

# *Persuasion* (novel)

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*Persuasion* is Jane Austen's last completed novel. She began it soon after she had finished *Emma*, completing it in August, 1816. She died, aged 41, in 1817; *Persuasion* was published in December of that year (but dated 1818).

*Persuasion* is connected with *Northanger Abbey* not only by the fact that the two books were originally bound up in one volume and published together two years later, but also because both stories are set partly in Bath, a fashionable health resort with which Jane Austen was well acquainted, having lived there from 1801 to 1805.

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## Plot introduction

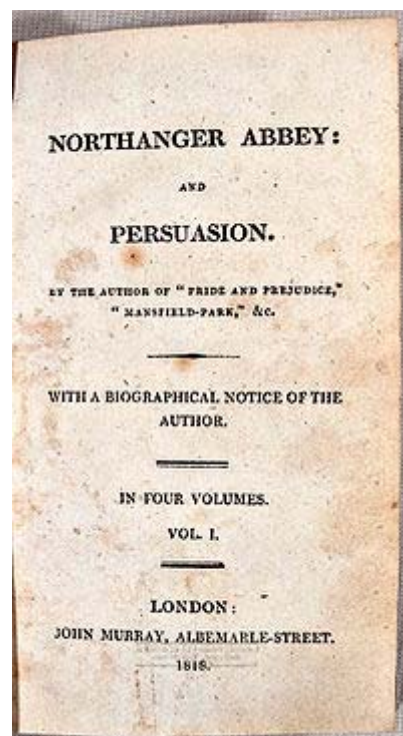
More than seven years prior to the events in the novel, Anne Elliot falls in love with a handsome young naval officer named Frederick Wentworth, who is intelligent and ambitious, but poor. Sir Walter, Anne's father and lord of the family estate of Kellynch, and her older sister Elizabeth are dissatisfied with her choice, maintaining that he is not distinguished enough for their family. Her older friend and mentor, Lady Russell, acting in place of Anne's deceased mother, persuades her to break off the match.

Now, aged 27 and still unmarried, Anne re-encounters her former fiancé when his sister and brother-in-law, the Crofts, take out a lease on Kellynch. Wentworth, now a captain, is wealthy from wartime victories in the Royal Navy and from prize-money for capturing enemy ships. However, he has not forgiven Anne for her rejection of him.

The self-interested machinations of Anne's father, her older sister Elizabeth, Elizabeth's friend Mrs. Clay, and William Elliot (Anne's cousin and her father's heir) constitute important subplots.

## Title as variation on a theme

### *Persuasion*



Title page of the original 1817 edition

<b>Author</b>	Jane Austen
<b>Country</b>	England
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Genre(s)</b>	Novel
<b>Publisher</b>	John Murray
<b>Publication date</b>	1818
<b>ISBN</b>	N/A

Readers of "Persuasion" might well infer Jane Austen intended 'persuasion' as the working theme of the story, and that she applied the novel's title to reflect this conceit. Certainly that theme is repeated several times, with vignettes within the story as variations on that theme. But there is no known source for Austen pronouncing her own title for this work. (Some critics believe Austen intended to name the novel "The Elliots", but that, in fact, she died without titling it.)

On the other hand, the literary scholar Gillian Beer documents that Jane Austen had profound concerns about the levels and applications of 'persuasion' employed among individuals of her society, especially as it influenced the choices and moral suasion made upon the young women of her day. Beer reports that, for Austen and her readers, persuasion was indeed "fraught with moral dangers";<sup>[1]</sup> she notes particularly that Austen personally was appalled by the misdirection of her own intentions in advising a beloved niece (Fanny Knight) on the very question of accepting a particular suitor entailing with a long engagement. Beer writes:

Jane Austen's anxieties about persuasion and responsibility are here passionately expressed. She refuses to become part of the machinery with which Fanny is manoeuvring herself into forming the engagement. To be the stand-in motive for another's actions frightens her. Yet Jane Austen cannot avoid the part of persuader, even as dissuader.<sup>[2]</sup>

