

**TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL**

**ENGLISH B**

**EXTENDED ESSAY**

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**Research Question:** How is the social structure in the 19th century British society reflected by Jane Austen in the novel "Persuasion"?

## **Abstract**

In most of her works Jane Austen chooses to depict the life of upper class people. While doing so, she also broadly analyzes and explores the social structure of the society of the time, which at some points becomes the target of her criticism. In this essay my aim was to make a thematical analysis of the social structure of the nineteenth century British society relying on Austen's last completed novel, *Persuasion*. The class structure of nineteenth century's British society is broadly analyzed, and criticized at some points by Jane Austen. Mr. Elliot, stands for the general perception of a gentlemen of the time who has exceedingly gentle behaviours and valued only by the name of his family, who lacks any personal qualities. However, Captain Wentworth represents the changing idea of a gentlemen, who gains his respectability and high degree of social status from his own efforts. Author seems to be supporting this change in social structure which brings out more social mobility for the people who do not inherit a title or land from their family such as Captain Wentworth and suggests an alternative of the previous substantial social structure in which individuals did not have any social mobility.

## **INDEX**

### **Abstract**

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. Jane Austen (1775-1817)**

#### **1.2. Persuasion**

### **2. Analysis**

#### **2.1. Marriage**

#### **2.2. Role of Women in the Society**

#### **2.3. Social Classes**

#### **2.4. Importance of Appearance**

#### **2.5. Naval Profession**

#### **2.6. Family Relations**

### **3. Conclusion**

### **4. Bibliography**

## **1.Introduction**

### **1.1. Jane Austen (1775-1817)**

Jane Austen was one of the most prominent English novelists. In her novels she depicted the domestic life of upper and middle class of nineteenth century English society. She is known for her witty and elegantly structured satirical writing style. “Jane Austen is different from other writers of her time, because her main interest is in the moral, social and psychological behaviour of her characters. She writes mainly about young heroines as they grow up and search for personal happiness. Austen’s pictures are detailed, often ironic, and always about a small number of people.” (Carter,121) Her most acknowledged works are: *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*.

### **1.2.Summary**

“*Persuasion* (1818), JaneAusten’s last completed novel, is her most subtly wrought work and the one in which her concern with manners is revealed at its most profound. Manners are here far more than the pleasantries of social polish. They are the fundamental means of communication in gentry society, an index not merely of class, intelligence and sensitivity, but of forbearance and submission to authority, of personal integrity and moral rectitude...It is in such a world that the most mature of Jane Austen’s heroines has to discover the truth about her feelings and the nature of the world about her. In a situation of the utmost delicacy, Anne Elliot, with a shallow snob for a father and a limited though well-meaning adviser in Lady Russell, has been persuaded to reject the man she loves” (Coote, 379)

The novel opens with a description of Sir Walter Elliot and the reader is introduced to the family of him by the book “baronetcy” which he reads at the beginning of the novel. From the book, we learn that he is a member of a prosperous and respected family, who proudly bears the title of “baronet”. We also learn about Lady Elliot, who is told to be an impeccable mate for Sir Elliot who compensated all inadequacies of him and preserved the level of respectability of their family who involved three daughters besides themselves: Mary, the youngest who is married to Charles Musgrove and the elders, Elizabeth and Anne. However, by the time Lady Elliot had passed away the girls were too young to take care of themselves and Lady Russell, the intimate and reliable friend of Lady Elliot inherited the guidance of her family.

After being informed on the Elliot Family's history, we come across with their present life, which locates the respected title of their family under risk as a result of Sir Elliot and his daughter Elizabeth's lavish overspendings. They are advised by Lady Russell to decrease their expenses however, Sir Walter and Elizabeth are too vain to compromise from their comfort and the family is brought under great debt. The only remaining solution to decrease the burden of debt is to relocate from their house in Kellynch Hall in which they live under excessively lavish conditions and rent it to an appropriate tenant.

Soon, this appropriate tenant for the house is determined to be the Crofts, which consists of Admiral Croft who serves for the Navy and his wife Mrs. Croft. This creates a different excitement for Anne when compared to all other Elliot family members as Mrs. Croft is her past lover, Frederick Wentworth's, sister whom she was persuaded by Lady Russell to separate eight years ago and couldn't be able to forget since then. Firstly Sir Walter is disturbed by the thought of letting his family house to an Admiral whom he concerns below himself in both social and most importantly physical terms. Contradictingly, after meeting the tenants, his prejudiced opinion about them is proved to be wrong and two families come to an agreement on the house.

