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ENGLISH B
EXTENDED ESSAY

“To what extent do the class structure and social rules in the 18th and 19th centuries influence the relationships of the heroine Anne with the other characters in the novel ‘Persuasion’ written by Jane Austen?”

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ABSTRACT

This extended essay examines the effects of social and economic factors on the relationships between the heroine and other characters by taking the following research question into consideration:

“To what extent do the class structure and social rules in the 18th and 19th centuries influence the relationships of the heroine Anne with the other characters in the novel ‘Persuasion’ written by Jane Austen?”

Based on the thesis that each and every character has a particular mission in the novel, the essay is separated into parts that include different characters’ relationships with Anne Elliot, the heroine of Persuasion.

The characters that are chosen in order to explore the social structure are; Lady Russell, Mrs. Smith, Elizabeth, Mary, Sir Walter and Captain Wentworth. The reason for choosing these figures is that all of them symbolize a certain class by being a member of it.

In addition to this, the arrangement of the sections in the essay is made according to a certain order. Initially, female figures are stated so as to demonstrate the general perception towards women in the mentioned era. First of all, Lady Russell and Anne is analysed, thus, the reason of the main conflict in the novel; the separation of Anne and Captain Wentworth is emphasized. Then the other figures that are affected from the class structured society are explored and at that point the concept of sisterhood and its being shaped by the social structure is underlined. Finally, the male figures are examined and some assumptions are generated about formation of the main conflict.

In conclusion, a judgment about the existence of the connection between social and economic structure of England in the 18th and 19th centuries and the relationships between Anne and other characters is reached and the parallelism of them is proved.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For most of the novels, the lines or the characters are created for a specific aim; some of them introduce the reader with a literal trend; like the trend of naturalism in “Thérese Raquin” by Emile Zola; sometimes the novels are used as a tool for criticising a governmental system such as capitalism in Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”, similarly in George Orwell’s “Animal Farm” the animals represent some groups or leaders in Russia during Russian revolution. Also the novels can portray an era, considering the social, economic and cultural structure and situation of a country or a region.

Austen’s “Persuasion” presents the class structures of 18th and 19th centuries’ England by describing the relationships between characters with effective dialogues. It portrays an era, but rather than examining historical or political issues in a detailed way, Persuasion takes the social dimensions and conflicts into consideration.

The novel “Persuasion” by Jane Austen which was completed in 1816, just a year before she died, apparently consists of the constancy of love between Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth despite the disapproval that eventually has brought about their separation. However, unlike the other Jane Austen novels, Persuasion is an effective representative of its era in regard to social and economic situation of England in the 19th century besides being a romantic novel.

*“By the time Persuasion was written, France had begun to instigate Napoleonic wars across Europe which also affected England emotionally and militarily.”*¹ This historical event is narrated quite often through the war experiences of soldiers as characters, especially from the mouth of Captain Wentworth, the hero of Persuasion; and this detail can be considered as evidence of the distinguishable feature of the novel which emphasizes that Persuasion not only includes the concept of love but also mentions the historical facts that ensures its formation.

Apart from stating the wars, Persuasion certainly serves as a literary work; treating the class system in England, which was formed during the industrial revolution. In fact, the characters of Persuasion were chosen in order that the classes would be demonstrated such as Mrs. Smith and her nurse both as a member of lower class, and Musgroves as upper class.

¹Tarlson, *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*, Volume 1

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In this essay, the heroine Anne Elliot and her relationships with other characters will be analysed under the features of late 18th and early 19th centuries in England. The characters', especially Anne's decisions and attitudes will be examined around the theme: place of women and men in a class-structured society. Also the influence of social and economic facts on the characters' hearts and minds will be discussed by getting into their relationships with Anne.

2. THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL and ECONOMIC STRUCTURE in 18th and 19th CENTURIES' ENGLAND ON RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ANNE and OTHER CHARACTERS

2.1. LADY RUSSELL AND ANNE

The heroine Anne and Lady Russell's relationship -which is both friendship and mother-daughter bond at the same time- is one of the most striking elements in *Persuasion*, as the main conflict in the novel: "Anne's remorse" takes its source from this powerful relationship. Lady Russell symbolizes this inflexible attitude of the society on marriage and the superiority of prestige and fortune on affection. This judgment was inevitably common for late 18th and early 19th century because of the class system and the desire for ensuring or saving the permanence of honourable names. Anne Elliot, who has a well-known name already, is the character proving the presence of sentiments despite the ignorance towards affection and she mentally rejects the requirements of nobility. Even though Anne has a very strong character and respect to loyalty, it has not been possible to resist suppression of society, under the mask of a close bond, because of the prejudiced and restraining attitude towards women.

