

Persuasion Discussion Questions

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-seven-year old Anne Elliot is Austen's most adult heroine. Eight years before the story proper begins, she is happily betrothed to a naval officer, Frederick Wentworth, but she precipitously breaks off the engagement when persuaded by her friend Lady Russell that such a match is unworthy. The breakup produces in Anne a deep and long-lasting regret. When later Wentworth returns from sea a rich and successful captain, he finds Anne's family on the brink of financial ruin and his own sister a tenant in Kellynch Hall, the Elliot estate. All the tension of the novel revolves around one question: Will Anne and Wentworth be reunited in their love?

On the most basic level *Persuasion* is a love story, both interesting and entertaining, rich in intrigue and romance. On a deeper level it examines human foibles and societal flaws. The question of the importance of propriety is raised frequently, as is the issue of appearance versus reality.

Readers of *Persuasion* will discover Austen's talents on full display: her skill for delicate, ironic observations on social custom, love, and marriage and her ability to apply a sharp focus lens to English manners and morals.

1. *Persuasion* is often described as "autumnal." Why? How does "autumnal" describe Anne Elliot's situation? Jane Austen's?
2. Consider the opening of the novel. What does it tell the reader about both the characters in the novel and the condition of Britain in 1815, the year *Persuasion* is set?
3. What values do Sir Walter Elliot and Elizabeth represent? Captain Wentworth, the Crofts, the Harvilles and Benwick?
4. How are Sir Walter's values displayed through his words and actions? Consider his relationship with his tenants, those who work for him, and each of his daughters.

5. What do Sir Walter's fiscal problems suggest about the condition of the upper class and aristocracy in Britain? Does Sir Walter recognize his failures? How are Elizabeth and Mary like their father? How are Mary Musgrove's values displayed through her words and actions?
6. What does the navy represent in the novel? Compare and contrast the two worlds of the novel: the aristocracy and upper class on one hand and the British navy on the other.
7. What is Austen's own view of the two, and how is it conveyed?
8. Jane Austen described her heroine in a letter to her niece Fanny Knight (23-25 March 1817), "You may perhaps like the Heroine, as she is almost too good for me." Do you agree?
9. What arguments are there for Anne's having listened to Lady Russell eight years earlier? How does Anne view this persuasion by the end of the novel?
10. What are the results of eight years of waiting for Anne? For Wentworth?
11. How are Anne Elliot's values displayed through her words and actions? Is Anne Elliot a passive or an active character? • Consider her actions when the family leaves Kellynch; • During the stay in Lyme Regis; • During the concert in Bath; • After reading Wentworth's letter.
12. Reread aloud the conversation Anne has with Harville in Bath. Did she mean for Wentworth to overhear the conversation? What does she say that influences Wentworth?
13. Does Anne go through the growth that Austen's other heroines do, to self-knowledge and moral and intellectual improvement? What does Anne need to learn? Does Anne become more independent near the end of the novel?
14. Does she mature emotionally? Would she have stood up to Lady Russell at the end if needed? Is Anne a Cinderella figure?
15. What role does Mrs. Smith play in the novel? What is the effect of Mrs. Smith's revelations to Anne?
16. Does Wentworth go through a process of self-discovery? Does he change? If so, how?
17. How is he shown to be well suited to Anne?

18. Why are Wentworth and Harville upset by Benwick's inconstancy to the memory of Fanny Harville? How are Benwick and Louisa similar?
19. Why is this novel set in so many different locations? What do these places represent: Kellynch, Uppercross, Lyme, Bath? How does Bath reveal Sir Walter's true nature?
20. The characters are subject to different types of persuasion. Who is persuaded by rank/class/family connections? Who is persuaded by self-interest? Who is persuaded by self-importance?
21. Does the novel embody a feminist viewpoint? Consider Anne's conversation with Harville. Consider Mrs. Croft's character and actions.
22. The cancelled final chapters of *Persuasion* are a glimpse into Austen's writing process. What do they show? How do they differ from the revised ending?
23. **Persuasion** is Austen's last completed novel and was only published posthumously. It is often described as "autumnal," and sometimes as a work over which Austen's debilitating illness and approaching death has cast a pall. Do you see Austen's own shadows in the book?
24. Would you describe it as a sadder book than **Emma**? Than **Mansfield Park**?
25. Austen's humor works, as always, throughout, but would you describe *Persuasion* as a funny book?
26. Is Anne Elliot Austen's most perfect heroine?
27. Do you like a perfect heroine?
28. Is Wentworth Austen's most perfect hero?
29. Are you persuaded that his entanglement with Louisa Musgrove was unintentional?
30. What do you suppose the impact of Anne's presence as spectator had on his attentions to the Musgrove girls?
31. There are three women in **Persuasion** about whom opinions wildly differ.
 - a. Mrs. Russell:
Is Mrs. Russell a true friend to Anne despite her occasional bad advice? How

