

# Jane Austen's Literary World: On *Persuasion* (2)

## Anne Elliot's Isolation & Sensibility

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(Received September 30, 1987)

One of very remarkable things Jane Austen (1775-1817) achieved in writing novels is to display a brilliant ideal, an idealistic picture of human character which is shown us as a heroine who attains a 'well-balanced harmony' between her 'sense' & 'sensibility.' In this respect, we could assert with some confidence that Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is possibly the best creature of all the heroines in the novels by Jane Austen.

*Persuasion*, published posthumously in 1818, is a love story: Anne Elliot, 'extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling,'<sup>1)</sup> re-meets Frederic Wentworth, a captain in the Navy, eight years after they parted from each other through her own active breach of the engagement to him, and presently acknowledges her permanent attachment towards him, continuing to love him passionately in secret into the happy ending. The author tries to describe in detail her bitterness of painful love, in harmony with autumnal beauty in the countryside of Somersetshire: 'There is a peculiar beauty and a peculiar dullness in *Persuasion*,'<sup>2)</sup> says Virginia Woolf in her writing.

When we speculate on the nature of her painful love, we cannot but acknowledge the great difference between her and the heroines in other works — Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride And Prejudice*, Emma Woodhouse in *Emma*, etc. The difference seems to lie in the way of adjustment of 'sense' and 'sensibility' belonging to each heroine; in the case of Anne Elliot, the element of 'sensibility' is rather thicker than that of 'sense' compared with Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, etc. In this paper, we would like to speculate on the following

problems: on the characteristics found in Anne Elliot's 'sensibility' with which she lives a 'solitary' life, keeping her affection of Captain Wentworth in secret, and moreover on Jane Austen's techniques in the plot of the novel with regard to her favorite heroine's 'sensibility', etc.

### **1. Anne Elliot In Isolation**

In the life situation of each heroine, we easily acknowledge, there is the great difference between Anne Elliot and the other heroines; Anne Elliot alone is exposed to the outstanding situation of solitude or isolation from other characters through the work. Her isolated state lasts to a decisive extent to the final stage of the novel until she gets her engagement to Captain Wentworth.

To begin with, her decisive isolation is found out among her own family — her father, elder sister and younger sister. Sir Walter, her father, is depicted as a snob who has special fun just in reading the Baronetage. In the novel he is the very person that is typical of the pride of the Elliots, the stanch pride in the family excellence of his in social status in the eighteenth century. He is so pompous a character that he is of disposition to criticize other people in terms of their social status or family, their fortune, and, strange to say, their features in appearance. Between such father and Anne, we readers cannot even find any piece of father-daughter love; we never find such a father-daughter relation between them as those between Elizabeth Bennet & her father and between Emma Woodhouse & her father.

Elizabeth Elliot, Anne's unmarried elder sister, is also depicted as the same type of a snob as their father. Her cool attitude towards Anne in daily life doesn't give us any impression of warm feelings towards Anne though she is her senior in the sisters' relation; in everyday life, Elizabeth is not a friend of Anne's, either, with whom Anne can talk about her inner problems. Mary Musgrove, Anne's married younger sister, has a rather better attachment for her, but because of her slight lack of intelligence, she is also one of the people who pride themselves, to a considerable extent, on the Elliots' status in the society. Besides she is a woman of selfishness and has a disposition not to take other people's feelings into consideration. So there seems to be little warm-hearted communication between the two ladies. Thus Anne is completely isolated from all her family; she is in

a thorough solitude in her daily life.

In the story there appears another lady close to Anne, called Lady Russell. She is Anne's late mother's best friend, her patroness in reality and only a person who seems to understand solitary Anne, but it is clear that from this prudent, seemingly overweening character, too, Anne is situated in the state of isolation. Lady Russell appears in *Persuasion* as the very person that persuaded Anne to break off her engagement to Captain Wentworth, but we cannot regard her as a character who plays a prominent part in favor of Anne in the whole story; she 'is depicted as a "sensible, deserving woman," but does nothing very sensible or deserving from beginning to end.' <sup>3)</sup> She also has the personal quality to put a high value upon common prudence as a highly-ranked person in the society, especially upon the family status and fortune. She cannot appreciate good points in Captain Wentworth because of her measure of judgment in people, while Anne believes in them through her passionate feelings. In this respect Lady Russell has the same quality of prudence, as it were, 'common sense' of such ostentatious people of pride—as Anne's own father and two sisters.

Among the people who sport such sort of common prudence in judgment of other people, Anne alone stands out exclusively in her quality of personality; she is created as a heroine who has, by nature, a kind of 'passionate feelings' or 'sensibility', as well as common 'sense' or 'prudence' like those of the people's around her. It is indeed this 'sensibility' that forces her to be situated in the decisive isolation from all the people close to her.

In addition, it may be needless to say that she is isolated from the hero, Captain Wentworth, for her psychological shift about her ardent attachment for him in the midst of isolation from him is the main plot of *Persuasion*; it is the central story of this novel for her to break up by degrees the seemingly unrepairable isolation from him, sometimes in agony and sometimes in pleasure, and finally reach the happiest situation in which she can regain his true affection towards her.