In that era, women did not have the chance to work. *"Almost every historian and literary critic of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century agrees that a primary definition of 'work' for women during this period would be some form of sewing or needlework."*²

This situation reinforces the dependence of women on men and for this reason, affection loses its significance; so fortune gains importance in relationships between men and women. In such an era that is under the power of masculinity and women's ability to think is even denied; which can be exemplified from Jane Austen's life as: *"The men may have well discussed politics, but not with the women, and Jane Austen never writes scenes with only men present, for the simple reason that she could never have witnessed such a scene herself"*³, it is highly difficult for a woman to behave according to her own perception and intuition about life.

² Jones, Volume 25. NO.1, winter 2004

³ Mackean,. *"The Authorial Voice and the Heroine's Point of View"*

Anne Elliot also submits to the pressures of the society since, *“She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing- indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it.”*⁴

The main factor, which makes “persuasion” more logical for Anne is, Lady Russell, the one who persuades her. Lady Russell, as previously stated, is the primary representative of suppressive society, so every word of her is accepted as a rule by Anne. Since she is an older friend, Anne is much more respectful towards her judgements and advice. Moreover Lady Russell sees Anne as her daughter and she believes she has a right to interfere in Anne’s life: *“It must not be, if by any interference of friendship, any representations from one who had almost a mother’s love, and mother’s rights, it would be prevented.”*⁵

Nevertheless, more than being sincere, this mother-daughter relationship forms another contradiction and thoroughly explains why Lady Elliot, the actual mother of Anne passed away in the novel. *“Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable; whose judgment and conduct; if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards”*⁶

From the quotation, it might be concluded that unless Lady Elliot had passed away, she might have been the supporter of Anne’s engagement with Frederick Wentworth, since Lady Russell and Lady Elliot have quite different opinions; especially when the subject is affection.

The expression: “Youthful infatuation” might be considered as a clue that once Lady Elliot attempted to resist or resisted the rules of the society and this is something that Lady Russell never dared to do. As a vital fact, the reason why this relationship between Anne Elliot and Lady Russell is powerful in the novel is, its being based on manners and mind. For an era, denying women’s skills, education and being educated can be considered as a chance for a woman and it is possible to observe this inequality from several women characters in the novel that merely focus on marriage. *“[...] if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher than a degree; the pen has been in their hands.”*⁷

⁴ Austen, page 32

⁵ Austen, page 31

⁶ Austen, page 5

⁷ Austen, page 276

Thus, Lady Russell and Anne Elliot; both believing mind's superiority and significance of sensibility, get closer to each other quickly. These two women's relationship springs from the desire for achieving something on their own as a woman, because they are sufficient and intelligent enough to make reasoning and share their opinions with men. Due to being very much loyal to social rules and manners, Lady Russell, in a way throws her chance away; however; in spite of getting worse and worse because of regretting for rejecting Captain Wentworth, Anne acts with courage while she is telling about her opinions on the issue of "men and women's affection" during a discussion with Captain Harville.

To sum up, Lady Russell is the figure, who introduces Anne with the social rules and the class structure; correspondingly, their connection can be perceived as formal and distant rather than being a strong and purified mother-daughter or friendship bond.

2.2. MRS.SMITH AND ANNE

Apart from Lady Russell who has been a determining figure in her fate and her two sisters, there is another woman in Anne Elliot's life: Mrs. Smith. In *Persuasion* there are several representatives of each social class, like Elliots and Musgroves who are members of upper class, similarly another character, Charles Hayter is a member of middle class- and hence is degraded by Mary as "*Nothing but a country curate.*"⁸ -, finally Mrs. Smith stands for lower class. Furthermore, she is the best example for a negative class- shift. "*She had been used to affluence, - it was gone.*"⁹ Yet she appears as a quite powerful and optimistic character; at the same time, she is the key figure of the novel due to her role of enlightening the truths about William Elliot. On this point, Austen emphasizes that, without taking the names, social status, classes and wealth into account, anyone can play a vital role in another person's life. Besides, more than being "anyone", Mrs. Smith is a strong woman who has managed to struggle despite all the disasters she has encountered: the death of her husband, the unexpected poverty, her being crippled because of rheumatic fever. Perhaps, it can be claimed that Mrs. Smith is the character who has been affected by the features of the era the most.

