

Reflection over Convention: How Language Encourages Change in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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Abstract

Anne Elliot, the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, spends much of the novel being ignored: "Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was to always give way;--she was only Anne" (Austen 7). The novel traces the reunion of Anne with her former fiancé, Captain Wentworth, but it is also a critique of nineteenth-century British society and a woman's role within it. Specifically, the novel satirizes the period's excessive emphasis on class as well as its problematic intertwining of social class, marriage, and expectations regarding female behavior. Anne is at the center of this critique: she uses language and her integrity of character to persuade those around her to move away from social conventions and adhere to more virtuous prospects. In the narrator's hands, Anne's questions, private reactions, and ordinary words like "could," take on added significance and power. Small changes in diction or shifts in subject become the engines that gradually alter both Anne's opinions and the novel's readers. For instance, when she realizes how quickly a friend and widower has fallen in love with someone new, Anne becomes overwhelmingly conscious of Wentworth's unflinching constancy towards herself. As they discuss the friend, Anne asks Wentworth a question about Lyme, causing a diversion from the tense topic of constancy but not ending the conversation. It is through the narrator's representations of her quiet asides, silent internal debates, and subtle re-directions that Anne Elliot, whose word at the beginning of the novel "had no weight," by the novel's end is finally able to speak and to choose a virtuous husband rather than a conventional one.

Keywords: language, rhetorical devices, convention

1. Introduction

Persuasion traces the reunion of Anne Elliot with her former fiancé, Captain Frederick Wentworth, but it is also a critique of upper middle class nineteenth-century British society and a woman's role within it. The use of rhetorical strategies in the novel *Persuasion* encourages readers to reflect on their identity in comparison to conventional expectations, just as the plot's protagonist, Anne Elliot, is presented becoming aware of her individual self and place in society. In the Elliot's social circles, a woman was expected to marry well, be accomplished in the arts, know how to handle domestic duties (such as hosting parties and making calls), and overall act as a perfect lady. These social expectations lead Anne to reject Wentworth, a man of exceptional character whom she loved. His lack of money and title at the time would reflect poorly on the Elliot family line, along with Anne's supposed happiness of a comfortable wedded life.

However, that romantic plot changes for the better when the Elliot family is under pressure to maintain a comfortable appearance and must economize their assets due to Sir Walter and Elizabeth's constant spending. The family decides

to let Kellynch hall to Admiral Croft and his wife, Sophia, who ironically happens to be Wentworth's sister. During that time of transition, Wentworth (now a successful naval captain) coincidentally returns to stay with the couple after an eight year absence. Consequently, he and Anne must re-form a friendship because they spend time in the same social circles among the Croft and Musgrove families, since Anne is staying with her sister, Mary, and her husband Charles Musgrove. Coincidentally, Wentworth crosses paths with Anne again while there, and the two rekindle their romantic relationship since he realizes he still loves her and not Louisa Musgrove. At the novel's end, a letter exchanged between the pair demonstrates Wentworth's constancy towards Anne and her own belief in it. They soon marry and live happily ever after. Anne is driven by duty to accept her position in society while simultaneously accepting the fact that she loves Wentworth. She is the perfect lady because she marries, as women of her class are expected to do, while at the same time she is revolutionary because her husband was not originally a conventionally acceptable match for her.

While an extensive body of criticism exists on Jane Austen and her works, this paper draws primarily on works by Gillian Beer, Kathryn Davis, and Stuart Tave, which relate to the novel's use of language. In addition, I use works by Claire Müller, Bettina Starcke, Kay Young, and Wendy Olmstead to explore embodiment and sensory perception in the novel. Furthermore, in order to successfully encourage readers to reflect on Anne's identity, Jane Austen uses the following persuasive techniques: the language of the novel abides by the rhetorical concepts of *logos*, *pathos*, *ethos*, and *kairos*. These Greek techniques are foundational in constructing persuasive literary works. The Aristotelian definition of rhetoric is to "[l]et rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" which is the function of those techniques (Wimsatt & Beardsley 115). Rhetorical principles and practices connect the disparate threads of the novel. "Unity is created when a single image or figure of speech is extended throughout a work or when several images or figures form a pattern" (Dobie 45). The unity of the novel appears to be connected to Anne and Austen's use of rhetorical strategies, Using feminist theories of narration and embodiment, and a formalist attention to the novel's use of rhetorical concepts as well as perspectives drawn from those Aristotelian rhetorical concepts, this paper argues that Jane Austen constructs the novel to show how Anne uses language and her own intellect, constancy, and observation to move beyond what her father, Lady Russell, and society say to her about happiness in a marriage.

