

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO JANE AUSTEN'S



# PERSUASION

"There's now not a journey I make without  
taking with me one of the Connell Guides."

JOANNA LUMLEY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by John Wiltshire*

# Contents

Introduction	1	What happens when Anne and Wentworth are finally reunited?	85
A summary of the plot	2		
What is <i>Persuasion</i> about?	5	What makes <i>Persuasion</i> unique among Jane Austen's novels?	92
Why is the opening of <i>Persuasion</i> so striking?	11		
How does Anne survive?	19		
What kind of hero is Captain Wentworth?	24		
How does Jane Austen treat sex in <i>Persuasion</i> ?	31		
Is <i>Persuasion</i> a sentimental novel?	40		
Does Anne Elliot change? If so, how?	50		
Is Lady Russell “a very good woman”?	59		
How much of a villain is Mr Elliot?	67		
Why did Jane Austen rewrite the end of <i>Persuasion</i> ?	73		

	<u>NOTES</u>		
	<i>Dr. Johnson and Persuasion</i>		9
	<i>The historical setting of Persuasion</i>		15
	<i>Was Persuasion really “ready for publication”?</i>		27
	<i>Bath</i>		35
	<i>The navy</i>		47
	<i>Ten facts about Persuasion</i>		55
	<i>The narrative voice</i>		63
	<i>The comedy of Persuasion</i>		71
	<i>Twelfth Night and Persuasion</i>		75
	<i>Reading and books in Persuasion</i>		79
	<i>Captain Wentworth's pen</i>		87
	<i>How much can be said for the Musgroves?</i>		93
	<i>A short chronology</i>		104
	<i>Bibliography</i>		106

# Introduction

*Persuasion* was first published in 1818, after Jane Austen's death. Much shorter than her previous two novels, *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, it appeared in two volumes. The novel was hardly reviewed at all when it appeared, but over time has become probably the favourite Austen book after *Pride and Prejudice*. One was written when Austen was a young, marriageable woman, the other when she was in her forties, and it features a heroine who, at twenty-seven, could in those days be destined, like Austen herself, to life as a spinster. The atmosphere of the two books is quite different, like the social world they depict – one “light and bright and sparkling” as Jane Austen herself called it, the other more sombre, shadowed by several deaths, and sometimes gentle and sometimes savage in its irony. But *Persuasion* has endeared itself to readers because the romance it celebrates takes place so convincingly within a constricting and believable social world. It's a love story for adults.

“Pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked”, Jane Austen wrote in a letter. She told one of her nieces in March 1817, after she had finished *Persuasion*, “You will not like it, so you need not be impatient. You may perhaps like the heroine, as she is almost too good for me.” Her previous heroine, Emma Woodhouse, is conceited, bossy and full of herself, but Anne Elliot is quiet,

accommodating, kind and thoughtful, so she does risk seeming like the model domestic lady of much pulp nineteenth-century fiction. Jane Austen avoids making her a picture of perfection by inviting the reader into Anne's consciousness. Through the medium of her consciousness we see that Anne is watchful of herself, critical of herself, aware of her own self-deceptions, but at the same time subject to impulses and longings, to the dreams and sexual desires we all share.

## A summary of the plot

Seven years before the novel opens, Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth, a naval officer, have fallen in love, but under pressure from her family and her friend, Lady Russell, Anne has broken off their engagement. This is a decision she comes bitterly to regret. In the first chapters, her father, Sir Walter Elliot, a vain and spendthrift baronet, is persuaded that he can remedy his dire financial position by letting Kellynch, his house and estate, and moving to the fashionable resort of Bath. When her father and her equally snobbish sister Elizabeth leave, Anne goes to live temporarily with her other sister, Mary and her husband Charles Musgrove, in the neighbouring village of Uppercross. Admiral Croft and his wife take up residence at

Kellynch and soon Wentworth, who is Mrs Croft's brother, comes to stay. He has been successful in his naval career and is now a well-off Captain.

Anne does her best to avoid meeting him, but since they are thrown together in a small community, meetings inevitably take place. These are very difficult for Anne, because she still has strong feelings for Wentworth, but he treats her with cool politeness and nothing more. We learn that he still resents her treatment of him years before and has no intention of renewing their relationship, and even that he finds her badly aged. But occasions occur when he sees her in difficulties and comes to her aid. These moments intensify her inner conflict: she tries to overcome her feelings for him, but it seems impossible. Wentworth starts what seems to be a courtship of Louisa Musgrove, Charles's sister. On a walk in the countryside, Anne overhears Wentworth praising Louisa's decisive and firm character, and then listens as the pair talk about her. Wentworth learns that Anne has refused an offer of marriage from Charles Musgrove.

