Persuasion

Jane Austen

About the author

Jane Austen was born in 1775 in the Hampshire countryside. She had six siblings – five brothers and one sister. Her father was a clergyman and her mother was an energetic woman who possessed her own ample supply of literary talent. Recent biographies reveal that the family was forced to endure constant financial difficulties. To offset these troubles, the family always behaved in a lively and affectionate manner towards each other and their guests. The family had many relatives in the region.

Austen started writing as a teenager. Even at a young age, her works were incisive and elegantly expressed. The few letters of hers that remain show her to have had a lively – if rather acidic – wit. Describing her appearance, her brother wrote, 'In person, she was very attractive; her figure was rather tall and slender … She was a clear brunette with a rich colour.' Austen received several proposals of marriage, but rejected each of them in turn. She fell in love with a young man who reciprocated her feelings, but as both of them were penniless, they weren't allowed to marry. By her mid-twenties, Austen already regarded herself as a spinster, and began drawing ever closer to her beloved elder sister, Cassandra. After Austen's early death, Cassandra described her younger sister as 'the sun of my life'.

Austen wrote six major novels. *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816) were published during her lifetime, and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published in 1818 after her death. The books were very popular with both readers and critics, and highly placed public figures admired her novels greatly. In fact, the Prince Regent, who was the heir to the throne at the time, kept a set of Austen's novels in each of his homes.

In 1800, when Austen was twenty-five years old, her parents moved the family away from the family home, and they didn't settle down again until 1810. During this tumultuous period of motion and unrest, Austen wrote very little, an indication of how disturbed she was by the move. Jane Austen died relatively young of illness in 1817 at the age of forty-one.

Summary

Jane Austen's literary genius is acknowledged by critics and readers alike. Each of her novels, which were written in the early part of the nineteenth century, can genuinely be described as a literary masterpiece. Austen's last novel, *Persuasion*, was published in 1818 – one year following her premature death at the age of forty-one.

Persuasion tells the story of Anne and her pursuit of love. Anne is the daughter of Sir Walter Elliot, a handsome – but not very clever – baronet with three daughters. Anne is Sir Walter's second daughter. She is pretty, clever and interesting, and yet Sir Walter takes no interest in her. At the age of nineteen, Anne was loved dearly by Frederick Wentworth, a handsome young naval officer. However, as Captain Wentworth wasn't wealthy, he was discouraged from marrying Anne. Seven years later, after she has lost the freshness and innocence of youth, Anne is still unable to forget Captain Wentworth.

Through a change in circumstances, Anne and Captain Wentworth find themselves meeting socially. Wentworth is now rich, but for some reason, he is cool towards Anne, and two female friends of hers take a great interest in him. Then the wealthy and charming Mr Elliot appears on the scene and takes a similar interest in Anne. It seems that Anne and Captain Wentworth will never be united in love – although things might not be what they seem!

Background and themes

Jane Austen's works are satirical comedies about the middle and upper-middle classes. The plots are variations on the same theme: a young woman's courtship and eventual marriage. By the end of Austen's novels, the heroine has always found a husband. Austen focuses on small social groups in small-town environments. In a letter, she compares herself to a painter of miniatures: 'The little bit of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush …' However, within this narrow focus, Austen explores several universal themes: money and its positive and negative effects on the human psyche; romance

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and its illusions; and the necessary progression towards more realistic relationships as courting couples eventually discover each other's true nature.

Although each of Austen's novels is unique, certain character types recur throughout her stories. Anne Elliot is a typical Austen heroine – she is intelligent, refined and emotionally self-contained. In a letter to her niece, Austen wrote, 'You may perhaps like the heroine, as she is almost too good for me.' Another character type appearing throughout Austen's novels is the loud, insensitive older man or woman who is interested only in money and appearances. In Austen's other novels, this is often a middle-aged woman. However, in *Persuasion*, the character takes the form of Anne's middle-aged father, the ridiculous Sir Walter, who is preoccupied with the colour of his coat and his expensive new carriages. Another regularly appearing character type is the charming man of good birth who turns out to be a scoundrel. In *Persuasion*, this man is Mr Elliot, who pursues Anne in the beginning, but is discovered at the end of the novel to have a dark past. Another recurring character type in Austen's novels is the kindly middle-aged couple who are friendly towards the heroine. Admiral and Mrs Croft, who rent Sir Walter's house from him, fall into this category in *Persuasion*.