Thus, Beer explains, Austen was keenly aware that, still, the human quality of persuasion—to persuade or to be persuaded, rightly or wrongly—is fundamental to the process of human communication; and that, in her novel "...Jane Austen gradually draws out the implications of discriminating 'just' and 'unjust' persuasion". Indeed, the narrative plays through a number of variations of people swaying, or attempting to sway, other people—or themselves. Finally, Beer describes Austen's work as: "...the novel's entire brooding on the power pressures, the seductions, and also the new pathways opened by persuasion".<sup>[3]</sup>

## Plot summary

Anne Elliot is the overlooked middle daughter of the vain Sir Walter Elliot, a baronet who is all too conscious of his good looks and rank and spends excessive amounts of money. Anne's mother, a fine, sensible woman, is long dead, and her elder sister, Elizabeth, resembles her father in temperament and delights in the fact that as the eldest daughter she can assume her mother's former position in their rural neighborhood. Anne's younger sister, Mary, is a nervous, clinging woman who has made an unspectacular marriage to Charles Musgrove of Uppercross Hall, the heir to a bucolic but respected local squire. None of her surviving family can provide much companionship for the elegant-minded Anne, who, still unmarried at 27, seems destined for spinsterhood.

After she met and fell in love with Wentworth, at age nineteen, Anne had been persuaded by her mother's great friend—and her own trusted confidante, the widow Lady Russell—to break the engagement. Lady Russell had questioned the wisdom of Anne marrying a penniless young naval officer without family or connections and whose prospects were so uncertain. Wentworth is left bitter at Lady Russell's interference and Anne's own want of fortitude.

Wentworth re-enters Anne's life when Sir Walter is forced by his own profligacy to let the family estate to none other than Wentworth's brother-in-law, Admiral Croft. Wentworth's successes in the Napoleonic Wars resulted in his promotion and enabled him to amass the then considerable fortune of £25,000 (around £2.5 million in today's money) from prize money awarded for capturing enemy vessels. The Musgroves, including Mary, Charles and Charles's younger sisters, Henrietta and Louisa, are delighted to welcome the Crofts and Wentworth to the neighborhood. Both Musgrove girls are attracted to Wentworth, though Henrietta is informally engaged to clergyman cousin Charles Hayter. Hayter is viewed as a merely respectable match, being a bit beneath the Musgroves, socially and financially. Charles, Mary, and the Crofts continually speculate as to which one

Wentworth might marry. All this is hard on Anne, due to her regret at breaking off the engagement and Wentworth's constant attention to the Musgrove girls. She tries to escape their company as often as she can, preferring to spend time with her nephews.

Captain Wentworth's visit to a close friend, Captain Harville, in nearby Lyme Regis results in a day-long outing being organized by those eager to see the resort. While there, Louisa Musgrove sustains a concussion in a fall brought about by her own impetuous behaviour. This highlights the difference between the headstrong Louisa and the more sensible Anne. While onlookers exclaim that Louisa is dead and her companions stand around dumbfounded, Anne administers first aid and summons assistance. Wentworth's admiration for Anne reawakens as a result.

Louisa's recovery is slow and her self-confidence is severely shaken. Her newfound timidity elicits the kind attention and reassurance of Wentworth's friend Captain Benwick, who had been mourning the recent death of his fiancée. The couple find their personalities to be now more in sympathy and they become engaged.

Meanwhile, Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's scheming friend Mrs. Clay, the widowed daughter of Sir Walter's agent, have relocated to Bath. There they hope to live in a manner befitting a baronet and his family with the least possible expense until their finances are restored to a firmer footing. Sir Walter's cousin and heir, William Elliot, who long ago slighted the baronet, now seeks a reconciliation. Elizabeth assumes that he wishes to court her, while Lady Russell more correctly suspects that he admires Anne.

