

John Willoughby: Sexual Predation in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

Jane Austen's novels consistently deal with themes of class, money and gender, but also tackle darker yet inescapable issues such as sexual predation. Sexual predation can be defined as attempting to obtain, or obtaining, sexual contact with another through lies, manipulations, and other such predatory behaviors. These behaviors clearly exist in the character of John Willoughby, from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. At face value, Willoughby is charming, witty and dashing, lavishing special attention on Marianne, the most impetuous and emotional of the Dashwood sisters. In Marianne's eyes, he can do no wrong, but truths come to light that illuminate Willoughby's actual intentions. Throughout *Sense and Sensibility* Willoughby exhibits all of the traits of sexual predation; he lies, plays with Marianne's heart, and refuses to accept responsibility for the consequences of a previous seduction, all from behind a mask of charm and beauty.

John Willoughby first appears to Marianne as a charming knight in shining armor after rescuing her from a fall, quite literally and figuratively sweeping her off her feet. Austen writes that "his person which was uncommonly handsome received additional charms from his voice and expression" (Austen 36), and takes care to emphasize "his manly beauty and more than common gracefulness" (36). Marianne and the rest of the Dashwood family are obviously awed by his physical appearance, and while the family enjoys Willoughby's company, he shares a special intimacy with Marianne, his company being "her most exquisite enjoyment" (41). Austen writes that "when he was present, she had no eyes for anyone else. Everything he did was right" (45). Marianne is utterly overwhelmed and enraptured by Willoughby, placing all her faith and trust in him. In her naiveté, Marianne throws all caution and care for social conventions of the day to the wind: "when obliged to separate for a couple of dances [they] were careful to stand

together and scarcely spoke a word to anyone else” (45). In Regency England, dancing was one of the few socially acceptable entertainments that allowed for physical contact between a man and a woman, and thus was a significant part of the courtship ritual. However, with this came the expectation that a gentleman or a lady would not overly favor a certain partner, lest scandalous behavior be interpreted. Jane Austen herself commented on this, writing to her sister Cassandra in a letter from 1796 describing her behavior at a recent ball as “everything most profligate in the way of dancing and sitting down together”. By repeatedly ignoring others at balls, Marianne and Willoughby are highlighting their physical connection, and this behavior does not go unnoticed. Elinor is concerned by Willoughby’s lack of caution and propriety, and her concern increases when she hears Willoughby call Marianne by her given name (49). He then proceeds to beg Marianne for a lock of her hair, cuts it off, kisses it and places it in his pocket (50). These are all incredibly intimate actions, especially coming from a more worldly wise man like Willoughby to a very young and inexperienced girl like Marianne. His motives are dubious, and his intentions are further put to question when he and Marianne separate from the party at Whitwell and tour Allenham alone (57). Willoughby is luring Marianne away from propriety and towards a more dangerous path of potential seduction.

When Willoughby leaves abruptly there is no news of the engagement everyone eagerly expects, leading a concerned and suspicious Elinor to state: “I want no proof of their affection, but of their engagement I do” (66). Willoughby has developed an intimacy with Marianne that has crossed all the social boundaries of the time, leaving Marianne in a position where it is unlikely she would deny him anything, considering her utter faith and devotion to him. This is a game of cat and mouse, although the consequences of a mistake in Regency England are far greater than they would be today.

Willoughby, it turns out, has a history with predatory sexual behavior and seductions. Colonel Brandon reveals to Elinor that Willoughby had seduced his ward, a young woman of similar age and demeanor as Marianne:

He had left the girl, whose youth and innocence he had seduced in a situation of the utmost distress, with no creditable home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address. He had left her promising to return; he neither returned, nor wrote, nor received her (171).

As per standards of the day, Brandon challenged Willoughby to a duel in order to serve justice and defend the honor of his ward; neither are injured, and Willoughby remains free to continue acting as he always has (171). These actions reveal the true mark of Willoughby's character: he is careless, untrustworthy, and has a history of seducing and deserting young women once he has served his own pleasure seeking purposes. He promised things and didn't follow through, leaving at least one young woman with a child out of wedlock with no means of supporting herself. Willoughby takes advantage of the innocence of girls like Marianne, using them as playthings until he loses interest; in short, highly predatory behavior.

Throughout the novel, Willoughby's actions overstep the social conventions of the day, bringing harm only to the women he interacts with. When asked about the way he played with Marianne's heart, Willoughby admits "my vanity was only elevated...careless of her happiness, thinking only of my own amusement" (262). He remains unharmed by their relationship, while Marianne makes herself ill with hurt and confusion, emerging a considerably different and less lively person than she was prior to their acquaintance. Willoughby's careless behavior is remarkably similar to predatory and cavalier patterns found in society today: ignoring messages and severing contact (144), dismissive behavior (144), scrutiny and blame directed solely

towards the woman involved, deceit, and broken hearts. As with so many aspects of Austen's writing, Willoughby's actions are remarkably relevant to both the world we live in today, and life in Regency England.

Works Cited

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Tomalin, Claire, and Jane Austen. *Jane Austen: A Life*. New York, Vintage Books, 1999.