

Persuasion

Jane Austen's *Persuasion* depicts a young woman's struggles with love, friendship and family. Anne Elliot who is pretty, intelligent and amiable, had some years before been engaged to a young naval officer, Frederick Wentworth, but had been persuaded by her trusted friend Lady Russell to break off the engagement, because of his lack of fortune and a misunderstanding of his easy nature. The breach had brought great unhappiness to Anne. Pre-Victorian England offers a romantic and whimsical backdrop for the characters.

When the story opens Anne is twenty seven, and the bloom of her youth is gone. She is the daughter of Sir Walter Elliot, a spendthrift baronet and widower, with a swollen sense of social importance and personal elegance. His eldest daughter, Elizabeth, haughty and unmarried, is now twenty-nine. Captain Wentworth, who has had a successful career and is now prosperous, is thrown again into Anne's society by the letting of Kellynch (her family estate) to his sister and brother-in-law. Throughout the years Anne has remained unshaken in her love for Wentworth. Thus Austen creates a emotional fairy tale which keeps you dreaming and makes you believe that true love never dies.

Austen presents her strongest feminist character in this novel. The roles of hero and heroin are reversed and men and woman are presented as moral equals. It is interesting that the most explicit feminist protests by Austen in her novels all have to do with literature. In *Persuasion* Anne Elliot debates Captain Harville on who loves longest, women or men:

Captain Harville:

"I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. ... But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men."

Anne Elliot:

"Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything." (Austen, Page 222)

As the story unfolds, Anne frees herself from familial authority through her relationship with other strong women. In Austen's time, there was no real way for young women of the "genteel" classes to strike out on their own or be independent. Professions, the universities, politics etc. were not open to women. Therefore most women could not get money except by marrying for it or inheriting it.

The beauty of this novel lies in its portrayal of the understated virtues of constancy, integrity and the balance of qualities that make for a complete character. The contrast between Anne's values and those shallow and duplicitous qualities of her father, her cousin and others is striking but always subtle. Anne is a mature and independent heroine who frees herself from the authority of her genealogically obsessed father through her bond with other female characters, however imperfect, such as Lady Russell and the remarkable Mrs. Croft.

In this, Jane Austen's last complete work, satire and ridicule take a milder form, and the tone is more grave and tender.