Although William Elliot seems a perfect gentleman, Anne distrusts him; she finds his character disturbingly opaque. She is enlightened by an unexpected source when she discovers an old school friend, Mrs. Smith, living in Bath in straitened circumstances. Mrs. Smith and her now-deceased husband had once been Mr. Elliot's closest friends. Having encouraged them into financial extravagance, he had quickly dropped them when they became impoverished. Anne learns, to her great distress, of his layers of deceit and calculated self-interest. In addition, her friend speculates that Mr. Elliot wants to reestablish his relationship with her family primarily to safeguard his inheritance of the title, fearing a marriage between Sir Walter and Mrs. Clay. This helps Anne to understand more fully the dangers of persuasion—in that Lady Russell pressed her to accept Mr. Elliot's likely offer of marriage—and helps her to develop more confidence in her own judgment.

Ultimately, the Musgroves visit Bath to purchase wedding clothes for their daughters Louisa and Henrietta (who has become engaged to Hayter). Captain Wentworth and his friend Captain Harville accompany them. Anne and Harville discuss the relative faithfulness of men and women in love, while Wentworth writes a note within earshot of the discussion. This causes him to write a note to Anne detailing his feelings for her. In a tender scene, Anne and Wentworth reconcile and renew their engagement. The match is now more palatable to Anne's family — their waning fortunes and Wentworth's waxing ones have made a considerable difference. Also, ever overvaluing good looks, Sir Walter is favorably impressed with his future son-in-law's appearance. Lady Russell admits she has been completely wrong about Captain Wentworth, and she and Anne remain friends.

## Main characters

**Sir Walter Elliot, Bt.** — A vain, sycophantic self-satisfied baronet, Sir Walter's extravagance since the death of his prudent wife 13 years before has put his family in financial straits. These are severe enough to force him to lease his estate, Kellynch Hall, to Admiral Croft and take a more economical residence in Bath.

**Elizabeth Elliot** — The eldest and most beautiful daughter of Sir Walter, who encourages her father's imprudent spending and extravagance. She and her father routinely put their interests ahead of Anne's, regarding her as inconsequential.

**Anne Elliot** —

*Main article: Anne Elliot*

The second daughter of Sir Walter is 27 years old and unmarried. She is very intelligent and was very pretty but lost her bloom after breaking off her engagement with Wentworth. Now nearly eight years ago, she fell in love with Captain Wentworth but was persuaded by her mentor Lady Russell to reject his proposal because of his poverty and uncertain future.

**Mary Musgrove** — The youngest daughter of Sir Walter, married to Charles Musgrove. She is attention-seeking, always looking for ways she might have been slighted or not given her full due, and often claims illness when she is upset. She greatly opposes sister-in-law Henrietta's interest in marrying Charles Hayter, who Mary feels is beneath them.

**Charles Musgrove** — Husband of Mary and heir to the Musgrove estate. He had wanted to marry Anne and settled for Mary (much to the disappointment of the Musgrove family, and to his misfortune) when Anne refused him due to her continued love for Wentworth.

**Lady Russell** — A friend of the Elliots, particularly Anne, of whom she is the godmother. She is instrumental in Sir Walter's decision to leave Kellynch Hall and avoid financial crisis. Years ago, she persuaded Anne to turn down Captain Wentworth's proposal of marriage. While far more sensible than Sir Walter Elliot, she shares his concern for rank and connections, and did not think Wentworth good enough for Anne because of his inferior birth and financial status.

**Mrs. Clay** — A poor widow, daughter of Sir Walter's lawyer, and intimate 'friend' of Elizabeth Elliot. She aims to flatter Sir Walter into marriage, while her oblivious friend looks on.

**Captain Frederick Wentworth** — A naval officer who was briefly engaged to Anne some years ago. At the time, he had no fortune and uncertain prospects, but owing to much success in the Napoleonic Wars, his situation has greatly improved. One of two brothers of Sophia Croft.

**Admiral Croft** — Good-natured, plainspoken tenant at Kellynch Hall and brother-in-law of Captain Wentworth.

**Sophia Croft** — Sister of Captain Wentworth and wife of Admiral Croft. She offers Anne an example of a strong-minded woman who has married for love instead of money.