Soon, Captain Wentworth persuades the whole party to make a trip to Lyme Regis, a coastal resort, where his friend Captain Harville, who has been injured in the naval war, has taken up residence. The scene of the novel shifts to Lyme, where they are greeted with an open-heartedness that contrasts with the snobbishness of Anne's

relatives. The Harvilles have a friend, Captain Benwick, staying with them. He is in mourning for his fiancée who has died whilst he was at sea. Anne finds him sympathetic, and the two become friends. As Anne is climbing the steps up from the beach, she passes a gentleman who evidently admires her, and Wentworth, following her, sees this too. Then a dramatic incident occurs on the same steep steps when Louisa, who insists on jumping down them with Wentworth's aid, mistimes her jump and tumbles onto the pavement below, apparently senseless. Anne and Wentworth go to break the news of this serious accident to the Musgroves, and then Wentworth, who feels that the incident has committed him to Louisa, leaves.

Taken to Bath by Lady Russell, Anne finds her father and sister with her sister's companion, Mrs Clay, cultivating the acquaintance of the once wayward Mr Walter Elliot, the heir to the Kellynch estate. Anne recognises him as the man who had looked at her appreciatively in Lyme. Mr Elliot is intelligent, smooth and charming, and Anne is charmed – for a while. Lady Russell approves of him and encourages their relationship. Anne visits an old school friend, Mrs Smith, once rich, now a destitute invalid. Then a letter arrives from Mary, with the surprising news that Benwick and Louisa have become engaged. Anne can't suppress her excitement that now Wentworth is free again. And Wentworth is soon on his way to Bath.

They meet, and seek to talk to each other, but broaching the past and explaining their feelings is made difficult by having to converse in the middle of Bath parties and concerts, and particularly by Mr Elliot's assiduous attentions to Anne, which make Wentworth think Anne encourages his rival and arouses his jealousy. Bath gossip is already predicting Anne and Elliot's engagement. When Anne strongly denies this to her, Mrs Smith discloses Mr Elliot's real and villainous character. The Musgroves have come to Bath; Anne joins them and Captain Harville at an Inn. Wentworth is there too, writing a letter on behalf of his friend. In an intense conversation, Harville and Anne dispute whether men or women have the more lasting affections. Wentworth, overhearing this, seizes the opportunity to write a covert letter to Anne declaring his own undying love for her, she reads the letter, and their romance comes to a thrilling close.

## What is *Persuasion* about?

*Persuasion* tells the story of a life that might have been wasted, but is redeemed by love.

In Tony Tanner's words, the novel "must appeal to anyone who has experienced the sense of an irreparably ruined life owing to an irrevocable,

mistaken decision". Anne Elliot has made a mistake like this and must find the resources to survive emotionally in the midst of her regret. "We all have a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be," says Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Emma Woodhouse, in Austen's next novel, has such a guide but doesn't attend to it. Nor, at a crucial moment, does Anne in *Persuasion*: she listens to her relations and it almost costs her happiness. So the novel shows us how fragile happiness is, how easily it can be thrown away. Anne nearly loses everything, but she is lucky; she learns, and is given a second chance.

Having broken off her engagement with Frederick Wentworth, though still in love with him, Anne has met no one else who attracts her. Half a century or so before Austen wrote *Persuasion*, Samuel Johnson, her literary mentor, vividly described the state of mind to which Anne's mistake could lead. It is one, he wrote,

in which our desires are fixed upon the past, without looking forward to the future, an incessant wish that something were otherwise than it has been, a tormenting and harassing want of some enjoyment or possession which we have lost, and which no endeavours can possibly regain.

This is precisely the situation that interests Austen: Anne is in danger of being eaten away with

sorrow and regret. Why she isn't is a very important part of the novel.

Janet Todd writes that "*Persuasion* both shows the destructive folly of romantic self-sacrificial love, and reveals its supreme value". Whether the novel represents Anne's love for Wentworth as folly is questionable, but there's no doubt that *Persuasion* is a romance, and filled with the romantic belief in the power of love. In *Persuasion*, says the feminist critic Nina Auerbach, the "iron law of consequences is suspended; the seeds of apparent tragedy produce unexpected joy". Events ultimately bring the two former lovers together, "more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth and attachment" (23)\* – an apotheosis that has touched the hearts of readers for two centuries.