We could assert that in this novel Anne's 'sensibility', which is not likely to be understood at all by the people around her, is intentionally put forward by Jane Austen, who attempts to adjust Anne's 'secret but passionate feelings' with her 'ordinary prudence.' We might safely say that she tries to display the

well-balanced adjustment between 'sense' and 'sensitivity' of a human being, in the figure of the heroine, Anne Elliot.

## 2. Anne Elliot's Sensibility

After the interval of eight years, Anne meets Captain Wentworth, who visits to stay with the couple of the Crofts, his elder sister and her husband, during his long holidays, who live in Anne's own house borrowed from Sir Walter because of the financial pinch of the Elliots. Anne and Captain Wentworth come face to face repeatedly at social gatherings held in the district. Before his appearance in the district, she has made up her mind to be calm in seeing him; she has decided not to be stirred by him, because she fully admits the very fact that she once made him give up their engagement. She has firmly intended to behave as a woman of sense, whereas her feelings are, against her will, more stirred by him than she was afraid of their being done: 'his cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than anything.'<sup>4)</sup> It is natural, she imagines, that he should feel angry with her who gave him the one-sided breach. She feels bitterly sad at the thought of the long-lasting anger or furiousness in his heart. At this stage, Anne appears to be a woman who is full of 'sense' — common sense — and, at the same time, she begins to form a wish that she would like to reduce his feelings of anger even to a little bit of extent, even though she cannot wipe them out.

Afterwards Anne happens to have lucky opportunities to make a guess at his feelings towards her; two desirable incidents can convey to her a slight suggestion about his inner heart. One of them takes place at Mary's home. When she is looking after wounded little Charles, who is Mary's eldest son, his younger brother Walter comes near her so as to get some cakes in vain, putting himself on Anne's back never to get himself down in spite of her repeated entreaty. Completely bothered by his clinging, she is suddenly relieved from the naughty boy by the kind help of someone — in fact, by Captain Wentworth, who happens to be there. She cannot utter a word, even thank him, at the moment. Moreover, she comes across the other preferable incident during the walk with young people. Walking too long, Anne feels rather tired, when Captain Wentworth is so kind as to ask the Crofts, who have just come near the walking party by gig, to drive her

home. Hesitating his abrupt kindness, she obeys his remarkable suggestion.

Through these two incidents Anne naturally manages to guess his feelings to her: she guesses that he cannot be unfeeling towards her even though he cannot forgive her at the bottom of his heart. On the one hand, she feels pleased with his unexpectedly kind-hearted behavior, and on the other hand, she feels worried about his inner injury. It is at this stage that there occur strange feelings in her; she dares to persuade herself that he seems to 'like' her, rather than to 'dislike' or 'hate' her. She subconsciously puts her selfish feelings forward, imagining she may possibly be able to expect him to perceive her affection for him in the near future. This self-persuasion of hers, which consists of the most unilateral, selfish feelings of imagination, discloses an aspect of her 'sensibility.' Out of common people's good sense, you recognize that it should not be forgiven with ease for you to wish to regain your lover's affectionate feelings which you once neglected yourself. In the case of Anne, however, she persuades herself that he tends to 'like' her, even if not 'love' her. We might safely say here that her excellent 'sense' or 'prudence' has been beaten by her 'sensibility' or 'selfish feelings.' Admitting that her affection towards him has remained unchangeable for eight years, can she be sane when she dares to wish she would make him turn to and love her again? Isn't it 'self-delusive belief' from her 'sensibility' that encourages her to get back his special affection towards her?

Jane Austen intends to give Anne several more opportunities in which she can gradually approach his inner feelings. During the stay in Lyme, which Anne and other young people visit for pleasure, Louisa, the second daughter of the Musgroves, gets seriously injured in a fainted state, when Anne notices he is liable to rely upon her with regard to the first aid of the wounded young lady. Moreover, on a rainy day when Anne meets him at the confectioner's shop in Bath, she is sure that he feels jealousy of Mr. Elliot present with her, who is her cousin & the heir presumptive to her father, because Captain Wentworth suspects her, she assures herself at her own convenience, of her engagement to Mr. Elliot. But as the matter of fact, she cannot take hold of his true feelings; she cannot even make sure whether he is still suffering from his inner wound or he has forgiven and turned to her. She does want to have more opportunities to see and talk with him so that she can grasp the truth in his inner heart.

In a few days she has a good chance to perceive, to a considerable extent, his inner heart at the concert hall. Before the concert begins, the two people have an opportunity to talk with each other in the most favorable atmosphere that might have been created between them since they met each other again. Then he refers to his good friend Captain Benwick's engagement to Louisa, criticizing his friend's attitude towards the sudden engagement; (according to him, his friend, in fact, has been in bitterness because of the death of his fiancée, Fanny Harville.) He criticizes him rather passionately:

“...A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman! — He ought not — he does not.”<sup>5)</sup>

These words of his are nothing but the disclosure of his feelings towards Anne in person before him. The moment she hears them, she is ‘struck, gratified, confused, and beginning to breathe very quick, and feel an hundred things in a moment.’<sup>6)</sup> It is at this stage that she has at last grasped his affectionate feelings towards her in the true sense.