⁸ Austen, page 89

⁹ Austen, page 181

Initially, with Mrs. Smith, the fate of many women; not having any work to do -as mentioned before, except needlework- and lacking of a good education is illustrated. Mrs. Smith is only thirty-one years old in the novel; however the descriptions, the misery that are narrated add twenty or more years to her age. Moreover, her being widow creates a sharp image for the eyes of the society. Being a widow means becoming more useless in the eyes of the society, because a widow does not have a hope that a single woman has. In the novel, there are two widows and a widower. With Lady Russell; the other widow, the point of view towards widows in that era is underlined as: *“Lady Russell [...] should have no thought of a second marriage, needs no apology to the public, which is rather apt to be unreasonably discontented when a woman does marry again than when she does not.”*¹⁰ On the other hand, Captain Benwick; a friend of Captain Wentworth, is a widower, yet at the end of the novel, he marries Louisa Musgrove so that the hardships that women face with and the concept of “rights” are examined with this imperative detail in *Persuasion*.

Throughout the novel, class structure and significance of money are mentioned, and these issues also affect the situation of a widow. A widow, who belongs to lower-class, does not have much chance to go on living; in contrast, if a woman has money and is a member of upper-middle class, then she has some chances to be respected by the society. Sir Walter, as a voice of aristocracy in the novel, stresses this inflexible judgment of the society in a defensive approach: *“Sir Henry Russell’s widow, indeed, has no honours to distinguish her arms; but still, it is a handsome equipage, and no doubt is well known to convey a Miss Elliot – A widow Mrs. Smith lodging in Westgate- buildings!-A poor widow, barely able to live, between thirty and forty-a mere Mrs. Smith...”*¹¹ Nonetheless, neither being widow, nor being a member of lower class, creates an obstacle for Anne to visit her; as Anne is the most unspoiled character when the class structure’s effects are discussed. Also Anne, in a way, admires her *“elasticity of mind”*¹², and *“power of turning readily from evil to good.”*¹³.

¹⁰ Austen, page 5

¹¹ Austen, page 186

¹² Austen, page 181-182

¹³ Austen, page 182

Another major thing that makes them get closer to each other is the change that they undergo. Anne has emotionally corrupted and lost her bloom; Mrs. Smith has become crippled and lost her husband. In short, both of them have lost something and need support. Therefore, these two women's relationship is not affected by the features of the era and as well, it plays an important role for the coming events in Persuasion.

2.3. ELIZABETH AND ANNE

In the novel, Elizabeth Elliot portrays a feeble and passive character, also her relationship with Anne or with Mary are ineffective. In spite of the fact that Elizabeth Elliot shoulders the responsibilities of being Lady Elliot, Jane Austen did not prefer to load intrigue to her acts; because like her father and other sister Mary, she is a weak character. Elizabeth is the one who hasn't got a right to choose in Persuasion: The only difference between her and her father is their gender and; hence she was expected to be Lady Elliot. In short, though she is an Elliot and a well-known, beautiful and elegant lady, she cannot keep her chance to be a happy woman, again mainly because of the influence of the era, and being a member of a motherless family.

Consequently, the "sisterhood" between Anne and Elizabeth is not a favourable and compassionate one. Anne has found love and no matter how short it has been, she has experienced it; on the other hand, Elizabeth has never had the chance to experience affection because the man she has loved once, William Elliot, the heir presumptive has caused a frustration in Elizabeth's life by marrying a "*rich woman of inferior birth*"¹⁴ and "*all acquaintance between them has ceased.*"¹⁵ Although Mr. Elliot's sudden and unexpected marriage occurs primarily because of his hidden aims about being rich, his care for Elizabeth might have ceased due to Elizabeth's and Sir Walter's, also the society's common approach to marriage and their way of defining marriage as "*equality of condition and rank.*"¹⁶

