



Persuasion

By Jane Austen

First published in 1818

Genre & subject

Young women - fiction

England - social life and customs - fiction

Love stories

Classical fiction

Synopsis

Eight years ago Anne Elliot bowed to pressure from her family and made the decision not to marry the man she loved, Captain Wentworth. Now circumstances have conspired to bring him back into her social circle and Anne finds her old feelings for him reignited. However, when they meet again Wentworth behaves as if they are strangers and seems more interested in her friend Louisa. In this, her final novel, Jane Austen tells the story of a love that endures the tests of time and society with humour, insight and tenderness.

Author biography

Austen was born on 16 December 1775 at Steventon rectory and publicly christened on 5 April 1776. After a few months at home, her mother placed Austen with Elizabeth Littlewood, a woman living nearby, who nursed and raised Austen for a year or eighteen months.

In 1783, according to family tradition, Jane and Cassandra were sent to Oxford to be educated by Mrs. Ann Cawley and they moved with her to Southampton later in the year. Both girls caught typhus and Jane nearly died. Austen was subsequently educated at home, until leaving for boarding school with her sister Cassandra early in 1785. The school curriculum probably included some French, spelling, needlework, dancing and music and, perhaps, drama.

By December 1786, Jane and Cassandra had returned home because the Austens could not afford to send both of their daughters to school

Austen lived her entire life as part of a close-knit family located on the lower fringes of the English landed gentry. The steadfast support of her family was critical to her development as a professional writer.

Discussion starters

- What matters most in Sir Elliot's view of life? What does his reaction to Lady Russell's proposals suggest about the kind of man he is?
- What do we come to learn about Sir Walter's three daughters—Elizabeth, Anne, and Mary?
- How would you describe Lady Russell? Does her influence over Anne work toward Anne's betterment or detriment?
- When younger, was Anne right to have followed Lady Russell's advice? Did it show passivity on Anne's part or good judgment to have allowed herself to be guided by her elders? Contrast her with Louisa Croft's assertion later in the book that she would never be dissuaded from following her own desires.

- Talk about the Musgrove family and their affection for and interactions with one another. How do they feel about Mary Elliot Musgrove as their daughter- and sister-in-law? How do they receive Anne? What do you make of Anne's first visit when all complain to her, behind the others' backs, about how the two boys are raised?
- Do you find Mary's hypochondria funny...or irritating...or what? Consider, also, the scene where Mary manipulates Anne into looking after young Charles so that she, Mary, can go dinner at the Musgrove's and meet Captain Wentworth!
- Describe the kind of marriage that Admiral and Mrs. Croft seem to have. How do they view one another? How does their marriage differ from, say, Charles and Mary Musgrove's?
- With their newfound wealth, both Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft are able to join the upper ranks of English society. How have sailors such as Wentworth and Croft made their fortunes? What other options are available for social mobility in the early 19th century?
- What kind of person is Captain Wentworth? What kind of woman does he say he admires? What is the impact on him when he learns that Anne turned down Charles Musgrove in marriage?
- Why does Mary disparage Charles Hayter? What is his economic and social standing with respect to her own?
- When Anne meets Captain Benwick in Lyme, what drew the two together? Were you expecting a romance to develop between the two? Why...or why not?
- How does Wentworth react to Louisa's fall? Whom does he blame—himself or Louisa? What does he begin to realize about Anne...and Louisa?
- When Anne first reaches Bath, at first she believes Mr. Elliot is interested in her sister, Elizabeth. Yet Anne hopes that he might not be "too nice, or too observant, if Elizabeth were his object." What does she mean?
- When it becomes apparent that Mr. Elliot has turned his attentions toward Anne, what makes her uncertain of his sincerity? In the end, what does Anne learn about Elliot's motivations?
- In all of her novels, Austen casts a gentle, satirical eye on English society. In *Persuasion*, her gaze seems more critical: what might she be saying in this work about rank and property—and about the possible rise of a middle class?
- In a letter, Austen described Anne Elliot as "almost too good for me." Do you find Anne "too good" to be true? Is her goodness cloying and sentimental? Or is her goodness something different—an integrity combined with strength and acceptance? How do you see the heroine of this novel?

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