By the time Elizabeth and Sir Elliot set off for Bath which is to become their new place, Anne chooses to stay with her sister Mary and his husband Charles Musgrove's family for a while in the village of Uppercross. As annoying as Mary's endless complaints are, Anne spends a relatively pleasant time there. She becomes delightful as some of her characteristic qualities which are ignored by her family are appreciated by Musgrove family. Soon, she discovers that Frederick Wentworth has returned from the sea and will also be visiting Musgrove family. The family and Captain Wentworth get along well and he frequents Uppercross. However, from his cold and distant behaviours Anne loses all her hopes about any remnants of the past being alive in Captain Wentworth.

After having spent two months at Uppercross, Anne leaves for Kellynch again to meet Lady Russell there and they set off for Bath to rejoin the rest of the family. There, she is introduced to his cousin Mr. Elliot whom she thinks to be hiding perversity under the mask of his courtesy. Mr. Elliot seems to develop a growing interest in Anne. This interest doesn't escape from Captain Wentworth's notice as well as other people and makes him recognize his devotion to Anne. He describes how he feels to Anne in a letter and soon they decide to marry. This time the Elliot family and Lady Russell are left without any strong grounds of

objection to the marriage of Captain Wentworth and Anne, as now he has enough money and title to be an appropriate match for Anne.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. Marriage

*“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a good wife”. (Pride & Prejudice)*

In most of Jane Austen’s works, marriage plays an important role and usually, she prefers to deliver her criticism towards the society and its morals by using this concept. Similarly, the plot of Persuasion is shaped around the marriage between the heroine of the novel, Anne Elliot, and Captain Wentworth.

In the society of the time, marriage constituted a woman’s main purpose in life and families raised their daughters merely for nothing more than to become adequate wives for their future husbands. Once they reached the age of marriage which was usually 18-19, they were expected to get married and a woman’s remaining single until her thirties was perceived to be extraordinary among the society. In the novel we are faced with Elizabeth Elliot’s, the eldest daughter of the Elliot family, fear of her chances of marrying to decrease as she grows older. “... she felt her approach to the years of danger, and would have rejoiced to be certain of being properly solicited by baronet-blood within the next twelve month or two”(Austen, 5) It is clear that the women are appreciated only to the extent that their appearance suggested. By the time their beauty of youth wore out they lost their chances of getting married. At this point, an inequality between men and women seems to be present as it attracts Anne’s attention that Captain Benwick has a greater chance of getting married than her despite their being at the same age, as it is socially acceptable for a man to marry much later in life than a woman. “ He is younger than I am in feeling if not in fact; younger as a man” (Austen, 96)

The marriages of the time were perceived as the fulfillment of materialistic desires of both sides along with their families’ and a marriage’s chance to succeed was not determined by the strength of the commonly shared feelings between the sides but by the appropriateness of the social ranks of each sides’ families. Elliot family’s youngest daughter Mary, is married to Charles Musgrove, a member of “ An old country family of respectability and a large fortune” ( Austen, 4) Sir Walter identifies her marriage to be satisfactory and desires her other two daughters to make as appropriate matches as Mary did. Soon after, the reader comprehends

that her marriage with Charles Musgrove is completely miserable as they do not share anything more than social rank in common. Applying the same superficial morals, Sir Elliot and Lady Russell, identify Anne's marriage with Captain Wentworth as an unsatisfactory one. "Anne Elliot with all her claims of birth, beauty and mind to throw herself away at nineteen, involve herself in nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining influence"(Austen, 24). Although Anne is a sensible woman who is able to make her own independent decisions having less class consciousness than the other members of the family, she is not able to leave the thoughts of her families aside, especially Lady Russell's and is persuaded to reject Captain Wentworth's proposal. Preventing Anne from getting married to a man whom she loves Lady Russell and Sir Elliot try to persuade Anne to marry William Elliot who is the heir of the "baronet" title of Sir Elliot's. In a while, it is revealed that William Elliot is a dishonest and a mean person which creates an irony when compared with Sir Elliot's and Lady Russells previous impressions on him.

Despite the social concerns that the members of aristocracy possess in a marriage, members of the Navy give prominence to love and presence of commonly shared feelings. The marriages between them consequently have a better degree of sincerity and contentment. The Crofts who are the tenants of Kellynch Hall of Elliot family have tight bonds between them formed by their love towards each other and they share a lot in common. Similarly ,the marriage of the Harvilles is portrayed as a successful marriage in the novel.

Taking the various marriages in the novel into consideration, it can be concluded that Austen supports the idea that one's social rank is important to an extent, yet, she is supportive of the idea that the presence of commonly shared feelings and intimate understanding of each other between the partners are the prominent qualities that sustain a marriage.

## **2.2. Role of women in the society**

In the nineteenth century British society, women did not play any significant role beyond being a wife and a mother. As a female writer, Austen experienced the inconveniences of being a woman in her career. She had to hide her identity while writing as it was inappropriate for woman to write.

