

Jamie L. Olson

Jane Austen Essay Contest 2018

June 18, 2018

George Wickham, *Pride and Prejudice*'s Libertine

Classic literature may provide a glimpse into the past depicting previous social mores and norms, but it can also be a powerful mirror to reflect how some issues change over time. There are indeed many aspects of human society that have changed little over time, such as sexuality and power. While these universal human themes are rarely explicitly discussed in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, they are indeed woven tightly throughout the novel. There are two events featuring these themes that could be considered sexual predation by 21st century standards which provide us an opportunity to contemplate how sexuality and power have altered in the intervening two centuries. The implications of these events are far reaching for all involved, and the consequences, both direct and indirect, reverberate through their social circles in numerous ways. Austen's 1813 novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, demonstrates how insidiously sexual predation may have happened in Georgian England, but also allows the reader the opportunity to reflect on the ways that patriarchal systems allow this predation to persist despite the passage of time.

Over the course of the novel, we learn that George Wickham is actually a predator. He moves with calculated ease from one well-bred young girl to another in search of economic or sexual plunder. The definition of a predator as someone who "injures or exploits others for personal gain or profit" describes Wickham precisely (*Merriam-Webster*). Wickham is the ultimate predator as his every interaction with women centers on his own self-interest, from carefully constructed conversations designed to portray himself as an innocent victim of Mr. Darcy to his secret machinations to elope with Georgiana Darcy or Lydia

Bennet (Austen, 53; vol. 1, ch.16). Austen describes him as a handsome, well-mannered conversationalist popular with the ladies but who also kept pleasant company around well-bred gentlemen, such as the elder Mr. Darcy, which cultivated trust and good will in social circles (Austen 52; vol. 1, ch. 16, 132; vol. 2, ch .12). He seems well aware of his effect on women, and skillfully uses his charm and appeal to lure both the minor girls away from their families with promises of marriage, which would have been appealing for such immature, sheltered young ladies.

According to 21st century legal standards, we would view Mr. Wickham as a sexual predator because Lydia and Georgiana were only fifteen when he lured them away from their families (Austen 31; vol. 1, ch. 9, 133; vol. 2, ch.12). In his attempt to marry Georgiana Darcy, the much elder man sees his chance to claim access to her significant fortune. Arranging to elope with Georgiana Darcy was pre-meditated as evidenced by coordinating with Miss Darcy's governess, Mrs. Younge, to spirit her away from school (Austen, 133; vol. 2, ch. 12). Prior to the novel's opening this scheme fails. As *Pride and Prejudice* begins, Wickham is again seeking opportunities with other young ladies. Although early in the novel, he is cordial and friendly with Elizabeth Bennet, this relationship doesn't develop. It is only when the younger sister, Lydia Bennet, heads off to visit Colonel Forster's family in Brighton and leaves her family's watchful presence that he seizes the opportunity to satisfy his sexual appetite with her. Lydia is described as "a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humoured countenance" and "high animal spirits"(Austen 31; vol. 1, ch. 9). While Lydia had no fortune to attract him, her beauty, youth, and "high animal spirits" may have unintentionally conveyed sexual availability to this scoundrel (Austen 31; vol. 1, ch. 9). By his own admission to Mr. Darcy, Wickham admits that he never intended to marry Lydia because he hoped to find better fortune with someone else

(Austen 210; vol. 3, ch. 10). Again, his predatory actions show him to be a sex offender according to our current standards.

The reputation of not only Lydia but her entire family would have been destroyed by this scandalous act. Only the intervention of Mr. Darcy caused Wickham to marry Lydia, and therefore avert complete dishonor to the entire Bennet family (210-211; vol. 3, ch.10).

Reputation can be defined as “a tool to predict behavior based on past actions and characteristics” (Dingledine). This was especially true in 1813, and it remains true still. Those around Lydia feel both horrified for the poor choice she has made and its immediate implication of being married to such a scandalous and untrustworthy man, but also they recognize what the impact on the family’s reputation will be. In particular, Mr. Bennet knows too well the bleak future awaiting his daughters if he cannot marry Lydia to Wickham as soon as possible. As none of the other Bennet daughters are married, Lydia’s scandalous situation would have long-lasting effects on her sisters’ marriageability. Mrs. Bennet’s modest £9,000 inheritance would not suffice for all five of her daughters and herself should something happen to Mr. Bennet (Heldman, 38).

Lydia Bennet consistently acts selfishly, carelessly, and really has no grasp of the seriousness of her actions, large or small, throughout the novel. In the 21st century, if we met a teenager like Lydia, we may just shake our heads at her naive, irresponsible and perfectly adolescent behavior as to be expected from any fifteen year old. Not only have our social norms about sex and marriage changed dramatically, but our understanding of neuroscience, human biology and development have changed how we think about the protection and rights of minors. We have much different expectations about the behavior of a significantly older man interacting romantically or sexually with an underage girl.

Lydia is the only person who seemingly doesn't grasp the damage caused by the situation. In her letter of departure from the Forster home, she declares secretly going off to elope "a good joke" (Austen 189; vol. 3, ch. 5). Her infatuation is clear in her additional declaration, "...there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel" (Austen 189; vol. 3, ch. 5). The reader can well imagine that at some future point with more wisdom and experience, she will come to understand the foolishness of her youthful infatuation.

