Sense and Sensibility begins as a balanced ledger sheet. Norland, the home of the Dashwoods, a large, prosperous and respectable estate, represents economic stability. Here, for Austen’s fiction, is the equivalent of primal security, an Edenic paradise of the landed gentry. The novel begins in a numbing muddle of financial detail, describing flatly the economic situations of Norland’s owner, Mr. Dashwood, and those of his heirs: his nephew and nephew’s wife, his grand nephew and nieces, and his great-grand nephew. These monetary details constitute both the status quo and a paradisial stability, for at the old man’s death in the third paragraph, narrative wit and economic instability enter the novel hand-in-hand: ‘The old Gentleman died; his will was read, and like almost every other will gave as much disappointment as pleasure’ (p. 4). The one grand nephew and his son are favoured over the three grand nieces. This initial imbalance of the ledger causes all the subsequent action of the novel, because the fates of the Dashwood sisters devolve almost entirely from their disinheritance. The entrance of irony at this crucial moment is metaphorically right, because only when innocence and security are lost is the double nature of language apparent. There is no need for irony in an unfallen paradise; irony is a postlapsarian aspect of language.

The goal of the novel is to heal this early disruption, this original sin of too much money for one, too little for others. A return to the status quo is impossible; those ejected from the garden of the estate must seek new gardens. The dispossession of the Dashwood sisters and their mother is not unique to Austen’s fiction; the theme of disinheritance is central to her artistic vision. We find permutations of this theme in the entail of the Bennets’ estate in Pride and Prejudice, in the corruption of Mansfield Park, and in the leasing of Kellynch in Persuasion. Only in Mansfield Park is the original estate the scene of resolution and restitution, and even here the restoration is partial; Edmund and Fanny live on the grounds of the estate in the
Parsonage, but not in the Park itself. But the strategy for recompensing those heroines caught at an economic and social disadvantage is the same in all of Austen's novels: marriage. Marriage creates a new estate, a new unity and stability. Without exception, Austen's novels end in apparently happy and advantageous marriages for their heroines. These marriages round off the action; they resolve – or attempt to resolve – all the novel's conflicts.

Marriage as a structural device for Austen is more than the simple romantic proposition of two loving hearts united in one. As in fairy tales, when we are assured that the hero and heroine live 'happily ever after', in Austen's novels marriage is the culmination of the educative process. It is not so much that education prepares for marriage but that a happy union of man and wife marks an achievement of the self. Marriage proves that one is capable of more than self-love. Further, the act of binding oneself to another represents a truth about psychological growth, that growth is the assimilation and ordering of the self's warring impulses. Maturity is inner unity, an integrity and cohesion of purpose; marriage, in Grimm's tales or in Austen's novels, represents the achievement of this unity, this wholeness of being.

Each of Austen's heroines begins in a state of relative innocence, as yet untested by the rude events of the adult world. In her attempt to understand and confront society's immorality, foolishness, weakness and disorder, each heroine learns to combat similar forces in her own personality. She is formed as she leaves girlhood for womanhood. In consequence, the satisfaction and sense of resolution a reader experiences when heroine and hero unite indissolubly is more than a thrill of vicarious romance; it is due to the recognition that marriage results from maturity. It stands to reason, therefore, that the more complete the heroine's education, the more complete will be the reader's satisfaction in the novel's resolution. For our discussion of *Sense and Sensibility*, the question is this: what level of integration, of psychological fulfilment, do the dual educations and marital fates of the Dashwood sisters achieve?

The question is complicated by the fact that we cannot judge the relative satisfaction afforded by this novel's conclusion purely on the psychological level. Unlike that of the fairy tale, Austen's fictional world is intensely commercial and class-conscious. The marriages reserved for her heroines must also satisfy on the economic and social levels. Austen's narrative concern is not the