do you feel about her eagerness to match Anne with Mr. Elliot? (Does anyone feel sorry for Elizabeth when Mr. Elliot suddenly switches his attentions from her to Anne?)

b. Mrs. Clay:

Mrs. Clay is a destitute widow with no beauty, the sort of character that Austen, in other books, might be sympathetic to. Why is Mrs. Clay then such an unsympathetic character? What is so despicable about her hopes of marrying Sir Walter? Are you persuaded that Mr. Elliot could be bullied into marrying her?

c. Mrs. Smith:

Mrs. Smith is the most controversial character of all. Like Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility* she allows a friend for whom she professes to care to come perilously close to a disastrous marriage without saying a word to stop it. Did you find this forgivable in Colonel Brandon? Do you find it forgivable in Mrs. Smith? It is quite likely that Mrs. Smith's property in the West Indies included slaves. Were you picturing the restored and contented Mrs. Smith at the book's end as a slave owner?

32. Sir Walter Elliot believes that cold weather has an unfortunate effect on women's beauty. Do you agree? How about hot weather? In which weather do you personally look your best?

33. **Mansfield Park** is a book that seems to regret change, to value stasis, and the traditional. What about **Persuasion**?

34. What values do the men of the navy bring to the society of the book?

35. What value is placed on titles and the aristocracy?

36. Is the society of **Persuasion** in flux and if so does Austen approve of its direction?

37. In a particularly famous passage Anne Elliot says that men have had the pen in their hands when assigning strengths and weaknesses to the sexes. Now that the pen is in Austen's hands what does she use it to say about men and women?

38. Captain Wentworth has doubts about the marriage of Captain Benwick and Louisa Musgrove. How do you rate their chances of happiness? Will they be happier than Charles and Mary Musgrove?

39. In Bath Anne begins to believe that Wentworth still cares for her. Why can't she simply tell him she is uninterested in Mr. Elliot? Does this drive you nuts? Would you say something to him if you were Anne?
40. Is it still the man's job to pursue, the woman's to be pursued?
41. Are you as troubled as I am about the passages that refer to the death of Dick Musgrove?
42. Explain the title.
43. Sir Walter is disturbed because he doesn't like the way his "heir presumptive" has acted in the past. Why do you think he can't just leave his money, title, and estate to his daughters?
44. To what extent do you agree with Sir Walter on the value of rank and consequence?
45. What do you think led Anne to acquiesce to her family's wishes? Should families have a say in whom their children marry?
46. What does the book illustrate about how naval men view women? What assumptions are they making about women?
47. Captain Wentworth and Anne are constantly in each other's company. What keeps them from speaking honestly to each other? Would you invite two people who had once been engaged to the same social gathering? Both the Captain and Anne are very polite to each other. How might things be different today?
48. The Crofts are portrayed as one of the few happily married couples in the novel. What is it about their relationship that seems so different from the other relationships portrayed in the book?
49. What seems to make Mary happy? Why might women at the time of the novel have focused on such things?
50. What does Anne's relationship with Mrs. Smith suggest to you about Anne? How does her father react to these visits? Why?

51. Austen writes of Captain Benwick: “His reading has done him no harm, for he has fought as well as read.” What does this statement indicate about what was important at this time? To what extent have attitudes changed in our time?
52. Captain Harville claims men do not quickly forget about the women they love while Anne claims the same for women. Do you believe men and women differ in their capacities to love and in remaining true to the one they love?
53. Anne believes she was right to be “persuaded” by Lady Russell not to marry Captain Wentworth when he proposed years earlier. Explain her reasoning. Do you agree with her?
54. Austen wrote *Persuasion* as her health was failing, hurrying to finish it before her death. Do you find the novel’s narrative carries any sense of urgency or sentimentality, or any other indication of what the author herself was going through as she wrote it?
55. What was Jane Austen most critical of in her society? What are you most critical of in the modern world?