*Persuasion*, it is generally agreed, sees the emergence of a softer Jane Austen, even perhaps, as the critic Laurence Lerner has put it, an "anti-Jane" of whom we've seen flashes in earlier novels: here, in her last, intensity of feeling moves "nearer the centre of the book's values". This is a novel shot through "not with the praise of prudence, but with that of impulse". It is an argument that can be pushed too far. While Lerner, and others, have suggested we see almost a reversal of values in *Persuasion*, it is perhaps more accurate "to speak of an enlargement of sympathies rather than radical change". Earlier characters love as

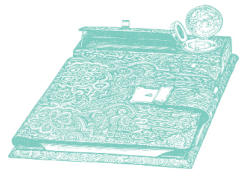
passionately as Anne (Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, or the much misunderstood Fanny in *Mansfield Park*) but the treatment of Anne is more attentive to the vacillations of her emotions, more closely sympathetic to her isolation.

If it is marked by an enlargement of sympathy, *Persuasion* is marked, too, by a corresponding harshness in the way Austen deals with Anne's family. To some critics, like Tanner, the novel suggests a loss of faith in society as a whole: the social world is shown (through Anne Elliot's eyes) as fragmented – "breaking up" into smaller and smaller circles or units. This novel, "valuing the activities of the professional classes more than the traditions of the country house set, recognizes relocation as a way of life", writes Deirdre Shauna Lynch. "Its crucial scenes happen in rented rooms. Its most admired characters are figures like Admiral and Mrs Croft." Relocation was a way of life too, in Jane Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, but whereas in the earlier book, the saving marriages seem unsatisfying, almost from Wentworth's reappearance in *Persuasion* there is the possibility and even the promise of a convincing rescue.

In "The Radical Pessimism of *Persuasion*", Julia Prewitt Brown argues that this book fits the critical theory of the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs, who thought the novel – as an art

form – should be “the epic of a failed world, or of the failure of the self to fulfill itself in the world”. In this sense, argues Prewitt Brown, *Persuasion* is Austen’s most modern work. Gone is the settled, stable, rural society of *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice*. *Persuasion*, Brown suggests, is “made up of a meaningless variety of places and the conflicting minor identities that attend them”.

The heroine moves from place to place, disoriented, isolated. Almost every community and form within which she functions is made



#### DR JOHNSON AND *PERSUASION*

Samuel Johnson (1709-84) whom Jane Austen once in a letter called “my dear Dr Johnson”, is the only great writer whom she never mocks, and an important influence on her novels. Isabel Grundy has remarked: “Opinions shared with him pervade her fiction at a deep level vital to structure and meaning.” Johnson was a towering presence in the

literary world in the years before Austen began to write, and his work gained in prestige in the years following his death. His essays, often offering moral advice and encouragement, and his novel *Rasselas*, were many times reprinted and widely read. “Influence” is a tricky thing to demonstrate but there are moments in *Persuasion* when Johnson’s writings might very well be in Austen’s mind. When Anne sides with “a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence” (4), she may well be rephrasing Johnson’s words in the second of his

meaningless by sheer disparity, or by the inevitable necessity of removal.

This is a very bleak view of the novel. It is true that Anne moves from her home to stay with her sister, and then briefly with Lady Russell, before going back to her family in Bath, but this is nothing like the disruption to their lives experienced by the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*. The various milieux in which Anne lives are far from “meaningless”: the Musgroves, for instance, are decent, established and warm-hearted country

essay series, *The Rambler*, when he writes of “that anxious inquietude which is justly chargeable with distrust of heaven”. A more overt allusion occurs when Anne reflects on her attempt to persuade Benwick away from poetry that reflects and intensifies his grief towards improving books that will “rouse and fortify the mind” in Chapter 11. (James Boswell, whose *Life of Johnson* Austen knew well, claims that Johnson’s essays would “brace and invigorate”.) Anne realises “that like many other moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination” (11), and here she is probably

thinking of Johnson’s *Rasselas*. In an impressive chapter Johnson presents his hero’s disillusionment with a stoic philosopher who can’t face his daughter’s death with the stoicism he himself commends. *Rasselas* is told by his mentor Imlac: “Be not too hasty... to trust or to admire, the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men.” wishes” at the outset of the novel; they achieve them over the course of time, with difficulty, but finding support in the routines of rural labour. It is only in the closing pages of the novel that they enter on “the noiseless tenor of their way”. ●