2. Encouraging Change

The first way in which the language of the novel encourages readers to reflection of Anne, themselves, and society is through logical ideals, or, *logos*. *Logos* is a Greek word which means "speaking reasonably" and is defined as "the systemic investigation of the validity of arguments and reasoning" (Barry 52). In many literary contexts, the word is used to mean reason or logic, or even "speech" itself (Wimsatt & Beardsley 115). In *Persuasion*, *logos* is found when the characters use reasoning. Jane Austen utilizes that strategy throughout her novel in three main ways. First, it is found when Anne's family logically questions the advantages and disadvantages of the marriage according to social customs of the time. It makes sense that Anne's family would question the advantages and consequences of her marriage to Captain Wentworth at the time of their first engagement. Members of upper middle class nineteenth-century British society valued rank, marrying within your class, and maintaining social obligations and domestic duties in an orderly and successful manner. Elizabeth, Mary, and Anne are each supposed to follow these expectations, being the daughters of a British baronet. They are to behave as ladies and to marry gentleman of equal rank, suitable wealth and appealing character. Given this context, it logically follows that Anne should marry into her specific class. Taking into consideration the social and financial pressures of her decision, it would have been hard for her to say yes to Wentworth. Readers understand this, and at the time of the novel it makes sense. The three Elliot daughters are prime examples of the social options a woman at the time could pursue.

Second, Lady Russell and Anne's father are her parental figures who hold authority over her, so she is reasonably bound by duty to obey them. Anne rejects Captain Wentworth's marriage proposal primarily because of her father and Lady Russell's disapproval of their union, and Anne has too much respect for their authority to disregard their advice. Without explicitly withholding his consent for the marriage, her father, Sir Walter, "...gave it all the negative of great astonishment, great coldness, great silence, and a professed resolution of doing nothing for his daughter. He thought it a very degrading alliance; and Lady Russell received it as a most unfortunate one" (Austen 17). Sir Walter and Lady Russell hold authority over nineteen-year-old Anne, so it is logical that she must adhere to their opinions. Anne herself even says after careful reflection at the end of the novel she was right to yield to Lady Russell in particular. From what Anne knows of Lady Russell at the time, Anne is persuaded, and we as readers are also persuaded to obey and trust her advice. Her father would perhaps withhold her inheritance if she were to marry Wentworth because she gains her name and status from her father, so anything she does affects that. On the other hand, Lady Russell is her mother

figure and cautions Anne against the match because of Wentworth's low status and seemingly unstable income. The two are the authority figures in Anne's life and represent conventional norms because of their strong adherence to those particular ideals. That said, Anne chooses to obey them according to the social importance of doing her duty by her family and out of respect for her elders. At the time of his proposal, Captain Wentworth was a sailor with no money, estate, or high connections attached to his name, prospects which Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Russell, who hold the conventional upper-class view of marriage, found unfavorable.

Finally, not having a formal education makes Anne of no consequence compared to men, who have always been favored in education, whereas women are expected to fulfill domestic duties. Moreover, not having conventional forms of rank, such as a title or husband like her two sisters, Anne's word is of lesser consequence in her family. The fact of which Anne is acutely aware: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything" Anne proclaims to Captain Harville at the end of the novel in a conversation about the constancy of men and women (Austen 220). Anne speaks up for herself and shows her firmness of character. Up until the time of Austen in the nineteenth century, many women writers were denied having their works published. Perhaps Austen was speaking to her own struggles and the struggles of women writers who could not voice their opinion in society as fully as possible due to the patriarchal system of society. This demonstration of Anne's fortitude is a powerful instance of change in Anne. Each of these components strengthens Jane Austen's argument that Anne made the right decision in first denying Captain Wentworth, and readers are encouraged through logic to reflect and change their perspectives.

