

# Jane Austen's Literary World:

## On *Persuasion*

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*Persuasion*, Jane Austen's last novel, was first published posthumously, with *Northanger Abbey*, in four volumes, in 1818. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot, the second daughter of Sir Walter Elliot, appears as an 'extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling';<sup>1)</sup> Frederick Wentworth, captain in the Navy, as a 'remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy.'<sup>2)</sup> Eight years ago, the heroine and hero above were deeply in love in vain, because Anne offered a sudden breach and forced Captain Wentworth to leave her; behind the offer there was a strict fact that she had been persuaded not to marry him by Lady Russell, the friend of Anne's late mother.

The plot of *Persuasion* begins with the heroine and hero's meeting again after the lapse of eight years. The author tries to describe variety of vibrations in Anne's female mind in detail; her bitterness of painful love is depicted beautifully in harmony with autumnal nature in the country of Somersetshire.

Virginia Woolf criticizes the novel: 'There is a peculiar beauty and a peculiar dullness in *Persuasion*.'<sup>3)</sup> Jane Austen had found herself in poor health by the time of completing the novel. In her attitude towards her own life and novel-writing there was happening a subtle change.

In this paper, through the pursuit of the process in which the heroine finally leads to the favorable goal with her inner feelings in secret, we would like to speculate on the following problems: the value of Anne's everlasting

attachment and, also, some characteristic aspects of *Persuasion* & its author.

## I

After their meeting again, Anne and Captain Wentworth come face to face repeatedly at social gatherings in the district. At one of such gatherings he becomes immensely popular among the people present, especially young ladies. While the people dance merrily, Anne plays the piano with her eyes sometimes filled with tears in secret. Surely has she decided to be calm, but her feelings are bound to be stirred by his words and behavior. As he doesn't know her subtle feelings at all, it is natural that he should try to behave politely towards her, but as for herself 'his cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than any thing.'<sup>4)</sup> Judging from such situations, she believes that he has still been angry with her who forced him to receive her one-sided breach. Her heart aches cruelly considering the furiousness in his heart.

Soon there happen two desirable events for Anne, which convey a slight suggestion to her that he may not possibly have, at least, hatred towards her; he shows her such warm-hearted kindnesses as he used to do in the old days. One of them is an event which happens at her sister Mary's home. When she is taking care of wounded little Charles, Mary's eldest son, his younger brother Walter comes to them in order to get some cakes in vain, putting himself on Anne's back in spite of her order and entreaty. She is too much bothered by him to look after the wounded boy, when Captain Wentworth present there kindly comes near to help her with releasing her from the naughty boy. Discovering who has helped her, she immediately cannot utter a word, even thank him. The author writes about Anne's sensation at that moment:

His kindness in stepping forward to her relief——the manner——the silence in which it had passed——the little particulars of the circumstance——with the conviction soon forced on her by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her thanks, and rather sought to testify that her conversation was the last of his wants, produced such a confusion of varying, but very

painful agitation, as she could not recover from, till enabled by the entrance of Mary and Miss Musgroves to make over her little patient to their cares, and leave the room.<sup>5)</sup>

Moreover the other happens in several days while the young people are taking a long walk. During the too long walk Anne feels rather tired, and just then the party catch sight of Admiral Croft's gig coming up. When it stops by them, Captain Wentworth is kind enough to ask the Crofts to drive Anne home. They are very willing to receive their brother's request, so he, 'without saying a word, turned to her, and quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage.'<sup>6)</sup>

At this stage Anne comes to acknowledge an aspect of his feelings: he cannot be unfeeling towards her even though he cannot forgive her. She recognizes his concern towards her, and, at the same time, his inner bitterness that he was once ill treated by her. In her mind there coexist two contradictory feelings — pleasure and pain. She, however, persuades herself that he surely tends to like her, even if not love her. This self-persuasion is good enough for her to encourage herself to get him to understand her true attachment.

## II

One November day young people among whom Anne is included make a trip to Lyme. While staying Lyme, Louisa, the second daughter of the Musgroves, gets seriously hurt on the head at the seashore. Not knowing what should be done with the wounded woman at the moment, they are thrown into confusion, and above all Captain Wentworth feels pained and perplexed to the greatest extent because he knows he is wholly in charge of the disaster. He is most completely at a loss what to do, out of his mind, but then he can come to his mind with Anne's shout 'A surgeon!' <sup>7)</sup> He as well as other young men asks her for all directions. This scene reveals an important aspect concerning Anne's character. Captain Wentworth relies upon her excellent ability to judge things; at this moment he subconsciously sets high value on her judgement. So we might regard this subconscious thought of his as a proof that his mind has been occupied by her to a considerable extent.