The society was very male dominated in the time of Jane Austen. We can see the reflections of this in the novel thoroughly. Sir Elliot has three daughters and yet, he is in need of a heir

who will take over all his title and land who would be a stranger in any case while his daughters won't receive anything from his fortune. This clearly emphasizes the insignificance of women in the society.

Women not only lack the right to inherit their father-land but they are also regarded as materials of trade that are exchanged through satisfactory alliances between the families by the process defined as an appropriate marriage in the society. While they were of no significant importance independently, women were respected depending upon their husbands' achievements and titles as Mary dwells upon in her words by saying " If he should ever be made a baronet! ' Lady Wentworth' sounds very well. That would be a noble thing indeed, for Henrietta! She would take place of me then and Henrietta would not dislike that" (Austen, 74)

In consequence of the pre-determined role for them as adequate wives , women were raised not to have any in-depth understanding of the world and they lacked ability to survive independently. However, in most of her novels, Jane Austen chooses her heroines from the female characters who have the ability to develop her own thoughts on the world and fulfills them to be considered important by the pleasant characteristic qualities which make them diverging female figures in the society who carry value individually. In the novel we came across with Anne Elliot as a sensible woman who has the ability to think independently and in a sensible manner in conflict with the traditional woman figure who lacks any depth of thought . Anne Elliot seems to be a prototype of the woman modal Austen idealizes, she doesn't gain her respect by the title and land her husband possesses but by her own personal qualities.

### **2.3. Social classes**

The early nineteenth century was a period of alteration for the social classes in British society. In the novel, it is apparent that the upper class is being divided into two distinct branches: the navy and the aristocratic upper class. Sir Walter, a land owning baronet who enjoys all the privileges that his title bring to him, without being aware of his responsibilities, is embodiment of the indolent aristocratic class. The hostility between aristocracy and the Navy is represented by Sir Elliot's disdainful demeanors. He describes the Navy as being the means of "bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction" which clearly reflects his awareness of the threat that the hardworking navy poses to the vain aristocratic class. Even, Lady Russell, who is also a member of the aristocratic class though being capable of giving sensible decisions and seems to carry less from the aristocratic pride of her fellow Sir Elliot,

holds some prejudices who possess an elevated social rank. “She had a cultivated mind, and was, generally speaking, rational and consistent; but she had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them.” (Austen, 10)

However, the new generation of the aristocratic class does not possess the prejudices that their families have towards the Navy. Anne, who is the daughter of a vain and indolent baronet, can be said to be refusing the superiority of aristocracy over the Navy by getting married to Captain Wentworth which also symbolizes her escape from the superficial morals and relationships of her own class. Similarly Louisa Musgrove’s marriage with Captain Benwick display that the navy is integrating into the upper class.

In the novel, Sir Elliot who hasn’t made any efforts to own it, loses the control over his land as a result of his lavish overspendings and left with no choice but renting his house. The Crofts family who work for the Navy rents the beloved Kellynch Hall of the Elliot family which signals a progression from old social structure to a new, more dynamic one. The Crofts family is depicted as a better landholder than the Elliot family which reflects that Austen supports this alteration in the social structure at some points.

#### **2.4. Importance of Appearance**

As it is previously mentioned under the title “Social Classes” the society of the time possessed some superficial morals by which the people were judged. In the novel we come across with the “Importance of Appearance” as an implication of those superficial morals. Most of the aristocrats value the appearance of a person on top of everything, which at the same time constitutes the main grounds on which Sir Elliot despises Admiral Baldwin, a member of the Navy. “... and a certain Admiral Baldwin, the most deplorable-looking personage you can imagine; his face the colour of mahogany, rough and rugged to the last degree; all lines and wrinkles, nine grey hairs of a side, and nothing but a dab of powder at top.” (Austen, 18)

#### **2.5. Navy**

In the early nineteenth century, in consequence of the Napoleonic Wars between France and Britain, English Navy became of great importance among the society. By the time they returned from the sea, they had made a considerable fortune.

In contrast with the aristocrats who obtained their supremacy in the society from their father owned land and titles, the members of the Navy obtained their money and respect from their own efforts and hard working. Therefore, as it is mentioned under the title of “social class” previously, the Navy suggested a shift in upper class; from land-owning lazy aristocrats to the hardworking members of the Navy.