**Louisa Musgrove** — Second sister of Charles Musgrove, aged about 19. Louisa is a high-spirited young lady who has recently returned with her sister from school. Captain Wentworth admires her for her resolve and determination, especially in contrast to Anne's prudence and what he sees as Anne's lack of conviction. She is ultimately engaged to Captain Benwick.

**Henrietta Musgrove** — Eldest sister of Charles Musgrove, aged about 20. Henrietta is informally engaged to her cousin Charles Hayter, but is nevertheless tempted by the more dashing Captain Wentworth.

**Captain Harville** — A friend of Captain Wentworth. Severely wounded two years ago and discharged at half-pay, he and his family have settled in nearby Lyme.

**Captain James Benwick** — A friend of Captain Harville. Benwick had been engaged to marry Captain Harville's sister Fanny, but she died while Benwick was at sea. Benwick's loss left him melancholic and a lover of poetry. His enjoyment of reading makes him one of the few characters in the story to find an intellectual

connection with Anne, and it is implied that he might have an interest in Anne. But Benwick ultimately becomes engaged to Louisa Musgrove.

**Mr. William Elliot** — A relation and the heir presumptive of Sir Walter, who became estranged from the family when he wed a woman of much lower social rank, for her fortune. Sir Walter and Elizabeth had hoped William would marry Elizabeth Elliot. He is now a widower. Now wanting very much to inherit the title, he mends the rupture in order to keep an eye on the ambitious Mrs. Clay. If Sir Walter married her, William's inheritance would be endangered. When he meets Anne by accident, his interest is piqued; if he could marry Anne his title and inheritance is likely secured. Rumors circulate that Anne and he are engaged.

**Mrs. Smith** — a friend of Anne Elliot who lives in Bath. She is a widow and has suffered ill health and financial difficulties. She keeps abreast of the doings of Bath society through news she gets from her nurse, Nurse Rooke, who also works for a friend of William Elliot's. Her financial problems could have been straightened out with some assistance from William Elliot, her husband's former friend, but Elliot would not exert himself, leaving her much impoverished. Later Wentworth acts on her behalf.

**Lady Dalrymple** — a viscountess, cousin to Sir Walter. She occupies an exalted position in society by virtue of wealth and rank. Sir Walter and Elizabeth are eager to be seen at Bath in the company of this great relation.

## Literary significance and criticism

*Persuasion* is widely appreciated as a moving love story despite what has been labelled as a simple plot, and exemplifies Austen's acclaimed wit and ironic narrative style.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> Austen wrote *Persuasion* in a hurry, during the onset of the illness from which she eventually died; as a result, the novel is both shorter and arguably less polished than *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, and was not subject to the usual pattern of careful retrospective revision.

Although the impact of Austen's failing health at the time of writing this novel cannot be overlooked, the novel is strikingly original in several ways. *Persuasion* is the first of Austen's novels to feature as the central character a woman who, by the standards of the time, is well past the first bloom of youth; biographer Claire Tomalin characterizes the book as Austen's "present to herself, to Miss Sharp, to Cassandra, to Martha Lloyd . . . to all women who had lost their chance in life and would never enjoy a second spring."<sup>[4]</sup>

The novel has been described as a great "Cinderella" story (introduction to the Penguin Classics edition). All the similarities between the fairy story and Austen's novel are there; a heroine who is generally unappreciated by those around her; a handsome prince who arrives but seems more interested in the "more obvious" charms of the Musgrove girls than the more steady charms offered by Anne; a moment of realisation and the final happy ending when those who did not appreciate have time to realise what they have lost. It has been said that it is not that Anne is unloved, more that those around her no longer see her, she is such a fixed part of life that her likes and dislikes, wishes and dreams are no longer considered, even by those who claim to appreciate her, like Lady Russell.

At the same time, the novel is a paean to the self-made man. Captain Wentworth is just one of several naval officers in the story who have risen from humble beginnings to affluence and status on the strength of merit and luck, not by inheritance. It marks a time where the very roots of society were changing, as 'old money' (exemplified by Sir Walter) had to accommodate the rising strength of the nouveau riche (such as Wentworth). The success of Austen's own two brothers in the Royal Navy is probably significant. There are also clear parallels with the earlier novel *Mansfield Park* as there are inherent and sustained messages of the importance of constancy in the face of adversity and of the need to endure.