Anne is told by Mrs. Smith, the old friend in her school days, that Mr. Elliot, her cousin & the heir presumptive to her father, is in reality a pretentious hypocrite. She has so far had a good opinion of him, but now she finds out his identity. In spite of Lady Russell's sincere admiration for him, she definitely decides her attitude towards him. She does not accuse Lady Russell by any means of a poor reader of character, but she makes up her absolute mind not to be persuaded this time by her patroness.

In also Bath, where Anne's father takes a house, the heroine and hero have opportunities to meet each other. On a rainy day when they happen to meet at the confectioner's shop, she acknowledges that 'he was more obviously struck and confused by the sight of her, than she had ever observed before.'<sup>8)</sup> About her feelings at that moment, the author writes as follows:

All the overpowering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong surprise were over with her. Still, however, she had enough to feel! It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery.<sup>9)</sup>

At this stage Anne comes to recognize a rather psychological change in his attitude towards her; he apparently wishes to have any opportunities to talk with her. But, as the matter of fact, she cannot understand his present feelings, that is, whether he is really suffering much from disappointment or not. She does feel eager to know the truth of his feelings, so she wants to have more and more opportunities to meet and talk with him.

Luckily there comes such a good chance: the concert which is to be held in a few days. She wishes:

If she could only have a few minutes conversation with him again, she fancied she should be satisfied; and as to the power of addressing him she felt all over courage if the opportunity occurred.<sup>10)</sup>

Before the concert begins, he appears in fact, and scarcely has he been encouraged by her gentle greeting when he stops to 'make enquiries in return, in

spite of the formidable father and sister in the back ground.'<sup>11)</sup> ('formidable' is an expression of sarcastic humor.) Then he refers to the engagement between Louisa and Captain Benwick; the former is the very woman to whom Captain Wentworth has been rumored to get married by some people — Anne has put up with this rumor — while the latter, one of his friends, is the man who has been unhappy owing to the sudden death of his fiancée, Fanny Harville. Captain Wentworth criticizes Captain Benwick:

"... A man like him, in his situation ! With a heart pierced, wounded, almost broken ! Fanny Harville was a very superior creature; and his attachment to her was indeed attachment. A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman ! — He ought not — he does not."<sup>12)</sup>

From these words of his the readers could perceive that he subconsciously discloses his own inner feelings. Anne, to hear these words, is 'struck, gratified, confused, and beginning to breathe very quick, and feel an hundred things in a moment.'<sup>13)</sup> ('an' — according to the text *Persuasion*)<sup>\*</sup>

During the concert she is in a great happiness:

... — all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least; that anger, resentment, avoidance, were no more; and that they were succeeded, not merely by friendship and regard, but by the tenderness of the past. She could not contemplate the change as implying less. — He must love her.<sup>14)</sup>

She is convinced of his strong attachment for her. The author writes the novel from the point of the heroine's view, so the readers cannot look into the hero's inner soul. It is difficult to know what has brought him to express such words. We can only guess that it is partly because Mr. Elliot's approaches to Anne have urged him to tell of his feelings; the closer Mr. Elliot tries to come to Anne, the more Captain Wentworth is stirred in reality. Mr. Elliot is made good use of as a foil of Captain Wentworth.

Jane Austen dares to depict the heroine's painful love thoroughly. Anne is worried a lot and driven into suspension: 'How, in all the peculiar disadvantages of their respective situations, would he ever learn her real sentiments?'<sup>15)</sup> In due time of suspension she tries to convince herself:

"Surely, if there be constant attachment on each side, our hearts must understand each other ere long. ..." <sup>16)</sup>

After thorough description of Anne's bitterness, the author leads the readers to the climax scene.

In a room of the hotel, Anne and Captain Harville, the best friend of Captain Wentworth, talk with each other of general attachment between men and women, while Captain Wentworth is busy writing an urgent letter at a distance from them. She subconsciously comes to confess her own attachment towards Captain Wentworth; she is never conscious of being heard by him, telling:

"... All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when love is gone."<sup>17)</sup>

During expressing her belief she gradually gets excited, until she is most deeply moved with her heart too full and her breath too oppressed. Why can't her 'moving remarks'<sup>18)</sup> awake Captain Wentworth, who in fact has been listening to her with scrupulous care? Her words necessarily drives him to make a frank confession in a letter. Thus, at last, he has completely been persuaded by her, or rather we should say, she has entirely persuaded him. Jane Austen rewrote the present chapter soon after completing the novel.<sup>19)</sup> She wished for the most passionate climax.