Throughout the novel, we come across with several different characters from the Navy, most prominent of which are Captain Wentworth, Captain Benwick, the Harvilles and the Crofts families. All these characters are depicted as upright and sincere people which seems to represent Austen’s appreciation of them. Also, female figures in the novel display a high level of gratitude and reverence towards the members of the Navy, recognizing the value of their efforts for the country. “Louisa, by whom she found herself walking, burst forth into raptures of admiration and delight on the character of the navy ; their friendliness their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness, protesting that she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England..”(Austen, 98)

Despite the younger generations’ appreciation of the pleasant qualities of the Navy, older members of the aristocrats possessed a prejudice against them as it is clearly reflected in the words of Sir Elliot, who is a stereotype of a vain aristocrat: “... I have two strong grounds of objection to it. First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; and secondly as it cuts up a man’s youth and vigour most horribly; a sailor grows old sooner than any other man..” (Austen, 19) This prejudice of Sir Elliot is caused by the superficial morals he possesses which seem to represent the general morals of the aristocratic people of the time. These morals locate the physical appearance on top of everything and therefore despise the members of the Navy. At this point, it is clear that the Navy have more important things to concern than their physical appearance and this results in their holding on more sincere values such as friendship, uprightness and hard-work rather than the superficial morals of the aristocrats. Eventually, the relationships between the members of the Navy seem to involve more sincerity and intimacy than those between the aristocrats. Thus, they can be said to form healthier relationships as it is evident in Anne’s regret of her rejection of Captain Wentworth’s proposal when she became aware of their sincere and intimate understanding of friendship. “ These would have been all my friends” (Austen, 97)

Another prominent characteristic quality of the members of the Navy appears to be their hospitality. Taking its source from the intimate morals that they have, all members of the Navy are ready to open their house to another member or even to aristocrats for the sake of being helpful. This becomes evident in Harvilles' opening their house to whole family without seeking any benefits when Henrietta, the daughter of the Musgrove family, becomes injured by her fall at a seashore during their visit to Lyme. Along with their other characteristics their hospitality serves for the purpose of clarifying the difference between the aristocrats and the Navy, as the aristocrats' understanding of the hospitality consists of organizing lavish parties in order to display their level of wealth. "...Such a bewitching charm in a degree of hospitality so uncommon, so unlike the usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display..." (Austen, 97)

## **2.6. Family Relations**

We are presented with a variety of families of different social rank and wealth throughout the novel. Some of these families display examples of successful marriages which eventually result in happy families while some are the most outstanding examples of unhappy families in consequence of problematic marriages. The families in the novel can be examined better by dividing into two: aristocratic families and naval families.

The Elliot family is an aristocratic family in which the lack of a maternal figure is compensated by Lady Russell, a sensible and an insightful woman. All the members of the family except Anne possess an excessive amount of pride and class consciousness. As a result of this, family members share nothing more than a blood relation, which results in their having no respect for each other's feelings as it is apparent in their rejection of Anne's marriage with Captain Wentworth. (Austen, 24) The family bonds are so weak that even William Elliot, the heir of Sir Elliot, does not actually care about his family beyond the title and land they will provide for him. However, it is remarkable in the Musgrove family of Uppercross, which is another example of an aristocratic family, that the members have a greater level of respect for each other and less class consciousness, which results in their forming healthier and stronger relationships with each other and a happier family than that of the Elliots'.

If the naval families in the book such as Crofts and Harvilles are examined, it is observed that they stand out as examples of more sincere and happy families than that of the aristocrats. In fact, Navy forms a family inside itself which consists of devoted members. As Captain

Wentworth dwells upon by saying “ I would assist any brother officer’s wife that I could and I would bring anything of Harville’s from the world’s one end if he wanted it ” (Austen, 68), the members of the Navy are ready to do anything for each other. At the same time, Wentworth’s referring to Captain Harville as his “brother” reflect the presence of intimate and strong relationships between them.

In contrast with the insincere families of the aristocrats which consist of self-absorbed and conceited members, naval families are portrayed to be large and happy, which seems to be a symbol of an aristocracy in decline.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, it can be said that the social structure of the 19th century British society is broadly analyzed and criticised at some points by Jane Austen in her last completed novel, *Persuasion*. This is most significantly achieved by the central concept around which the main plot of the story evolves, marriage. The concept of marriage is portrayed as a crucial concept which determines the role of women in the society. Austen can be said to be suggesting an alternative understanding of marriage which is based on commonly shared feelings rather than the general understanding of marriage of the time which is solely based on material concerns. Moreover, by this alternative understanding of marriage that is suggested by the author, the important role that the women should play in the society is prioritized which is enhanced by the sensible and intelligent heroine of the novel, Anne Elliot. In the mean time, the novel bears witness to the change that the social structure of the society undergoes centering around the change in upper class in consequence of Industrial Revolution. The reader is presented with two different alternatives of upper class; the aristocrats and the members of the Navy. The differences between these two groups are clarified by their diverging moral values and family relations throughout the novel. The conflict that these differences create becomes evident by the marriage between Anne Elliot who is a member of aristocracy and Captain Wentworth, a member of the Navy. From her satirical descriptions of the aristocrats’ superficial morals and the depictions of the pleasant characteristics of the Navy, it becomes clear that the author is supportive of the new understanding of the upper class that is developed by the members of the Navy as it maintains more social mobility among the society.

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