

Discussion Topics for *Persuasion*, Vol I:

*Persuasion* is one of the Austen books that telegraphs a central character flaw in the title. Is Anne still too persuadable when we meet her? Does she have any flaws at all, other than having lost her "bloom"? Is this a problem?

Related question: WAS Anne too persuadable or just young and cautious? Remember Fanny Price's mother!

What are the factors in Anne's life that made her so persuadable? What if her mother had lived—might she have made a difference?

Jane Austen originally named her novel: *The Elliots* whereas her brother named it *Persuasion*. Would the novel read any differently with its original name?

Why is Mrs. Clay in the early part—what purpose does she serve before we find her in Volume 2?

*Northanger Abbey* looks back—to the world of 18c romance novels and gothic intrigue whereas *Persuasion* looks forward to a world (in novels by the likes of George Eliot, George Gissing, and Trollope) where the two traditions, the man who succeeds because of his own efforts—privateer, merchant, doctor—and the man who succeeds simply because of his social class is in tension.

*Persuasion* is a novel of self-persuasion; that is, it deals with how individuals persuade themselves into their ideas about who others are as opposed to who the other really is. Thus, persuasion is tied into perception. Furthermore, it is a novel of self-persuasion about how one tries to see oneself.

*Persuasion* is a novel of delayed gratification...(I missed the rest of this).

One might compare and contrast the different kinds of families found in *Persuasion*: the Elliots, the Musgroves, and the naval families (Harvilles, Benwick, Crofts).

The narrator in *Persuasion* is far more even-handed than the narrator in *Northanger Abbey*. (mtk—how much are you aware of a narrator in *Persuasion*, even-handed or not?). Austen gives us clues about Frederick's feelings for Anne buried in the narration.

In chapter 8, page 61-62 "At that time to be at sea. . .when I had still the same luck in the Mediterranean," Captain Wentworth is describing his first ship, the *Asp* and his subsequent one, the *Laconia*, to the Musgrove family with Anne listening. Notice instances of his coded language. My question is whether Frederick means this language only for the group listening, mostly for himself, or consciously for Anne?

As opposed to *Northanger Abbey*, all the characters in *Persuasion* are believable. But the one instance that was hard to understand occurred when Anne notices Walter Elliot in Lyme Regis and judges him on his attractiveness. This seems superficial, a Sir Walter Elliot or Elizabeth Elliot reaction, not an Anne one. [Perhaps his clear appreciation of her looks (remember she is now “blooming” again) affects her as she has been such a non-person to all. (Later we discuss how this moment helps Frederick really to see her, a step toward their future.)

We discussed whether Austen’s description of Mrs. Musgrove chap 8, p.63-64 with “her large fat sighings” and as “a large bulky figure” was unflattering, mean-spirited, or was realistic and actually positive. We also talked about Austen’s humor at the expense of “Poor Dick” and how FW wanted to get rid of him as soon as he could...Another instance of Austen’s humor is on p 103 (chap 12) after Louisa’s fall and Henrietta’s fainting: “many [workmen and boatmen] were collected near them, to be useful if wanted, at any rate, to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report.”

What power did women have in the world of Austen, in her novels? In Vol 1, Anne is Cinderella and like seemingly has no power. Ditto Austen herself because power came from social status. But power actually comes from understanding exactly what one wants, in Anne’s case namely Frederick Wentworth. For Austen, power comes from her pen, from her knowing exactly what she wants.

(I may have missed some of this or added to it inaccurately).

Consider the role of Lady Russell—in Anne’s past and her present (and in vol 2). Even Henrietta wishes for Lady Russell’s persuasive influence so that Charles Hayter could have a “living” that would make their marriage more comfortable economically.

Opening page: Sir Walter is so proud of his ancestry and wants to think of himself as an aristocrat and yet he is not an Earl, a Lord but a Baronet, a title one could buy. Moreover, he is a baronet with serious money problems, all his own fault!

We discussed some of the ways Austen makes Anne sympathetic to the reader? Her sisters’ treatment of her—Elizabeth’s dismissal of her as a member of the family and Mary’s demands on her. Austen shows Anne as listening to all, taking care of everyone’s feelings, but without anyone listening to her.

What are the moments that made us aware that Frederick W still had strong feelings for Anne? awkwardness in room when he finds her alone; his removal of the child from her back; his wondering whether she dances; his interest in her having turned Charles Musgrove down even though Lady Russell thought it a good match; his awkwardness at

the piano; his noticing her exhaustion and handing her into the Crofts' carriage whereas no one else noticed; and especially his glance at her after he notices Walter Elliot's admiration—here, his own perception of her is strengthened by its reflection in someone's else's perception.

Lots of discussion about Mary's reporting to Anne that Capt Wentworth noticed how changed Anne was. Some wondered if that was what he actually said—notice who reported it, the sister who can never be positive about anyone but herself!

Discussion of Mary's whining and selfish self-centeredness and how well Anne put up with it. Mary was both the most irritating character in the novel (so far) and would have been the most fun to act.

Our perceptions are colored by Anne's erasing her own expectations—because of her family's treatment and because of what she imagines Frederick feels about her. She seems passive, resigned, sad, powerless.

And yet, Anne has many strengths—she is the responsible member of her family (does all the packing for the move to Bath), she is the one everyone confides in; she is the one everyone looks to in an emergency. Is Anne too perfect?

And yet, she seems to have no awareness of this power, no self-confidence because of it. And yet, she has a "backbone"—is able to turn down Charles Musgrove's proposal despite Lady Russell. She is mature in that she protects others feelings (she doesn't overrule Mary's determination to remain with the hurt Louisa). She is competent, not bossy; wise about not getting involved in taking sides with her sister Mary or with the Musgroves, wise in not opining.

Both Anne's and Frederick's self-persuasions protect themselves from further hurt and humiliation.

We readers see the world of England changing, not just because of success coming to the self-made men (privateers) rather than to the aristocrat but also through the less decorous, less coded behavior of the younger generation: the Musgrove daughters...

Our discussion ended with some questions about publishing in Austen's time vs. later in the 19c where instead of two (or three) volume novels, one read serializations printed monthly in Cornhill Magazine (Dickens, etc)

We want to locate the two canceled chapters and will, I hope, follow the suggestion that we read them and discuss in detail what Austen replaced them with. Lastly, throughout our whole discussion, we admired many, many instances of Austen's control over narration, tone, characterization, and plot.