At the scene of the concert, she is at a considerable height of ‘sensibility,’ because she has forgot for joy that it may be possible from another point of view that his statement is one merely as a general opinion in the common world.

Jane Austen dare not lead the story to a happy ending at a rapid pace; she tries to describe Anne's painful love thoroughly; under an excessive affliction, Anne is gradually driven into the state of suspension: her ‘prudence’ or good ‘sense’ prevents her from plunging into love, while her ‘passion’ or ‘sensibility’ stirs her to plunge into it. After the suspension, Anne manages to decide her attitude through her ‘prudence.’

“Surely, if there be constant attachment on each side, our hearts must understand each other ere long...”<sup>7)</sup>

At this stage, her ‘sense’ seems to have defeated her ‘sensibility,’ even if superficially.

At the climax scene, we should pay special attention to Ann's ‘sensibility.’ In the room where Anne and Captain Harville, Captain Wentworth's best friend, are talking with each other about problems of attachment between men and women, there happens to stay Captain Wentworth, writing a letter at the desk a little bit away from them. During their talk, she claims her ideas as follows:

“...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>8)</sup>

Uttering these words, she begins to get excited by degrees, until she comes to be deeply moved, with her heart on the point of explosion and with her breath oppressed on account of her unusual, as it were, abnormal excitement: the existence of Captain Wentworth there has possibly made her excited so much. These ‘moving remarks’<sup>9)</sup> of hers are the very expression of her own attachment for him. At this stage, her ‘passion’ or ‘sensibility’ reaches the peak: her ‘sensibility’ has broken up his hesitation into courageous behavior of handing over a confessing note to her.

On the one hand, she is a lady of ‘sense’ or ‘prudence,’ but on the other hand, she is that of ‘passion’ or ‘sensibility.’ Judging from her words and behavior, the latter element of hers is even more impressive than the former one; ‘her feelings are not shaped by prudence; passion overcomes her’;<sup>10)</sup> it is vividly clear that she is depicted as a very passionate heroine. In this respect, she is quite different from the other heroines, such as Emma Woodhouse (*Emma*) and Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride And Prejudice*), etc.

Anne’s passion finally comes to persuade Captain Wentworth, but this passionate aspect of her ‘sensibility’ seems to take on the quality of ‘selfishness’ with which she persuades herself that she will keep her love of him whom she once discarded by means of her unilateral wrong; just in this sense, he could be called a victim that is at the mercy of her ‘selfish sensibility.’ Even after their mutual understanding, she talks to him about the incident in the past:

“...and I must believe that I was right, ...that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend (Lady Russell) whom you will love better than you do now. ...I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. ... But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience...”<sup>11)</sup>

She tries to appreciate her ‘sense’, a ‘strong sense of duty’ shown in the past. Considering that this story leads to a happy ending, the impression that he is her slavish victim may be lessened considerably, but some readers would possibly like

him to play a little more protestant part against her selfish feelings; he is too obediently decorated a hero, as it were, a doll in the show window. (In *Persuasion*, the point of view of the author is on the heroine Anne, and consequently it is difficult or impossible to speculate on the inner side of Wentworth's consciousness. )

However, we would like to suggest that he should have been depicted as such a hero as experiences a few more love affairs in addition to the slight one with Louisa, or makes the temporary engagement to her; (Jane Austen depicted him as too innocent, good-natured a hero, neglecting his 'pride' or 'obstinate feelings' as a man.) If asked this question, some male readers might answer it in the affirmative, because the plot is structured just in favor of Anne — especially in favor of Anne's 'selfish feelings.' Possibly the author intends that Captain Wentworth should not be a bad or ill-natured man at all, except that he makes inconsiderate efforts to love Louisa.

In the case of the plot in which Captain Wentworth might be depicted as a little worse hero, it is natural that Anne's suspension should be too much severer and bitterer because of her permanent affection for him, but on the other hand, the impression that her 'sensibility' is liable to take on too much 'selfishness' could be diminished, because his pride as a man which was once damaged completely is largely respected by the author, which would surely give a lot of satisfaction to some male readers: but as it is, *Persuasion* might be a more satisfactory novel for female readers, rather than for male readers.

### 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) Virginia Woolf: *Jane Austen. THE COMMON READER Vol. I*, p. 180; London: THE HOGARTH PRESS, 1975.

- 3) Francis Warre Cornish, *Jane Austen. ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS*, p. 196; London: MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED, 1914.

- 4) III, VIII, 72.

- 5) IV, VIII, 183.

- 6) *ibid.*
- 7) IV, X, 221.
- 8) IV, XI, 235.
- 9) Laurence Lerner, *Persuasion*. Notes on Literature 'Jane Austen', p. 57; ed. H. Hirukawa; Eichosha Publishing Co., Ltd., 1977, from The British Council, 1977.
- 10) Laurence Lerner, *Persuasion*. *The same as 9) above.*, p. 52.
- 11) IX, XI, 246.