

## **Social Satire in Jane Austen's Persuasion**

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### **Abstract:**

In Persuasion, Jane Austen offers a penetrating critique of the standards of the British class system. She criticizes a system based on social distinctions and definitions like “Superior” and “Inferior.”

Through irony and satire, she vividly shows Victorian class rigidity and its traditional values.

This paper aims at showing that through her realistic portrayal of families and characters; Austen manages to capture the major defects of her social circle and sets to expose them one by one.

الهجاء الاجتماعي في رواية "الإقناع"  
للروائية جين أوستن

تقدم الروائية جين أوستن نظره نقدية ثاقبة للنظام الاجتماعي البريطاني و تتوجه بالنقد إلى ذلك النظام الذي يرتكز على التمايز و المسميات الطبقيّة: "الأرفع" و "الأدنى" مقاماً في المجتمع. تستخدم أوستن التعابير الساخرة و الهجاء لإظهار صرامة المجتمع الفكتوري و قيمه التقليدية.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى أظهار نجاح الروائية في تسليط الضوء على العلل الرئيسية في مجتمعها من خلال عرضها الواقعي للشخصيات و عزمها على كشف تلك العلل الواحدة تلو الأخرى.

Jane Austen is a master in comedy and satire as well as irony. Her favourite targets are fools, snobs, hypocrites, and ill-mannered people whom in general are given plenty of scope in Persuasion. Austen's irony, however, “allows her to poke fun at people and ideas through overstatement and understatement”<sup>1</sup>

There is irony in many episodes in which the character, through his or her own thoughts, has told the reader more than the other characters know. There is also irony in character situation, as when Anne tells her father and sister that she has seen Mr. Elliot at Lyme “Anne mentioned the glimpses she had had of him at Lyme, but without being much attended to ... they could not listen to her description of him. They were describing him themselves; Sir Walter especially”. Jane Austen shows us how Sir Walter judged people “He did justice to his very gentleman-like appearance, his air of elegance and fashion, his good-shaped face,

his sensible eyes ....” We also see how Sir Walter was thrilled when “Mr. Elliot appeared to think that he (Sir Walter) was looking exactly as he had done when they last parted” ten years ago.

Other qualities of Sir Walter such as snobbery and selfishness are shown in (ch.17), we see him horrified by the discovery of Anne’s visits to Mrs. Smith. ““A Mrs. Smith’ a mere Mrs. Smith, an everyday Mrs. Smith, of all people and names in the world”.

Sir Walter, who is shown to have all the appurtenances of refinement, is actually vulgar in his obsession with his own appearance and importance. Through Sir Walter, Austen expresses her disgust at self-importance. He shows no awareness that his comfortable way of life has recently been menaced by the Napoleonic wars; Admiral Croft fought at Trafalgar but that does not improve Sir Walter’s opinion of him or naval men in general because the navy “ raises men to honours which their fathers and grand fathers never dreamt of” (ch.3). Sir Walter’s way of life is exposed in the novel as being singularly self-centered and purposeless.

He is shown as a person who lives for pleasure and the gratification of his vanity .This is shown through a comparison with Admiral Croft, a man who has earned his social position by his bravery. In ch.13 Admiral Craft and Sir Walter’s tenant, tells Anne that he has moved all the large mirrors out of his dressing room and says of her father, “I should think he must be rather a dressy man for his time of life.” The Admiral’s dignity provides an implicit comment on Sir Walter throughout the novel.<sup>2</sup>

Sir Walter hesitates to introduce the Admiral to his aristocratic relation Lady Dalrymple but does “ think and talk a great deal more about the Admiral, than the Admiral ever thought or talked about him”(ch.18).

