

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

MARIANNE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Marianne (in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*) **emotional**

Overview In her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Jane Austen confronts us with a pair of sisters, Marianne ('sensibility') and Elinor ('sense') whose marital searches and complex interrelations are the triggers of the book. Marianne is the lady of sensibility—emotion, vivacity, impulsiveness, empathy--while Elinor, her sister, is the 'sensible' lady, prudent, careful in what she says, analytic in the care she gives to interpreting situations and making decisions. Marianne, having suffered the ups and downs of romance, eventually discovers the wisdom of Elinor's prudence, and marries the steady Colonel Brandon, while Elinor marries the Edward fate had earlier withheld from her.

Character Mrs. Dashwood, eager to guarantee security for her two daughters, recommends that Marianne, her younger, should look favorably on the young gentleman, Edward, who has come to live with the family. Marianne thinks of Edward who had offered up the previous night's reading session, and she responds from her very fixed opinion of the young man. She doesn't stop and weigh matters.. Marianne reacts passionately against her mother's suggestion. 'Edward is very amiable,' she says, but then immediately she pours forth her reservations—that he is not very handsome, that he is spiritless, 'he has no real taste'; he reads poetry like a zombie, she adds, referring to his lifeless rendition of the passionate poetry of Cowper, when he read to the family the previous evening. Marianne reacts quickly and impatiently, to the suggestion she may have a future with Edward.

Parallels Both Medea and Phèdre come to mind, when we search in Greek literature for forerunners to the deception in love of Marianne. Medea is the perfect embodiment of the woman deceived by a shallow and self-interested male—Willoughby and Jason have something in common. In one version of the tragedy of Phaedra, she confesses her love for Hippolytus to her nurse, who gossips the news to Theseus, who arranges the bloody death of Hippolytus, which was absolutely the last thing Phedra wanted; she was mortally deceived. One might choose, from subtle modern literary treatments of the deceived woman, O'Henry's story, "The Last Leaf," 1907, in which a woman's life is saved by the deception a painter and a painting exercise on her. Or, another parallel, the case of Rosamond (and her lover Lydgate) in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871). Rosamond is deceived both by Lydgate's classiness and class, and by her own vulnerability to these external attractions.

Illustrative moments

Discerning Upon request, Marianne—discovered to be musical--agrees to sing for the after-dinner party held by Lady Middleton. She performs. Sir John is boisterously enthusiastic—he likes her—and the remaining guests, except Colonel Brandon, express delight. 'Colonel Brandon alone, of all the party, heard her without being in raptures.' Marianne was delighted by the Colonel's reserve, which she contrasted with the 'horrible insensibility of the others.' She admires the Colonel for his refusal to fake musical delight; 'she was reasonable enough to allow that a man of five and thirty might well have outlived all acuteness of feeling and every exquisite power of enjoyment.' His 'advanced state of life' justified his reserve, which in itself she admired.

Charmed Marianne and her younger sister Margaret set off for a walk across the Downs; a rainstorm sets in, and the girls race back down the hills toward home. The ground is wet, and Marianne slips in the mud, turning her ankle; just as she falls a handsome young country gentleman, Mr. Willoughby, comes climbing up the hill to their aid. He is handsome and dressed like the perfect sportsman. He takes Marianne in his arms and carries her home; she is charmed by his looks and his behavior. Marianne is a natural for such a picture book romantic encounter,

and from that time on, until their unfortunate separation, not too long after, she thinks of Willoughby night and day, and their romantic passion surges. To herself she becomes a figure out of romance.

Distracted Willoughby leaves Marianne, for an undisclosed emergency, just as the lovers' ardor seems most intense. Marianne is crushed, and withdraws from family life as completely as possible, sulking and withdrawn. In her effort to cheer up her sister, Elinor induces Marianne to walk with her in the country. Marianne is unable to free herself from her delusional depression, and makes a perceptual error that shows how deeply distracted she is. Seeing 'a man on horseback riding toward them,' Marianne 'rapturously exclaimed, 'it is he, it is indeed:--I know it is!'. In her mind Marianne can see only Willoughby, and is deeply distraught when she realizes it is Edward who is dismounting and coming toward them.

Hypersensitive Elinor and Marianne, who has been a nervous wreck since the departure of Willoughby, go with Mrs. Jennings in London, to spend the winter. Marianne busies herself, as far as she can, with writing letters to Willoughby—letters to which she gets no response. One day, with the best of intentions, Mrs. Jennings brings Marianne a letter, 'something that I am sure will do you good.' 'In one moment her (Marianne's) imagination placed before her a letter from Willoughby, full of tenderness and contrition.' 'The work of one moment was destroyed by the next,' for the letter was from her mother. The tears 'streamed from her eyes with passionate violence.'

Discussion questions

What are the stages by which life readies Marianne for a marriage to Colonel Brandon, whom she had at the beginning of the novel thought unacceptably old?

Does Marianne, in her first romantic meetings with Willoughby, behave like what we might call a teen ager? Is she giddy? What are her tastes? Is she in any sense like a consumer of pop culture?

By the book's end, do you still feel that Marianne and Elinor are opposites? Has the gap between them narrowed?