

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
**WILLOUGHBY**

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**Willoughby** (in Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*) **unconscientious**

**Overview** In her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Jane Austen confronts us with a pair of sisters, Marianne ('sensitivity') and Elinor ('sense') whose marital searches and complex interrelations are the triggers of the book. Willoughby enters the story as one of the potential searched for mates. He is a handsome country sportsman, and first comes to attention when Marianne, descending a muddy hill in the Downs, slips in the mud and sprains her ankle. He lifts her up in his arms and carries her home, leaving Marianne and her mother and sisters spellbound. From that point on this attractive philanderer, who is capable of kindness and generosity, plays an important role in the Dashwood family, alternately breaking Marianne's heart and struggling to find his way back into it.

**Character** From the time he rescues Marianne from a fall in the mud, Willoughby is dramatic, charming, manly, a true gallant.. In the course of the novel, long after Marianne has fallen hopelessly in love with him, Willoughby makes it evident why he up and walked out on Marianne in the midst of their romance. He is a philanderer, with multiple female interests, and little stability. In the course of time, however, he comes to realize he has made a bad marriage, and makes clear that he has always loved Marianne, a confession in which there seems to be some truth. In the end, though badly married, the hedonist Willoughby makes do, and quite well, with the life of a country gentleman.

**Parallels** Wherever there are cads, parallels to Willoughby crop up in literature. Jane Austen herself outdoes Willoughby in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), where the cynical gossip George Wickham lies and deceives the girls. James Steerforth, in Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850), turns out to be careless with women and generally badly intentioned. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), by Oscar Wilde, luxuriates in depicting the developing hedonism of Dorian, who deceives many of the fair sex. Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises* (1926) highlights the sexual behaviors of a woman cad, Brett Ashley, who leaves men panting for her as she drives away.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Gallant** Marianne too hastily descends the muddy hill on her way home from walking with Margaret, and slips, spraining her ankle. Willoughby is just ascending the hill, handsome and rugged with his two pointers and his gun. At once he renders his services, picks her up in his arms, and 'quitted not his hold til he had ...carried her down the hill,' and seated her in a chair in her house, to the astonishment (and fascination) of her mother and older sister. The situation to which Willoughby so swiftly responded was right up his alley, allowing him to display his manly and romantic skills. He complied perfectly, like a character in a romance novel—which he was.

**Attractive** Willoughby is a delight to Marianne, whose ankle is sprained and who must remain at home for a while. Willoughby visits her daily. He and Marianne are on the same page when it comes to current books and even passages in books; they share the same tastes in music, and love to dance. Nor does Marianne misjudge this lively mid twenty-year old, though her judgment of him is not deep. 'Willoughby was a young man of good abilities, quick imagination, lively spirits, and open, affectionate manners. He was exactly formed to engage Marianne's heart...' If Willoughby had any prominent fault, and Elinor suspected this one, it was that he was too outspoken and frank; but that 'fault' he shared with Marianne, who admired it in him because it was hers.

**Charming** Marianne—and indeed the whole Dashwood family-- delights in the regular visits of Willoughby. Still obliged to favor her ankle, Marianne finds that Willoughby does everything possible to make her recovery pleasant. The two of them trade tastes in music and dance fashions, and find that 'their taste was strikingly alike.' 'Willoughby, on his side, gave every proof of his pleasure in their acquaintance...' 'His society became gradually her most exquisite enjoyment.' He was, in short, a regular house guest, and knew exactly how to ingratiate himself with the entire family.

**Philandering** Upon arriving in London, still perplexed by Willoughby's sudden abandonment of her, Marianne began to inundate Willoughby with letters. Yet she receives no response to these letters, and grows desperate for news of her former lover. Then one day Marianne and her sister go to a party and find Willoughby, standing a short distance from them. At first he pretends not to recognize Marianne, and greets her coldly, then, when she asks if he has not received her letters, 'his complexion and all his embarrassment returned...and he turned hastily away with a slight bow and joined his friend.' His philandering nature has caught up with him.

### **Discussion questions**

Is it fair to Willoughby to call him simply a philanderer? How does he—or does he?—deepen in the course of the novel, and how does he grow in compassion for others? Track two or three specific turning points, where you see Willoughby starting to prove himself more than a philanderer.

Willoughby seems pretty content with his life, at the end of the novel. What is his secret for contentment? He has been socially criticized as irresponsible, he has lost in the competition for his true love, Marianne, he has settled for a woman he doesn't love, but still he is content. What kind of guy is he?

Has Willoughby a genuine affection for Marianne, when he and she are young mutually self-absorbed admirers in Marianne's home?