Through Sir Walter, Jane Austen shows us the fact that vain men are responsive to flattery. Mr. Shepherd and Mrs. Clay have few problems with him. Mrs. Clay’s use of flattery in (ch.3) shows how she manages to convince Sir Walter, whose rejection of the idea of renting his house to a navy officer is based on looks and social rank. Mrs. Clay’s flattery nourishes Sir Walter’s vanity saying

*I have long been convinced , though every profession is necessary and honorable in its turns , it is only the lot of those who are not obliged to follow any , who can live in a regular way in the country ... It is only their lot I say , to hold the blessings of health and a good appearance to the utmost...*

As for Mr. Shepherd, he convinced Sir Walter though making it appear that the Admiral and his life “ranked nothing beyond the happiness of being the tenants of Sir Walter Elliot.” Though vain and snobbish on the one hand, he is shown to be willing to be obsequious to those of higher rank, to whom he can attach himself. When lady

Dalrymple and her daughter come to Bath, Anne has no doubt that her father is demeaning himself. However, his only thought is that through his actions he can increase his social standing in the community. And so Sir Walter forces his distant cousin lady Dalrymple to acknowledge their relationship, together with her daughter, Miss Carteret, who is “so plain and awkward, that she would never have been tolerated in Camden- place but for her birth” (ch.16). This makes Sir Walter’s actions more grotesque as he is at once servile and affected:

*lady Dalrymple , lady Dalrymple’ was the rejoicing sound; and with all the eagerness compatible with anxious elegance, Sir Walter and his two ladies stepped forward to meet her. (ch.20)*

Much of the humour in Persuasion is in the character rather than in situation. Characters react to one another and their resulting comments make the reader realize that there is much for laughter in what they are doing.

The mockery of false taste is more subtly conceived and finds its expression in a more intricate pattern of self-deception. The key to this mockery is hidden in the episode on the Cobb, which, to the casual eye, looks so disconcertingly like a perfunctory bringing about of the conventional catastrophe-a clumsy contrivance to increase the tension to breaking-point. The young Musgroves, with Anne Elliot and their friends at Lyme walk out along the Cobb, and Louisa exhilarated by the attention of Captain Wentworth , begins to play childish pranks and insists that he shall “sump her from one ledge to the other; “ ... She was too precipitate by half a second ,she fell on the pavement of the lower Cobb ,and was taken up lifeless” (ch.12) . This irony is no mere symptom; it is the very tongue in which Persuasion is written. Before the episode, in the course of Anne’s stay at Uppercross cottage , a slender thread of ironical suggestions has begun to weave itself into the pattern of the novel : The Musgroves of the ‘Great House’ are to visit the Musgroves of the ‘cottage’ and Louisa with laborious youthful tact, explains that by bringing their harp, she and Henrietta hope to lighten the visit, and raise their mother’s spirit: “... She is thinking so much of poor Richard! And we agreed it would be best to have the harp, for it seems to amuse her more than the piano-forte” (ch.6) .

Characters are presented as part of their group and through conversation, the thoughts and attitudes of life are revealed : Mary thinks that Charles Hayter should not aspire to marry a Musgrove because he comes from a poor family and the Musgroves now have a ‘baronet’s daughter’ among them ; her “And, pray, who is Charles Hayter?” anticipates Sir Walter’s stricture on Mrs. Smith because he and Elizabeth

wish to be part of the aristocracy and they will not risk introducing whom they consider a lower rank to lady Dalrymple.<sup>3</sup>

Anne shows a counter attitude: she is unrepresentative of her group and is outspoken about the meaninglessness of social groups that are so important to the rest of her family:

*Anne was ashamed. Had Lady Dalrymple and her daughter even been very agreeable, she would have been ashamed of the agitation they created, but they were nothing ... “My idea of good company, Mr. Elliot, is the company of clever, well-informed people (ch.16).*

Through juxtaposing the leisured gentry and the active naval officers, Jane Austen shows her ideas towards these two classes. This is made clear in Anne’s comparison between Mr. Elliot’s genteel manner and Captain Wentworth’s impetuosity:

*she felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or a hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped”.(ch.17)*

