



Gender Hostility in Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *Sense and Sensibility deals with the various forms of hostility that can arise between men and women. This hostility usually arises when one fails properly to judge another person and develops misunderstandings. These misunderstandings are often quite natural because of the complexity of human nature. Hostility is used as a successful device by Jane Austen to portray the ups and downs which tend to threaten relationships.*

In *Sense and Sensibility*, this device of hostility works on two levels. In one case, the hostility of one of the sisters is shown in a marked manner from the very beginning for the man she eventually marries. In the other case, there is no direct hostility between the two persons concerned but circumstances conspire to create some hostile feelings between them. This latter hostility is of a subtler type which is only gradually removed.

Seen in terms of a bare outline, the plot of the novel deals with two sisters, Elinor and Marianne, who move gradually towards desirable marriages with worthy men, Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon respectively. This progress is variously complicated by the unscrupulous behaviour of two selfish people, Willoughby and Lucy, who create misunderstanding between the protagonists. In pursuing their selfish ends these two eventually remove themselves by opportunistic marriages. Apart from that, the chief barriers between male-female protagonists are removed after gaining a proper understanding of one's own self and of each other. It is only after that they are able to enter into a happy and satisfying relationship.

It makes an interesting reading to study in detail the strategies Jane Austen adopts in the novel to create, enhance and finally remove the hostility between her characters. As has been discussed in the introductory chapter, the basis of hostility is the lack of understanding caused by personal as well as other socio-economic reasons. Marianne gets hostile feelings towards Colonel Brandon because of her romantic nature which attracts her towards the frank, dashing and energetic Willoughby only to create difficulties which will need to be removed at a later stage.

Marianne is an impulsive girl given to art, drawing, music, literature and other finer things. We are told that "She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation; she was generous, amiable, interesting; she was everything but prudent" (42). She likes romantic things like going for walks, dancing, hunting etc. which she believes are sports for the young people. She takes for granted that any man entering his thirties is already an old man. Such romantic notions make her take a hostile view of Colonel Brandon because he is on the wrong side of thirty-five. She finds him dull, boring and old; one who "must have outlived every sensations" of love, left with "nothing to do with matrimony" (70). When Colonel Brandon talks of some rheumatic pain in his

left shoulder, Marianne immediately takes it to be a sign of infirmity and old age. She says: "Did not you hear him complain of the rheumatism? And is not that the commonest infirmity of declining age?" (70)

Now, Jane Austen handles the story in a manner as would bring out Marianne's initial hostility towards Colonel Brandon in an open manner usually a counterfoil is used for this purpose. Where this counterpart serves to enhance the heroine's hostility towards the hero, it also helps in clearing her view of his real disposition. Here Willoughby is used in that manner. He is the man who is the opposite type of Colonel Brandon in personality as well as in nature Willoughby possesses manly beauty, uncommon gracefulness, superior gallantry and fascinating manners of added charms are his vivacity and openness. Thus he seems to answer all Marianne's wishes and she is overwhelmed. As Jane Austen writes: "His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story" (75). To complete the picture of Marianne's ideal hero, Willoughby is equally enthusiastic and romantic, passionately fond of music and dancing. Marianne's joy knows no bounds to discover that "the same books, the same passages were idolized by each" (79). It is natural that with all these qualities, Willoughby captivates Marianne's heart. Writing about Willoughby Jane Austen herself says: "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, for with all this, he joined not only a captivating person, but a natural ardour of mind which was now roused and increased by the example of her own, and which recommended him to her affection beyond everything else" (80).

Therefore, right from their first meeting, Marianne falls head over heel in love with Willoughby without knowing the reality of his character. Her sensibility makes her overlook any defect that he may have or any error that he may commit: "Prejudiced" against Colonel Brandon "for being neither lively nor young", she goes all out for Willoughby and totally neglects the former. Elinor observes it with concern and realizes that for a person of romantic temperament like Marianne, "What could a silent man of five and thirty hope, when opposed by a lively one of five and twenty?" (81). Thus, Marianne's finding in Willoughby her ideal of perfectness serves only to enhance her initial hostile feelings towards Colonel. While Colonel Brandon seems to her to stand for a stable, dull, mature life marked

with infirmity and fatigue, Willoughby is an emblem of youth, vigour and vitality. When Sir John Middleton tells Marianne about Willoughby's having danced for four hours without any rest, she instantly cries out in pleasure: "That is what I like; that is what a young man ought to be whatever be his pursuits, his eagerness in them should know no moderation and leave him no sense of fatigue" (77).

