

Reading Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* in the #MeToo Era

This essay examines Susan Warner's popular novel *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) through the lens of the #MeToo Movement. Warner's novel has long been scrutinized for its gender politics, sentimentality, and religious didacticism. Warner's contemporaries including Elizabeth Sewell and Charlotte Yonge disapproved of the novel for giving young girls unrealistic expectations about love. Although they raised the issue that "fascinatingly simple girls of ten or twelve are petted and caressed by respectable gentlemen of five-and-twenty or thirty," they criticized the novel more for "teaching little girls to expect a lover in any one who is good-natured to them" than in how the novel normalizes the behavior of sexual predators. More recent feminist critics such as Joanne Dobson, Mary Hiatt, and Jane Tompkins examine the sentimental novel in terms of its subversive feminism and note that the novel serves to train both the protagonist and the readers in the "cult of true womanhood" and how to submit to evangelical patriarchal authority. What both nineteenth century and contemporary critics fail to mention is that the novel essentially grooms Ellen for sexual assault.

This argument isn't without precedent in the #MeToo Movement, Rebecca Solnit argues that women are "groomed to be prey," and in many aspects, Warner's novel does exactly that through the many unwanted caresses and kisses forced upon Ellen during the novel. The didactic nature of the novel suggest young readers are also being groomed to accept unwelcome advances, and the many contemporary experiences shared through the MeToo hashtag illustrates that these grooming patterns have continued.