The second rhetorical strategy which encourages readers to reflect on identity versus conventional expectations through the language of the novel, is *pathos*. *Pathos* refers to a rhetorical strategy that appeals to the audience's emotions and attempts to elicit a common response. According to M.H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, "Pathos in Greek meant the passions, or suffering, or deep feeling generally," and in modern criticism "is attributed to a scene or passage that is designed to evoke the feelings of tenderness, pity, or sympathetic sorrow from the audience" (Abrams 143). Because everyone experiences pity, sympathy, and sorrow at some point in their lives, literary works can use that common experience to generate sympathy in an audience. It appeals to the human senses, yet is not sentimentality or overly-done emotion (Isham). Hearers (or readers) "are led to feel emotion [*pathos*] by the speech" (Wimsatt & Beardsley 115). *Pathos* is depicted throughout the novel in three ways. First, *pathos* arises in the romance plot and the tension among affection, family, and social class that surface when Anne attempts to marry outside her station. Second, Austen employs the literary devices of metaphor and onomatopoeia to express character's strong feelings and ideas which attempt to produce identical responses in readers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Anne's first reason for being persuaded by Lady Russell which may evoke sorrow or pity in readers is the fact that Anne's mother is dead, and Anne finds it impossible to communicate her feelings to disobey the woman who stands in her mother's place. Each of these plot points cause emotional reactions in the novel's readers which encourage reflection on identity and social status through Anne's situation.

In the narrator's hands, Anne's questions, private reactions, and ordinary words like "could," take on added significance and power. Small changes in diction or shifts in subject become the engines that gradually alter both Anne's opinions and the novel's readers. For instance, when she realizes how quickly a friend whose fiancé died before they could wed, is in love again, Anne becomes overwhelmingly conscious of Wentworth's unflinching constancy towards herself. As they discuss the friend, Anne asks Wentworth a question about Lyme, diverting from the tense topic of constancy but not ending the conversation. The speech is perhaps the strongest example of Anne's ability to shift a conversation and illustrates Austen's appeal to human emotions (or, persuasion) using images and onomatopoeia:

Either from the consciousness, however, that his friend had recovered, or from some other consciousness, he went no farther; and Anne, who, in spite of the agitated voice in which the latter part had been uttered, and in spite of all the various noises of the room, the almost ceaseless slam of the door, and ceaseless buzz of persons walking through, had distinguished every word, was struck, gratified, confused, and beginning to breathe very quick, and feel a hundred things in a moment. It was impossible for her to enter on such a subject; and yet, after a pause, feeling the necessity of speaking, and having not the smallest wish for a total change, she only deviated so far as to say, 'You were a good while at Lyme, I think?' (Austen 123)

The onomatopoeia of "slam" and "buzz" along with metaphors allow readers to hear what is happening in Anne's mind. It is a valuable illustration of how Austen appeals to human emotions in order to persuade readers to reflect on the situation. However, Captain Wentworth could not believe fully in the attachment, especially after Benwick's betrothed, Fanny Harville, had passed away only six and a half months before. He exclaims: "A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman!" in reference to the situation (Austen 173). Wentworth's vehement

exclamation implies that he has felt the same way, or he would not have proclaimed the statement with such passion. Indeed, "From some other consciousness, he went no farther" (Austen 173). Readers are encouraged to understand that he's shifted from thinking about Benwick to thinking about himself.

Now, the third rhetorical strategy which encourages readers to reflect upon identity and societal expectations through the novel's language is *ethos*. It is also a Greek word, and it means "a person's overall disposition or character" (Abrams 143). The word also means "stamp," "seal," or "habit." One's character is formed through specific behavior. It conveys an image of decorum which should meet the audience's expectations, which is ultimately that which persuades them (Isham). Aristotle even says that "character is almost, so to speak, the most persuasive form of persuasion" because the person speaking is made worthy of belief (Wimsatt & Beardsley 115). In the novel *Persuasion*, Jane Austen encourages readers to reflection based on the portrayal of Anne's empathetic character. Anne Elliot's character is established at several points in the plot as an intelligent, dependable, and constant person. The first time readers are introduced to Anne, they receive a conflicting picture of her character: "Anne, with an elegance of mind and a sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;--she was only Anne." (Austen 7). This is only the first representation, or "formula" given of her character, and it leaves readers asking, "Why?" "Why is Anne not able to speak and not able to gain leverage with her family? What holds her back?" Anne is dutiful, prudent, and conscientious of others and the situations around her. These qualities also prevent her from rebelling against her family's coldness or rejecting their advice. Over time, readers grow attuned to Anne's character as the narrator describes her from the viewpoints of characters like Captain Wentworth and Captain Benwick. Austen also uses specific words which show Anne's almost impossible ability to communicate what she wants to say because she is so conscious of others feelings and the spaces which they visit. This representation of Anne aids readers in believing that she truly does undergo a change and that her final conclusion to return to Captain Wentworth is correct.

