

Sibling Relationships in Austen's Novels Discussion Questions

JASNA E. Washington and N. Idaho Region

These questions are designed to get you thinking about the many sibling relationships shown in the novels. We won't have time to discuss all of them.

Section I. Sister-Sister Relationships

When sisters are also friends, they can offer emotional support to each other, give honest feedback, and help each other develop as people.

1. *Northanger Abbey* Not much seen of the relationships between sisters.
2. *Sense and Sensibility* The relationship between Elinor and Marianne is complex in *S&S*, with much affection between them yet also many instances of friction. How do you see this relationship evolving by the end of the novel? How do the Steele sisters and the Jennings sisters, Charlotte Palmer and Lady (Mary) Middleton, compare with the elder Dashwood sisters? What is Margaret Dashwood's contribution to the novel?
3. *Pride and Prejudice* The five Bennet sisters group into two close dyads: Elizabeth and Jane, and Lydia and Kitty, with Mary alone in the middle. How does Elizabeth's judgment of Jane change when she realizes her errors in judging Darcy and Wickham? Are there ways in which Lydia can be seen as an exaggeration of some of Elizabeth's qualities? Do you have any sympathy for Mary's position as the odd woman out? Any thoughts about the relationship between Mrs. Bennet and her sister Mrs. Philips?
4. *Mansfield Park* How do you think Fanny's friendship with and mentoring of her sister Susan in Portsmouth helps Fanny develop into adulthood? What are your thoughts about Julia and Maria Bertram alternating between friendship and rivalry due to Henry Crawford's manipulation of them? The three Ward sisters become Mrs. Norris, Lady Bertram, and Mrs. Price. How do their sisterly dynamics affect the next generation?
5. *Emma* Emma's relationship with Isabella is described as affectionate, but it is not shown much. Does Isabella serve mainly to show Emma's good qualities?

6. *Persuasion* Elizabeth is distant and cold-hearted to Anne. Anne's relationship with Mary is one-sided caretaking. What do these relationships show us (or Wentworth) about Anne? Any thoughts about Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove?

Section II. Brother-Sister Relationships

In some of the novels, the heroine has a brother who plays an important role for her. The hero's sister can highlight his good qualities or give him a woman's perspective.

1. *Northanger Abbey* What are your thoughts about the interplay of the three brother-sister dyads in the novel: Catherine and James Morland, Henry and Eleanor Tilney, and Isabella and John Thorpe? How does Eleanor help Henry with Catherine?
2. *Sense and Sensibility* John Dashwood is heartless with the Dashwood sisters and Fanny Dashwood wants to direct Edward's life (along with his mother). What are your thoughts about these relationships?
3. *Pride and Prejudice* We see Charles Bingley's relationship with his sisters Caroline and Louisa and how they want to manipulate and control him. Is that relationship a warning to Jane Bennet that Bingley doesn't stand up for himself? How does Georgiana help to humanize Darcy? What are your thoughts about Austen's comment that Charlotte Lucas's brothers are happy when she marries that they will not have to support her in old age (which seems to reflect the reality of men controlling money in the Regency)? Any thoughts about Mr. Gardiner being a model of a good brother to Mrs. Bennet when the family is in crisis?
4. *Mansfield Park* We have several brother and sister groupings: Fanny and William Price; Henry and Mary Crawford; and Edmund, Tom, Julia, and Maria Bertram. William's plan to live with Fanny when he retires from the Navy contrasts nicely with Henry's refusal to live with Mary on his estate. Do the Bertram siblings show much affection for each other? What are your thoughts about Mary and Henry's relationship and how she tries to pressure Fanny to marry Henry?
5. *Emma* Emma's relationship with John Knightley is brother-sister and there is tension because of Emma's concern about how he treats her father. What is John's main function in the novel for Emma?

6. *Persuasion* Mrs. Croft calls out Captain Wentworth for his over-refined beliefs about women. Do her comments play a role in his reassessment of Anne?

Section II. Brother-Brother Relationships

Most of the relationships between brothers are not close.

1. *Northanger Abbey* Henry Tilney seems to have a distant relationship with Captain Tilney (the first born). What do you think Henry really thinks of his brother?
2. *Sense and Sensibility* Edward Ferrars is the older brother and the women in the family try to control him while his younger brother Robert is favored. Robert behaves dishonorably by “stealing” Lucy from his brother and thus allows Elinor and Edward to marry and be relatively independent of his mother. What do you make of the brothers? Although we only hear about it in a story, Colonel Brandon’s relationship with his older brother seems to follow a common pattern of the older brother being dishonorable. Do you think this was a social commentary by Austen?
3. *Pride and Prejudice* There aren’t any important brother-brother relationships, although can one argue that Bingley and Darcy function like brothers?
4. *Mansfield Park* Edmund and Tom Bertram seem to have a very superficial relationship in the beginning of the novel with some areas of tension. After Tom gets sick, does his changing attitude toward Edmund feel realistic?
5. *Emma* The relationship between George and John Knightley is the closest brother pairing in all the novels. What qualities of George Knightley do we see through his interactions with John?
6. *Persuasion* Captain Wentworth has a brotherly relationship with his brother-in-law, Admiral Croft, and his fellow Captains Harville and Benwick. What good aspects of Captain Wentworth are shown through those relationships?