Another type or group depicted by Jane Austen is that of the Musgroves. They define by contrast the values of both the gentry and the naval officers. They are not snobbish and in some respects resemble the naval group in their warmth and hospitality.<sup>4</sup> In ch.14 Jane Austen uses an unusual amount of descriptive detail to convey the warmth of their family life :

*On one side was a table, occupied by some chattering, cutting up silk and gold paper; and on the other were tressels and trays, ...the whole completed by a roaring Christmas fire ... Mr. Musgrove made a point of paying his respects to Lady Russel and sat close to her for ten minutes, talking with a very raised voice, but, from the clamour of the children on his knees, ... It was a fine family-piece.( ch.14)*

Yet they are also criticized. Charles “did nothing with much zeal, but sport; and his time was other wise trifled a way, without benefit from books, or anything else.” (ch.6)

The Musgroves are lesser snobs and Charles Hayter is given Henrietta’s hand in marriage though he is her social inferior and Anne comments to Charles Musgrove: “Your father and mother seem so totally free from all those ambitions feelings which have led to so much misconduct and misery” (ch.22). There is also a considerable satirical comment about the relationship between Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay, but it is not recognized by the other characters until near the end of the novel.

As for his sisters they are described in(ch.5) as “modern mind and manners” and are commented on indirectly by Admiral Croft: “ And very nice young ladies they both are; I hardly know one from the other.” (ch.10)

Jane Austen may not harass her stupid characters with practical jokes, but her verbal play with them can sometimes be shocking. In Persuasion, which is regarded as the tenderest of her novels, she can write:

*The real circumstances of this pathetic-piece of family history were that the Musgroves had had the ill fortune of a very troublesome hopeless son, and the good fortune to lose him before he reached his twentieth year; that he had been sent to sea because he was stupid and unmanageable on shore; that he had been very little cared for at many a time by his family , though quite as much as he deserved , seldom heard of, and scarcely at all regretted , whom the intelligence of his death abroad had worked its way to upper cross , two years before.( ch.8)*

As to Mrs. Musgrove’s grief for her dead son she writes :

*Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportion. A large bulky figure has a good right to be in deep affliction as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain- which taste cannot tolerate- which ridicule will seize (ch.8).*

Self-obsession was not a quality satirized in the insensitive characters for Jane Austen shows us that even a sensitive character as Anne is self-obsessed . This is shown in ch.19 as Anne and Lady Russel approach captain Wentworth in Bath and we see from Anne’s point of view:

*She could thoroughly comprehend the sort of fascination he must possess over Lady Russell’s mind , the difficulty it must be for her to withdraw her eyes, the astonishment she must be feeling that eight or nine years should have passed over him and in foreign climes and in active service too, without robbing him of personal grace.*

When we discover that Lady Russel has only been peering out of the window to look at some special curtains, we can share in Anne’s mortification, and at the same time , understand that what is of vital importance to one man many be seen quite differently by mother.

Her acid comparison of Sir Walter to a valet in the first chapter provided the sum and substance of Sir Walter Elliot’s character:

*Few women could think more of their appearance than he did; nor could the valet of any new made lord be more*

*delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessings of beauty as inferior only to the blessings of baronetcy: and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion. ( ch.11)*

Miss Austen's sharpness also shown through minor characters as we see in a conversation in (ch.8) with Mrs Musgrove. Mrs Croft assures Mrs Musgrove that Bermuda and the Bahamas are not called the West Indies. Mrs. Musgrove had not a word to say in dissent; she could not accuse herself of having ever called them anything in the whole course of her life.

As in her previous novels, Austen's Persuasion explores the relationship between social illness and independence. However, in this novel, she makes it clear that a strong character is not enough to keep a woman free from social defects. What will assure her well-being, however, is the combination of an independent spirit and an independent income. Austen sees "wealth as liberating women, bringing them privilege that men...had always enjoyed."<sup>5</sup> Austen in this work portrays society where, despite conservative resistance, change is underway. She criticizes the system of entail and inheritance.