Another important factor which increases Marianne's attraction towards Willoughby, consequently taking her away from Colonel Brandon, is the praise showered on Willoughby by all in whose company his name is mentioned. Such a praise is given by Sir Middleton himself who though rather unsure about Willoughby's manners still announces him to be "as good a kind of fellow as ever lived" (76). Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer also praise him a lot without knowing his background. Being at an impressionable age, Marianne gets ever surer of the advantage Willoughby must have over Brandon by what people always say of him. The high praise showered on him in high flown language leaves a strong impression on her. Like everybody else, except Elinor, she is so overwhelmed by his charm that she never doubts his sincerity.

Even Marianne's mother, Mrs. Dashwood, plays an important role in enhancing her hostility towards Colonel Brandon. She always encourages Marianne's impulsive and immoderate views, she thinks of them as marks of a finer spirit and better taste. As Jane Austen writes: "Common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood's romantic delicacy" (111). Instead of checking her daughter's growing intimacy with Willoughby, she is rather happy at the prospect of having such a dashing son-in-law. She is so sure of their secret engagement and of Willoughby being a sincere gentleman that, despite Elinor's constant warnings, she never makes any attempt to inquire about it from Marianne. Elinor realizes her mother's fault "in permitting an engagement between a daughter so young, a man so little known, to be carried on in so doubtful, so mysterious a manner"(180). Had she behaved prudently and advised Marianne to behave sensibly, Marianne would perhaps not have suffered so much as she does later on.

Because of all these factors Marianne behaves in a hostile manner towards Colonel Brandon and the affection he holds for her is totally ignored. However, Jane Austen uses this device of hostility for gradually providing a better understanding of his character. She is cured of this romantic sensibility when her experiences teach her to sort out the problems of life by treading the path of sense rather than sensibility. When Marianne is rid of the defects of her extreme sensibility, she finds Colonel Brandon a very appropriate match for her. Marianne's gradual disillusionment is presented by the author very skillfully. The Marianne Willoughby affair, as it turns out, was nothing but the attraction of two young romantic persons. And Jane Austen never advocates love at first sight. Though Marianne loves Willoughby sincerely, he, on his part, had no intention for more intimacy than would help him pass his time pleasantly during his stay in Devonshire. Jane Austen so handles the events that by the time Willoughby's real intentions are made clear to Marianne as well as to others. She is made to see the worth and sincerity of Colonel Brandon.

The first blow comes when Willoughby announces that he is leaving for London and will not be likely to return for a year or more. But, sad though she is, Marianne has no doubt about Willoughby's sincerity and she invents many

reasons for his sudden departure. Because she is to be disillusioned, Jane Austen provides her a chance to meet Willoughby again in town when Elinor and Marianne go there as Mrs. Jennings's guests. Marianne even writes to him but gets no response. When finally he appears at a party, his cold courtesy and his total lack of kindness completely knock Marianne down. It now dawns on her that Willoughby is going to marry a rich heiress for money. And then Willoughby's letter, "a writer of which every line was an insult, and which proclaimed its writer to be deep in hardened villainy" (196) confirms a final separation between them.