Austen makes some biting comments about 'family' and those we choose to associate with. Mary wants to nurse Louisa but doesn't want to nurse her son. Elizabeth prefers Mrs Clay to her sister who is 'amongst the nobility of England and Ireland', yet courts the attentions of Lady Dalrymple.

Through her heroine's words, Austen makes pointed remarks about the condition of women as 'rational creatures' at the mercy of males (only) recording history, writing books, etc., while castigating women's "inconstancy" and "fickleness". "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. ...the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything" (Persuasion Volume 2 Chapter 11).

She ends the novel with the similar theme to *Pride and Prejudice*, where the heroine leaves the others behind with marriage.

## Allusions/references within other works

- *Persuasion* is featured in the 2006 movie *The Lake House*, and provides a thematic background for the lovers.
- Many themes and incidents from *Persuasion* are presented in an updated setting in the novel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*.
- *Persuading Annie*, a novel by Melissa Nathan, is a modern version of *Persuasion*
- *Connivance*, (ASIN B002ACZU1A), a novel by Helen Baker is a continuation of *Persuasion* in which clever Mrs Clay continues to charm both Sir Walter Elliot and Mr Elliot, his heir.
- *Jane Austen in Scarsdale*, a novel by Paula Marantz Cohen, is based on the plot of *Persuasion*. However, Cohen's novel stars Anne Ehrlich, a high school guidance counselor dealing with parents' and students' anxiety over college admissions.
- *Persuasion* is referenced in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.
- The novel is referenced in 2004 novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*, by Karen Joy Fowler, which was later made into a film by the same name in 2007.
- *Persuasion* is quoted in the movie *The Book Of Ruth* which was made for TV in 2004. (*The Book Of Ruth* was originally a novel by Jane Hamilton.)
- *The Family Fortune*, a novel by Laurie Horowitz, is a modern version of *Persuasion* set in Boston, Massachusetts.

## Film, TV or theatrical adaptations

*Persuasion* has been the subject of several adaptations:

- 1960: *Persuasion*, BBC miniseries starring Daphne Slater as Anne and Paul Daneman as Captain Wentworth.
- 1971: *Persuasion*, BBC miniseries starring Anne Firbank as Anne and Bryan Marshall as Captain Wentworth.
- 1995: *Persuasion*, made-for-television film (which was released in US theatres by Sony Pictures Classics) starring Amanda Root as Anne and Ciarán Hinds as Captain Wentworth.
- 2007: *Persuasion*, teleplay, filmed in Bath in September 2006 for ITV1, with Sally Hawkins as Anne, Rupert Penry-Jones as Captain Wentworth.

## Footnotes

- <sup>^</sup> Gillian Beer, *Persuasion*, Austen, Jane; (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), Introduction, p. xv, 1998
- <sup>^</sup> Beer; pp. x-xv
- <sup>^</sup> Beer; pp. xv-xviii,
- <sup>^</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 256

## External links

- *Persuasion* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/105>) at Project Gutenberg
- *Persuasion* (<http://girlebooks.com/ebook-catalog/jane-austen/persuasion/>) free downloads in PDF, PDB and LIT formats
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- *Persuasion* audio book ([http://www.archive.org/details/persuasion\\_2008-06-16](http://www.archive.org/details/persuasion_2008-06-16)) , public domain solo recording by Moira Fogarty at Internet Archive
- *Persuasion* page at Pemberley.com (<http://pemberley.com/bin/persuasion/persuasion.cgi>) (includes novel text, discussion board, and FAQ)
- *Persuasion* (<http://publicliterature.org/books/persuasion/xaa.php>) , full text and audio at PublicLiterature.org (<http://publicliterature.org>)
- Chronology/calendar for *Persuasion* (<http://www.jimandellen.org/austen/persuasion.calendar.html>)

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