Austen seems to have been disheartened by the decay of England's aristocracy. The exploration of the innocent protagonist of each novel further widen her core ethics, and the relation of the imposing culture of her immediate family and surrounding social class gives a clear image of the prominence of class distinction and the apparent emptiness of the aristocratic society that in reality existed in Austen's own life.<sup>6</sup>

Austen's last heroine, Anne Elliott, portrays the evolution Austen underwent to achieve the conclusive statement of social justice, and individual acceptance of others in a diverse class of people. Ann's initial "persuasion" to at least partially submit to the influence of the aristocratic society lessen, as begins to fully comprehend the value of the emotional wealth of true friends, and true love. She found a superior humanity that did not exist in her own world.<sup>7</sup>

One can see the change of attitude towards Anne's marriage with captain Wentworth. Lady Russel acknowledges that she has been mistaken about the character of Captain Wentworth. Elizabeth changes her attitude in ch.22 and smiles to Captain Wentworth and invites him to the party. In this chapter, the change is explained:

*The truth was, that Elizabeth had been long enough in Bath, to understand the importance of a man of such an air and appearance as his . The past was nothing .The present was that Captain Wentworth would move about well in her drawing room.*

As for Sir Walter:

*Through he had no affection for Anne, and no vanity flattered, to make him happy on the occasion, was very far from thinking it a bad match for her. On the contrary when he saw more of Captain Wentworth, saw him repeatedly by daylight and eyed him well, he was very much struck by his personal claims, and felt that his superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against his superiority of rank; and all this assisted by his well-sounding name, enable Sir Walter at last to prepare his pen with a very good grace for the insertion of the marriage in the volume of honour.*

The social criticism in Persuasion gives the impression that Jane Austen was personally involved in the social phenomena, which she describes. The problem of the novel is not just the continued love of Anne Elliott and Captain Wentworth but also the rise of the middle-class (the Wentworth) against those (the Elliots) who, for no personal credit or worth, look down on others.

Jane Austen presents the life of those among whom she herself lived. Most of them belonged to the lesser aristocracy or the upper middle class, they had comfortable incomes, and spent the greater part of their time visiting or entertaining. Many of them are snobs with an exaggerated respect for rank and position. Therefore, she directs her criticism at the wealthy who as result to no credit of their own, were powerful. Entering their world, allowed readers see what lay behind the highly refined and genteel society.

However, the novel is more than this it tells how the daughter of a proud family was persuaded by her father's attitude and by the efforts of a well-meaning friend to sacrifices love and happiness for the superficial convictions of class differences and how these conceptions change when the former suitor became wealthy and distinguished.<sup>8</sup>

For the first time in this work, Austen makes the lower class be morally, intellectually, and emotionally superior to the high society. As in all Austen's works, this novel also blatantly attacks the high-ranking social class that had been somewhat upheld to a varying degree by at least one character in all of Austen's previous novels. As Barry Roth assures that Austen in this novel "tends to denigrate the older aristocratic types like Sir Walter Eliot while endorsing the up and coming class of people, such as Captain Wentworth, who have had to make their own way in life"<sup>9</sup>.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> June Dwyer, Jane Austen, (New York: A Fredrick Unger Book, 1989), p.34.

<sup>2</sup> F. B. Pinion, A Jane Austen Companion: A critical survey and Reference Book,( London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1985), p.124.

<sup>3</sup> Marry Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art,( London: Oxford University Press, 1961),p. 78

<sup>4</sup> A. Walton Litz, Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development (London:Chatto And Windus Ltd,1965), p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Dwyer, p.38.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Gillie, A Preface to Jane Austen (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1985), p.120.

<sup>7</sup> Pinion, p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> Gillie, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from E- mail sent by Professor Barry Roth, of Brown University.

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