As previously mentioned, Austen fell in love with a young man who wanted to marry her, but their families didn't approve of their union because neither of them had any money. Many critics have wondered if this real-life experience inspired the story behind *Persuasion*. Money is a major theme in all of Austen's novels, and it is of central importance in *Persuasion*. Mr Elliot is wealthy, and therefore he is desirable as a husband. Although he was once poor, Captain Wentworth is now rich, and therefore he is also a desirable suitor. However, one of Austen's greatest gifts is her ability to put things into perspective for the reader. In *Persuasion*, as in all of her novels, she demonstrates that many things are more valuable than money, such as love, patience and basic human decency.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1, pages 1–8

Before reading

1 **Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *What can you see? Where do you think the story takes place? Do you think the story takes place in the present or in the past? Why do you think this?*

2 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs and ask them to look at the pictures in the book. Each pair should choose one picture and then write a short paragraph about it on a piece of paper. The pairs should then swap pieces of paper and try to guess which pictures are being described.

3 **Pair work:** Photocopy the pictures throughout the book – make enough copies so that each pair of students has a copy of every picture in the book. Cut off the captions at the bottom of the pages and then give the pictures and the captions to the pairs. Get them to match the pictures with the captions.

4 **Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page vi and discuss the following questions:
Who and what can you see in the picture?
What are the names of the man and the women?
What kind of clothes are the man and the women wearing?
What are the women holding?
How much money do you think the man and the women have? Why do you think this?
What do you like about the characters? What don't you like about them?

After reading

5 **Write:** Teach the word *persuasion* to students and then ask them to find the word in Chapter 1 (it appears in the third paragraph on page 6). Have a student read the sentence containing the word out loud. Then get students to write a sentence to explain why the story is called *Persuasion*.

6 **Role play:** Divide the class into groups of three. One student is Sir Walter, one student is Lady Russell and one student is Captain Wentworth. Captain Wentworth should try to convince Sir Walter and Lady Russell that he is the right person to marry Anne. Sir Walter and Lady Russell should try to convince Captain Wentworth that he isn't the right person to marry Anne.

Chapter 2, pages 8–18

Before reading

7 **Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Anne in Chapter 2. *Will she see Captain Wentworth again? Will Captain Wentworth still love her? Will she and Captain Wentworth get married?*

After reading

8 **Check:** Review students' predictions about what would happen to Anne in Chapter 2. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

9 **Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 11 and discuss the following questions:
Who and what can you see in the picture?
Where are the people?
What are the people doing?
How do you think the people are feeling? Why do you think this?

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10 **Pair work:** *Why does Captain Wentworth help Anne up into the Crofts' little carriage?* Get students to work in pairs and think of answers to this question. Make it a competition. Ask each group to report back with its ideas. When the groups have reported back, take a vote to find out which idea the students like best. The group that came up with the idea wins the competition.

Chapter 3, pages 18–23

Before reading

11 **Artwork:** Get students to read page 18 and then draw a picture of Lyme. When they have finished, they should show their pictures to the rest of the class.

After reading

12 **Role play:** Ask students to work in groups and role play the scene in which Louisa falls off the wall and hits her head on the beach (pages 20–22).

13 **Read carefully:** Get students to read the last four paragraphs of Chapter 3 as a class. Each student should stand up and carefully read one sentence out loud until the entire section has been read.

Chapter 4, pages 23–30

Before reading

14 **Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 27. *How do you think Mr Elliot is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think Anne is feeling? Why do you think this?*

After reading

15 **Write:** *How does Anne feel when she reads Mary's letter and finds out that Louisa isn't going to marry Captain Wentworth? Why do you think she feels this way?* Get students to write a short paragraph to answer these questions.

Chapter 4, pages 31–38

Before reading

16 **Guess:** Get students to predict what will happen at the end of the story. *Who will Anne marry – Mr Elliot or Captain Wentworth? Will she be happy or sad?*

After reading

17 **Discuss:** Put students into small groups. Get them to look at the picture on page 36 and discuss the following questions:
Was Lady Russell right to persuade Anne not to marry Captain Wentworth? Why or why not?
Was Anne right to listen to Lady Russell's advice at the beginning of the book? Why or why not?

18 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs and have them divide *Persuasion* into eight chapters instead of four. Students should write down the page number of the first and last page of each new chapter, and they should give each chapter a new name. When they have finished, they should show their new chapters to the rest of the class.

19 **Write:** Get students to make a list of the towns, villages and regions that are mentioned in the book.

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