On the other hand, Marianne is in a miserable condition after being deceived by Willoughby. But as she is sincere in her feelings, she feels that the world has intrigued to separate her from him. She is still convinced that he cannot be so ruthless or unprincipled with no other intention but to provide comfort to Marianne's troubled mind, Colonel Brandon tells her about Willoughby's early life and its shady character. All this account of Willoughby's character throws a new light on his intentions in gaining acquaintance with Marianne. After knowing the truth about Willoughby, Marianne is able to think a rational way. She says: "I am now perfectly satisfied, I wish for no change. I never could have been happy with him, after knowing, as sooner or later I must know, all this- I should have had no confidence, no esteem. Nothing could have done it away to my feelings" (341). In Jane Austen's world mutual regard and esteem are always essential for establishing a meaningful relationship and so Marianne is made to realize that she could have no happiness with Willoughby after knowing his real character. Indeed, an alliance between Marianne and Willoughby could never have been approved of by Jane Austen. So any chance of such an alliance is interrupted "by what Colonel Brandon tells of Willoughby's character which is information given when most needed; he has known this all along, and it is the author's tact which has him tell it here"2.

Thus through Brandon, Marianne and Willoughby triangle Jane Austen shows how rash and wrong judgments based solely on romantic notions can be and how they can lead to senseless hostility towards persons with solid virtues and sterling qualities. Such a hostility is resolved slowly when life gives lessons to a rash individual with strong feelings. Then this hostility gradually gets transformed into love and affection. However, if one develops the sense of hostility towards a person after knowledge of his real disposition, then this hostility leads to a complete alienation as in the case of Marianne and Willoughby.

As we grasp Jane Austen's intentions as a writer in a better way, we notice that there is hostility in Elinor and Edward's case also. Their hostility, however, is of a very different nature. The hostility between them is not one which results from personal character. It is the outcome of certain adverse circumstances. Moreover, there is no overt hostility between the two because Elinor is sensible enough to understand the whole situation and rationalize Edward's position in it. So she softens her hostile feelings towards Edward who is caught in the clutches of an unworthy, selfish girl. Therefore, Elinor is sympathetic towards him. Such an attitude, accompanied by the removal of various blocks between them, ultimately results in a lasting and successful alliance of Edward and Elinor.

While Elinor gains a better understanding of Edward, his latent love for Elinor is also made evident. It is best shown

in his jealousy against Colonel Brandon about whom Elinor always speaks with admiration. This makes him suspect that Elinor has an affair with Brandon. However, this is not the reality. So to remove the barrier that is there between the two lovers, Jane Austen employs chance as a successful device. Lucy is made to marry Robert Ferrars, the younger brother of Edward. This unexpected event is incomprehensible to Elinor: "To her own heart it was delightful affair, to her imagination it was even a ridiculous one, but to her reason, her judgment, it was completely a puzzle" (354). After this unexpected but not unwanted release, Edward's prompt proposal to Elinor and her acceptance of it is but natural. Talking about their mutual happiness, Jane Austen writes: "They were brought together by mutual affection, with the warmest approbation of their real friends; their intimate knowledge of each other seemed to make their happiness certain" (358).

Edward's attachment to Lucy which creates hostility between Edward and Elinor is to a large extent the outcome of Mrs. Ferrars faulty upbringing. Edward himself says that because he got no real love and affection and companionship at home and because he was given no active profession to engage his attention, he had "nothing in the world to do, but to fancy myself in love" (352). Yasmine Gooneratne puts Edward's situation in these words: "Edward Ferrars, 'a gentleman like and pleasing young man', is doomed by his dependence on his mother to low-spirits and dejection for years, until Lucy's marriage to his brother and Elinor's acceptance of him create in him 'such a genuine, flowing, grateful cheerfulness, as his friends had never witnessed in him before'³. Thus even parents can be held responsible for giving rise to those hostile feelings in the young ones which create barriers in the way of their happiness.

These socio-economic factors stand in the way of their happy union even when Lucy is no more a barrier between Edward and Elinor. This economic problem is ultimately resolved by Colonel Brandon's offer of Delaford living to Edward. Further support is given by Mrs. Ferrars who, feeling deceived by Robert's marrying Lucy, forgives Edward. She bestows a settlement of \$10,000/- upon him which enables Edward to marry and provide for a family. Thus all the circumstances which once created hostility between Elinor and Edward are now resolved and this enables them to come together with a proper understanding of their own individual selves as well as of each other.

REFERENCE

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3. Gooneratne, Yasmine. *Jane Austen*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Print.