Those around Lydia deal with the situation in a variety of ways. Mr. Darcy uses the situation as an opportunity for growth and reflection when he takes some degree of responsibility for Wickham's opportunistic behavior. Having recently been chided by Elizabeth for his moral shortcomings and using the intervening time for self-reflection, he uses this opportunity to demonstrate not only his affections for Elizabeth and her family's well-being, but he also accepts that his secrecy of the George Wickham-Georgiana Darcy affair had repercussions he could not have foreseen (Austen 132-134; vol. 2, ch.12). He further admits his main motivation in intervening on Lydia's behalf stem from his love for Elizabeth (Austen 239; vol. 3, ch. 16).

Mrs. Bennet was quick to forgive Lydia once her marriage was complete. Throughout the novel, she seemingly is a very simple woman concerned about her comfort, her social station and what others think of her. Her willingness to focus on Lydia's marriage further reinforces to the reader her lack of intellectual development and superficial nature (Austen 4; vol. 1, ch.1).

Mr. Bennet has a longer memory agreeing that once the nuptials have been concluded that the newly married couple should not be welcomed at Longbourn but simply move to the North where they may make a new start where no one knows them (Austen 204; vol. 3, ch. 8). Lydia's uncle, Mr. Gardiner writes of their impending move north and fresh start that "it is an

advantage to have it so far from this part of the kingdom. He promises fairly, and I hope among different people, where they may each have a character to preserve, they will both be more prudent” (Austen 203; vol. 3, ch. 8).

In contemplating whether justice was served, one must consider the prevailing norms of the era. Thus, finally through Lydia and Wickham’s marriage, the situation was resolved justly. Disaster and the ruin of the family reputation were averted. However, through the lens of the modern reader, it may appear unjust as the young Lydia is forced to move far away from her family with a sexual predator. Once the reality of her situation set in, such emotional and physical isolation may have seemed like a punishment.

There are three main points to consider when reflecting on how our modern society deals with problems of sexual predation. First and most obviously, modern American society relies on appropriate laws and punishments for sexual predation of minors. The consequences for behavior such as Mr. Wickham’s in a modern scenario would likely be incarceration not only for rape of a minor but also kidnapping. (Washington State Legislature). Modern American society disapproves of sex offenders, especially those involved with children, and a man would have a hard time rebuilding his life after an incident like this.

The complex interplay of power, economics, and sexuality continues to be an issue for the modern woman. On many levels, the modern reader can see the obvious differences between the women of *Pride and Prejudice* and modern women; however, what is perhaps challenging to accept is the fact that despite the many positive changes that have allowed for the empowerment of women, many central aspects have changed little. The antiquated and insidious patriarchal system that persists today continues to support rape culture and imposes systems of moral and sexual control on women, despite much progress for women’s rights. The brave women who are

standing up to the pervasive culture of sexual assault and harassment are helping our society confront these issues in a meaningful way. In the year since the #MeTooMovement has exploded, American society has finally begun to candidly discuss difficult issues of harassment and assault. Here the notable difference is modern women are able to use their voices to call attention to sexual predation and sexist norms.

Finally and most importantly, modern society continues to perpetuate victim blaming. Lydia, while having participated in the scheme to elope, was indeed a victim of Wickham. Wickham does receive some of the blame in the novel, but Lydia is also held responsible. As Elizabeth deals with the news that Wickham and Lydia have gone off to Gretna Green, she contemplates the “humiliation, the misery” that her youngest sister was now bringing on the family (Austen 180; vol. 3, ch. 4). Despite knowing the merest details of Wickham’s secret departure with Lydia, even her aunt, Mrs. Gardiner says “It is really too great a violation of decency, honour and interest for him to be guilty of. I cannot think so very ill of Wickham” (Austen 182; vol. 3, ch. 5). Repeatedly, Lydia carries a greater share of the blame. The modern idea that women should think about their clothing choices or where they go alone, so that men aren’t tempted to assault or harass them, is obviously connected to the same line of thinking that Lydia shares part of the blame for what happened. According to a 2014 article entitled “Blaming the Victim in the Case of Rape”, “hostile sexism involves condemning women who do not adhere to traditional gender norms including ideals of female purity”(Niemi and Young, 232). Furthermore, according to Niemi and Young, “women may be seen by some as under an obligation to keep themselves pure and to prevent themselves from being defiled or contaminated by sexual assault” (232). This unfortunately shows how little has changed in two

hundred years since Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice*, despite many areas of progress in women's rights.

In conclusion, Wickham's actions being considered predatory seems obvious to the modern eye, especially in a world where sexual predation is currently being called out of the shadows and called by its rightful name. *Pride and Prejudice* continues to be a useful novel for the modern reader to reflect and investigate essential human issues of sexuality, sexism, control, reputation and power.

WORKS CITED

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Edited by Donald Gray, 3rd Ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Dingledine, Roger, et al. "Reputation." April 2003. Web. www.freehaven.net/~arma/jean.html. Accessed 01 Jun 18.

Heldman, James. "How Wealthy is Mr. Darcy – Really? Pounds and Dollars in the World of *Pride and Prejudice*." *Persuasions* #12, (1990): 38-49.

Niemi, Laura, and Liane Young. "Blaming the Victim in the Case of Rape." *Psychological Inquiry* 25.2 (2014): 230–233.

"Predator". Def. 2. *Merriam-Webster*. n.d. 2018. Web. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/predator. Accessed 27 May 18.

Washington State Legislature. *RCW 9A.44.079*. 1998. Web.

app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=9A.44.079. Accessed 12 Jun 2018.