*"Elizabeth, who had liked the man for himself and still more for being her father's heir, and whose strong family pride could see only in him, a proper match for Sir Walter Elliot's eldest daughter."*¹⁷

^{14, 15, 17} Austen, page 9

¹⁶ Austen, page 40

As an assumption; Mr. Elliot may have felt affection towards Elizabeth – and this is not something impossible because Elizabeth has always been elegant and beautiful Lady Elliot – than due to the pressure applied on him for being heir presumptive, his affection has died down. Furthermore Elizabeth, as a young woman and a member of an era that is a desperate period for women where they lead monotonous lives, is affected by this frustration badly, has resented a lot and gradually let herself be the slave of her jealousy. *“Then might she again take up the book of books with as much enjoyment as in her early youth; but now, she liked it not. Always to be presented with the date of her own birth and see no marriage follow but that of a youngest sister, made the book an evil.”*¹⁸

Regarding the status of women in 19th century, marriage is perceived as a competition by Mary and Elizabeth Elliot. Money and being equal are vital for both of them, and the greed for reaching comfortable and luxurious lives, weakens the bond among three sisters; though Anne has never taken any part in such a competition, she emotionally and mentally takes herself away from her sisters; as they have never supported her and tried to understand her. Hence Elizabeth and Anne are different from each other when their personalities, fates and the ratio of being under the effect of class structured society are taken into account.

2.4. MARY AND ANNE

As another relationship, the sisterhood between Anne and Mary can be examined. Dissimilar to Elizabeth, Mary listens to Anne and sometimes takes her advice; because as the smallest sister, she has children and though she has made a ‘convenient’ and ‘right’ marriage, she does not have the skill and patience to bring up children. *“As to the management of their children, his theory was much better than his wife’s [...] I could manage them very well, if it were not for Mary’s interference.”*¹⁹ Like Elizabeth, Mary is similar to her father in terms of giving importance to prestige, money, class equality; however Mary is far more emotional than Elizabeth; thus she resembles Anne too. Nonetheless, instead of trying to be a sensible and sensitive mother, Mary uses her mind and emotions to catch attention and seem like ill all the time.

¹⁸ Austen, page 8

¹⁹ Austen, page 51

Mary's relationship with Anne is like mother-daughter connection. The necessities of the era, her separation from Captain Wentworth and being insignificant in Kellynch Hall has used up Anne's energy, Anne has become mature; on the other hand, Mary is usually ill, she is unhappy most of the time, she does not have any idea about bringing a child up. Although the social structure has affected Mary's attitude and has made her a prejudiced young woman against the ones that are not 'equal' to her; it doesn't have so much influence on these two sisters' relationship. Anne can express her thoughts in Uppercross unlike in Kellynch Hall. Despite the entire minor childish problems, Mary is actually satisfied with the condition that she is in and she has achieved what a woman has to achieve at that era by marrying Charles Musgrove, which Elizabeth couldn't do. All in all, Mary Elliot is the luckiest of the Elliot sisters for she has never resisted society and has managed to have an 'ideal life' for a noble lady.

2.5. SIR WALTER AND ANNE

Apart from the relationships between Anne and the women characters; there is another relationship in *Persuasion* which goes parallel with the features of 18th and 19th centuries' social structure: Anne's and her father, Sir Walter Elliot's relationship. Throughout the novel, instead of a normal father-daughter relationship, father's degrading attitude towards his daughter can be observed. Since "*vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character*"²⁰, he believes property, money, an honourable name, prestige and a good-look is everything that a man needs. As a result of this, he becomes the one who is affected by quitting Kellynch Hall most. "*He had condescended to mortgage as far as he had the power, but he would never disgrace his name so far.*"²¹ ... "*Sir Walter could not have borne the degradation of being known to design letting his house.*"²²

Even though both Lady Russell and Sir Walter Elliot are steady about class structure, unlike Lady Russell, Sir Walter lacks moral values and features of a father.

