters and glad, despite his wife’s vexation, to see Elinor settled; she could now have no claims upon her father’s estate. He had been entirely judicious, he now reassured himself, in withholding the three thousand pounds promised her by his father, for what use would such a sum be to a clergyman’s wife? Mrs. Dashwood, however, had little desire to partake of the dubious pleasures of Devonshire, and most certainly not in the humble surrounds of a parsonage. Of course an invitation to Delaford would be an entirely different matter, and one upon which she would not look unfavourably. Colonel Brandon was a man of rank and property and his country residence, while lacking real elegance, was infinitely more suited to her cultivated sensibilities. No, she would not go! She would not be induced to admire Elinor’s screen paintings when Miss Morton’s landscapes were very much more to her taste. Fanny Dashwood’s letter to Elinor was all insincerity and ill-disguised rancour:

“How delighted I was to learn of your impending union with my elder brother; your situation as the wife of a clergyman will be admirably suited to your simple needs and sanguine disposition. You will, of course, be aware that Mr. Robert Ferrars is recently married to Miss Lucy Steele, a delightful creature who has quite enchanted us all. Edward was most pressing in requesting our company at the Parsonage once you are married and settled, and for myself, I would welcome the prospect of such visits; indeed, were it not for the dirt, I would take much pleasure in the many pretty scenic walks, and I am excessively fond of cottages—there is always so much comfort and elegance about them. Alas, my poor little Harry is of a delicate constitution and I fear that the climate may prove detrimental to his health. I do remember that your poor sister twisted her ankle, and was brought very low by a severe chill. Devonshire must be an uncivilised place indeed! We would, of course, be pleased to receive you at Norland Park whenever you find yourselves in Sussex, although a constant incursion of guests leaves us with few rooms to spare. Please convey my
compliments to your mother; how gratifying it must be for her to have her eldest daughter so well settled.

Mrs. Dashwood’s letter to her mother was no less ill-tempered. With Mrs. Ferrars, however, Mrs. Dashwood had no need for the affectation of civility. The letter found its recipient most amenable to the sentiments expressed and it intensified the anguish felt by the unhappy lady over the defection of her favourite son, whose even more unsuitable union with Miss Steele had entirely dispossessed Mrs. Ferrars of male heirs.

Her daughter’s letter, however, brought her little comfort:

“I am too ill to leave the house and beg you to come immediately. Despite my entreaties, Edward does not choose to marry Miss Morton, and she, the daughter of a nobleman, with thirty thousand pounds! Miss Elinor Dashwood set her cap at him the moment he arrived at Norland Park and her tricks and allurements have made him entirely forget his duty to his family. Miss Dashwood’s ingratitude, after all that has been done for her, is quite intolerable. How can my dear husband advance his position with a brother who has so very little to recommend him to men of consequence? Robert’s offence is equally unpardonable and we must look to little Harry for the honour and advancement of the family. No expence can be spared for his education; a German riding master and a French fencing master must be engaged without delay, for when he attends Westminster, he must shew himself to be a young man of consequence. I myself require German piano-forte, as Harry finds music excessively soothing, but it must be performed on a superior instrument. Lady Middleton called this morning, no doubt to rejoice at our misfortune, for her pitying glances showed that she had heard the news from Mrs. Jenkins. It is too vexing!

I remain, your most unhappy daughter &c."

Mrs. John Dashwood remained secluded at Norland Park for the duration of the season; her absence was not regretted nor her company sought by those whose approbation she most desired. In due course she ventured forth, her spirits lifted by the misfortunes of others. Mrs. Dashwood’s incivility failed to diminish the domestic felicity of the inhabitants of the Delaford Parsonage when the expence of a journey from Sussex, with young Harry suitably attired against the possibility of inclement weather, was finally undertaken. Elinor’s impulse to forgive her relatives was tempered by her censure of their continuing coldness towards Edward, and by his mother’s susceptibility to the persistent flattery of Mrs. Robert Ferrars, which gradually
Marianne is now less impulsive and emotional; there’s a sense that her marriage to Brandon brings ‘enduring’ happiness rather than the intense passion she had felt with

overcame his mother’s haughty displeasure. Elinor, on the other hand, Mrs. Ferrars could never forgive! Marianne, while feeling most keenly the injustices done to her sister, was more circumspect than she had hitherto been, having discovered that the most passionately felt sentiments are not always the most enduring, and are often best left unspoken.
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**Links with close analysis**

This table shows how the skills of close analysis are used and developed by writing a creative response to a text (in this case, *Sense and Sensibility*).

Study the table closely, then construct an equivalent table for the text you are writing a creative response on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of the text</th>
<th>The meaning of the textual feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Long, complex sentences; formal language** | - Elegance and formality of Austen’s style  
  - This feature of Austen’s style reflects:  
    - the (often superficial) elegance and formality of the society  
    - the ideals of a ‘civilised’ society, based on restraint and decorum.  
  - Austen’s characters highlight both the benefits and the disadvantages of these social constraints.  
  - Look for examples of these complex sentences in passages and comment on how they reflect character traits, e.g. restraint, secrecy, dishonesty, hypocrisy, frankness, indiscretion, etc. |
| **Irony** | - Use of clauses to qualify the main meaning of a sentence  
  - The main idea in the sentence can be modified, qualified or reaffirmed. This allows for:  
    - considered deliberations  
    - differing points of view  
    - shades of meaning, most often in the mind of the protagonist, whose considered point of view we are invited to endorse. |
| **Humorous irony** | - Austen’s caustic irony condemns the values embodied in certain characters (such as Fanny Dashwood) – values which should not be endorsed by the group as a whole.  
  - Irony provides a way of making a criticism – if only subtly – according to the rules of ‘concealment’ which keep disruptive tensions below the surface of society. |
| **Caustic irony** | - Opposing terms suggest underlying tensions  
  - Austen suggests that tensions between opposing forces need to be reconciled if the individual and the society are to achieve balance. |
| **Setting, costume, characters** | - Images associated with characters indicate the qualities and values they  
  - Understanding these subtle clues to character helps you to link specific features of the text to the text’s wider meaning.  
  - Marianne’s love of nature reveals a highly Romantic sensibility – which is |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imagery</th>
<th>Embody</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The imagery most strongly associated with Marianne (the Romantic poets, music and illness) strengthens her connection with the Romanticism.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elinor’s screen paintings suggest her ability to keep secrets and to ‘screen’ or restrain her emotions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery connected with other characters includes:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Willoughby’s horses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Nancy Steele’s clothes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Mrs Jennings’s association with food</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fanny’s associations with money and material possessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the constant entertainments at Barton Park.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>