### III

Though Anne was *persuaded* by Lady Russell, she has secretly loved Captain Wentworth. When they meet each other again, a flame of her at-

tachment for him begins to flicker in a subtle way. Then she comes to convince herself that she will continue to love him forever in any unfavorable conditions. At the last stage of the novel, her strong everlasting affectionate feelings finally *persuade* him who is in a great hesitation to confess his love to her. Besides she has *persuaded* the people around her, especially her father, sister, and also Lady Russell, so that they all can appreciate Captain Wentworth's character and economic advantage as well in the course of time.

In this consecutive process of '*persuade*', the readers could recognize that in writing *Persuasion* Jane Austen intended to place a high value on human beings' feelings or sensibility than on their sense. No doubt, the heroine Anne is a woman of respectable sense, but 'her feelings are not shaped by prudence; passion overcomes her';<sup>20)</sup> she is depicted as a passionate heroine: she is quite different from Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride And Prejudice*.

In this respect *Persuasion* has been criticized in the common way: *Persuasion* is apt to display a new aspect among the six novels by Jane Austen. J. B. Priestley describes Jane Austen as follows: 'Jane Austen ... had shown that by making use of tiny scraps of the most commonplace material it was possible to produce the most delightful fiction.'<sup>21)</sup> The world of her novels, it is natural, is an extremely small and stable one. But it seems that when she composed *Persuasion*, there might be occurring a change in her. Virginia Woolf writes: 'The writer is a little bored. She has grown too familiar with the ways of her world; she no longer notes them freshly .... Her attitude to life itself is altered.'<sup>22)</sup> She was changing: the way of her observation was shifting; it was less of facts and a little more of feelings as the critic above described it. In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen dared to make Anne be too passionate to control her sense.

In *Persuasion*, the point of view is on the heroine, and as a result, to our great regret, it is difficult or impossible for us to speculate on the inner stream of the hero's consciousness. On one hand, we acknowledge that Captain Wentworth must become awake to the fact that Anne is still worthy of his love; on the other hand, we possibly feel sympathy for his bitterness that he

cannot help hesitating to disclose his true feelings on account of a man's pride wounded by her. If we could be allowed to view him from a man's position, we would like to say that nothing is so severe and cruel to him as a selfish passion like Anne's: he was and is just at the mercy of her sensibility.

We, however, cannot but recognize the real, happy ending in the novel. Anne's everlasting love results in giving rebirth to Captain Wentworth's love: Love is the loadstone of love.

### Notes

- 1) III, IV, 26.  
The above abbreviation stands for VOLUME III, CHAPTER IV, page 26 in *Persuasion* by Jane Austen. The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen, ed. R.W. Chapman, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975. Hereafter to be abbreviated in the same way.
- 2) *ibid.*
- 3) Virginia Woolf, *Jane Austen. THE COMMON READER Vol. I*, p. 180; London: THE HOGARTH PRESS, 1975.
- 4) III, VIII, 72.
- 5) III, IX, 80.
- 6) III, X, 91.
- 7) III, XII, 110.
- 8) IV, VII, 175.
- 9) *ibid.*
- 10) IV, VII, 180.
- 11) IV, VIII, 181.
- 12) IV, VIII, 183.
- 13) *ibid.*
- 14) IV, VIII, 185-186.
- 15) IV, VIII, 191.
- 16) IV, X, 221.
- 17) IV, XI, 235.
- 18) Laurence Lerner, *Persuasion. Notes on Literature 'Jane Austen'*, p. 57; ed. H. Hirukawa; Eichosha Publishing Co., Ltd., 1977, from The British Council, 1977.
- 19) J.E. Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, pp. 177-191; ed. R.W. Chapman; Oxford Univ. Press, repr. 1951 (first edition, 1926); from the second edition (1871) of the original book (1817).



- 20) Laurence Lerner, *Persuasion*. *The same as 18) above.*, p. 52.
- 21) J.B. Priestley, *THE ENGLISH NOVEL*, p. 53; London: ERNEST BENN LTD., 1974 (first edition, 1927).
- 22) Virginia Woolf, *Jane Austen*. *The same as 3) above.*, pp. 180-181.