²⁰ Austen, page 4

²¹ Austen, page 11

²² Austen, page 18

Through the novel, despite the fact that Lady Elliot has died years ago, a supportive father image or a fatherly word for the favour of his daughters cannot be observed in Sir Walter Elliot's acts. Moreover, he despises Anne, for her being so rational and at the same time emotional and insufficient about laying down the domestic law at home. "*Anne [...] was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way; she was only Anne.*"²³ Thus, with his definite and inflexible opinions about class structure, Sir Walter becomes the determining figure when the effects of social and economic factors on the relationships between the characters are considered.

2.6. CAPTAIN WENTWORTH AND ANNE

Last but not least, the affection between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth can be scrutinized under the concept of "social limitations and class structure". To begin with, this relationship is the victim of social rules and the current events that have been taking place at that time. Captain Wentworth is a sailor and it has been a risky job, just because of the wars it does not have a life guarantee and making great fortune is rarely expected from sailors.

As mentioned before, Lady Russell prevents his marriage to Anne but the opinion of Sir Walter against this profession is sharp, definite and as usual degrading. "*I should be sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it... 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.*"²⁴ In spite of the fact that Captain Wentworth "*was confident that he should soon be rich*"²⁵, man without a title could not be an acceptable husband for an Elliot.

In contrary, both Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth are indifferent about social rules and don't find temporary power, "*equality of class and rank*"²⁶ worthy; and as a confirmation, the love between them is preserved for more than eight years. Hence, it can be concluded that their affection could not be directed by severe and strict social rules while their relationship is ceased by these factors.

²³ Austen, page 6

²⁴ Austen, page 23

²⁵ Austen, page 31

²⁶ Austen, page 40

The power of fortune and prestige is again implied with Captain Wentworth's return. When Anne has been persuaded to refuse him, he has not been having a fortune; however, almost nine years later, he returns to Anne's life with a well known name and a considerable fortune. Certainly, this time Sir Walter accepts the marriage without any question; Lady Russell tries her best to get to know Captain Wentworth and admits her fault, Mary is "*the one most immediately gratified by the circumstance*" ²⁷ which means the equality is reached. At the very end of the novel, the concept of Persuasion is examined again. To Captain Wentworth's question '*If he has made a second proposal eight years ago, without having a fortune, what would Anne's answer be?*' ²⁸ she answers that she would accept it. Anne regrets her being persuaded at the beginning of the novel as: "*How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been, - how eloquent, at least were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust providence.*" ²⁹ Perhaps, the first day after her refusal she has started to regret about this separation, and similarly after Anne's answer Captain Wentworth regrets about not having made the second proposal and thinks that the long suffering period "*might have been spared*" ³⁰.

Even so, after such a 'disapproved' marriage, society would inevitably judge them and some problems might have arisen. Briefly, with the theme of money's undeniable power, Jane Austen also points out the strengthening effect of the separation on affection, illustrates love's constancy and emphasizes the might of time.

²⁷ Austen, page 295

²⁸ Austen, page 291

²⁹ Austen, page 35

³⁰ Austen, page 292

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Jane Austen's "Persuasion" is an effective novel, which examines the concept of gender, rights, spiritual and material things in relation with affection that is followed by separation.

The influence of social rules and class structure in 18th and 19th centuries on people's lives, relationships, points of view, is analysed over the research question: "To what extent do the class structure and social rules in the 18th and 19th centuries influence the relationships of the heroine Anne with the other characters in the novel "Persuasion" written by Jane Austen?" While examining the relationships of Anne with female characters; such as her two sisters Mary and Elizabeth, Lady Russell and Mrs. Smith, the status of woman in this era was taken into consideration. Also in Persuasion, these figures are used so as to emphasize the class structure in 18th and 19th centuries' England by underlining their perceptions towards marriage. Furthermore, the relationships of Anne with the male characters can be shown as a proof of the link between the novel with its era. Especially the sharp judgments of Sir Walter signifies the group, defending the class structured society and in contrary Captain Wentworth appears as the one that is mostly affected by this situation with Anne.

While examining the social and economic factors that play an undeniably significant role on the formation of the characters and their relationships, some assumptions are stated in order to create a dimensional view over the figures and the events.

Consequently, the novel "Persuasion" written by Jane Austen can be considered as a tool for expressing class distinction in 18th and 19th centuries' England by consisting of many figures who are the members of different social classes and it also questions the concept of love, suppressed between the borders of social rules, with the hesitations and deciding process of the heroine Anne Elliot.

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