Finally, the fourth rhetorical strategy which encourages readers to acknowledge and to accept the resolution of Anne and Wentworth's situation through the language of the novel is *kairos*. It is another Greek word, which, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary definitions, originally translated to "fitness, opportunity, time," and the more commonly attributed definition is "a time when conditions are right for the accomplishment of a crucial action: the opportune and decisive moment" ("Kairos"). Mainly, the timing in which Anne and Wentworth relate their feelings to each other is crucial to the resolution of the plot. "A few months had been the beginning and the end of their acquaintance; but not with a few months ended Anne's share of suffering from it. Her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect" (Austen 28). The narrator clarifies Anne's feelings with an appeal to emotion with the emphasis on how so much time has passed, as well as how much time was lost. That properly placed timing after eight years encourages readers to reflect upon the time frame in which certain scenes take place in the novel's plot and the knowledge they already have of Anne and Wentworth's relationship to guess what will happen next.

3. Conclusion

Anne Elliot moves from being "the other," non-consequential woman, to a powerful, eloquent woman by the end of the novel. Stuart Tave emphasizes that "One way of describing the action of *Persuasion* is to say that it begins when Anne's word has no weight and it ends when her word pierces a man's soul" (256). She goes from being unable to speak to being strong enough to pierce a man's soul with her words. That is a profound change, and the timing of it is key. In the beginning of the novel Anne is not credible and only seen as an easily persuaded, useful woman to her family. However, at the end, readers understand the complexity of Anne's character and motives. Both she and Captain Wentworth become more self-aware as the plot develops because, due to their broken communication, they struggle with understanding each other's motives and characters at first. Wentworth believes Anne to be inconstant and yielding. That is why the yielding is so important, however, because it is a virtue in Anne's estimation. Aristotle's definition of virtue is "The excellence that makes anything an outstanding specimen of its kind, especially well-fitted to its ends. When applied to human beings, the word has no necessary moral implications, though it carries them conventionally" (Wimsatt & Beardsley 212). This is ironic because this paper explains that Anne breaks from conventional expectations and into a freedom of self-knowledge. But it is also important because the rhetorical devices used in the novel are Aristotelian in origin, which strengthens Anne's argument.

Through Anne's constant reasoning, feeling, and putting her thoughts into action at the right time, she forms a virtuous character which allows her to overcome conventional ideas. She possesses the power of reflection which allows her to make informed decisions. The rhetorical strategy of *logos* relates to how Anne believes to be doing what

she thought right at the time—her duty. The second strategy is *pathos*, which elicits emotional reactions in the readers because the narrator's descriptions draw readers into the action and feelings of the characters. A look Wentworth gave, a word Anne did not say, each express something succinct within each scene of interaction, and the pair reflects in order to decipher what the other might mean to communicate. The third strategy is *ethos*, which Austen uses to construct Anne's character through the narrator's and other character's descriptions of her. Finally, the fourth rhetorical strategy, *kairos*, is important because the timing of all of the interactions in the novel advance or interrupt the plotline and its resolution. *Persuasion* traces the reunion of Anne with her former fiancé, Captain Wentworth, but it is also a critique of upper middle class nineteenth-century British society and a woman's role within it. Austen's use of diction and rhetoric in the novel encourages readers to reflect on their position in society in comparison to conventional expectations by illustrating Anne Elliot's realization of her individual self and place in society through careful reflection.

4. Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Alyson Kiesel for her constant and dedicated support throughout the process of writing and revising this senior thesis project. Without her assistance, I would not have been able to write my argument as concisely and cohesively. She helped me work through numerous questions and edits. Second of all, I would like to thank Dr. Pamela Smiley and Dr. Seemee Ali for their constant dedication and advice they gave me throughout the process of writing this senior thesis as well. Without their guidance and insight, I would not have learned about literary theories and grasped Jane Austen's unique writing style throughout this process. Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to my wonderful senior thesis class for all of their helpful tips and feedback they gave throughout the extensive process of writing, as well as Dr. John Isham for explaining rhetorical strategies to me, along with the countless other people who gave me support, a listening ear, and suggestions for revision or addition.

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