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Ascendancy of Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Russell over Anne Elliot in Jane Austen's Persuasion

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Abstract

Persuasion, published posthumously is the last novel by Jane Austen and as the title suggests one can see that the protagonist is being persuaded easily either by her vain father or their family friend Lady Russell, throughout the novel. In the beginning, though she gives way to their opinions, she realizes later that they were not right in judging things. Towards the end, she learns to be independent, frees herself from their shackles and takes her own decisions. Of the three daughters of Sir Walter Elliot, it is Anne who proves to be intelligent, calm and compassionate in nature.

Jane Austen's Persuasion presents a typical selfish character in her creation of Sir Walter Elliot. The present chapter analyses the role of Sir Walter Elliot and of Lady Russell, both, trying to leave an indelible mark in the mind of Anne Elliot, the female protagonist of the novel. Lady Russell is no less than Sir Elliot in her selfishness. It becomes the responsibility of Anne to establish her individuality by coming out of the psychic pressure exercised by these two people.

Sir Walter Elliot is so obsessed with his position of baronetcy that he least cares to shower happiness and affection upon his daughter, the heroine of the novel, Anne Elliot. He is so mad after rank and high positions that he looks down upon people of inferior ranks. All the while he is engrossed in reading the book of baronetage. It is this negligence from the side of her father that Anne easily gives way to be persuaded by an elderly woman - Lady Russell in matters concerning her marriage which later proves to be an unwise decision. Sir Walter Elliot is represented as an embodiment of selfishness.

Persuasion's story is centred on Anne Elliot. Her father Sir Walter Elliot, a widower faces financial difficulties and is persuaded by Lady Russell, a family friend of his and Mr. Shepherd, his agent to sell his house, the Kellynch Hall to Mr. and Mrs. Croft and move to Bath. Anne does not accompany her father and sister to Bath but she goes to reside with her younger sister Mary Musgrove at Uppercross. She also gets accustomed with the Musgroves and their daughters Henrietta and Louisa.

When the Crofts move to Kellynch Hall, Captain Wentworth, the brother of Mrs. Croft comes to stay with them. Eight years ago, Captain Wentworth was engaged to Anne but as her father Sir Walter Elliot did not approve of their marriage, the engagement between them was broken off. Henrietta is proposed to Charles Hayter, a cousin of the Musgroves; Louisa becomes Wentworth's companion.

After sometime Anne leaves Uppercross and comes to stay with Lady Russell. But Anne does not disclose anything about Captain Wentworth to Lady Russell. A few days later Anne accompanied by Lady Russell goes to stay with Sir Walter in Bath. Anne is amazed to find Mr. Elliot, an heir to Sir Walter

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renewing his relationship with her father and sister. Sir Walter is seen in high spirits because he is in the company of their noble cousins, Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter Miss Carteret. At this juncture, Anne renews her friendship with a former friend of hers, Mrs. Smith who is now poor, widowed and crippled. Sir Walter is offended by this conduct of Anne, as he does not like mixing with people of lower ranks.

Lady Russell thinks that Mr. Elliot would propose to Anne after his mourning for his first wife is over. But Anne succeeds to understand that Mr. Elliot is inhuman and he is after the wealth of Sir Walter Elliot. She wants to convey this to Lady Russell, as she thinks that Lady Russell will surely not ask her to marry Mr. Elliot after knowing his true colour.

Anne gets to know that Captain Wentworth is in Bath, when she happens to meet him in a shop. She receives a letter from Mary that Louisa is engaged to Captain Benwick. The Musgroves also arrive in Bath. Anne visits the Musgroves and she finds Captain Wentworth there. The next time when she meets the Musgroves, she gets a letter from Captain Wentworth in which he reveals that he has not stopped loving her and that he still loves her. Anne meets Captain Wentworth outside in the street and they talk to each other of their actual feelings and the past misunderstandings. Thus both come to know that they still have a soft corner for each other.

Anne gets consent for her marriage with Captain Wentworth from her father, Lady Russell and other friends. She never finds fault with Lady Russell for having broken off her engagement with Captain Wentworth eight years ago. She thinks that it was right to accept her advice when she was young. At the end of the novel, Anne is seen as the happiest person.

In the novel, Jane Austen has portrayed Sir Walter Elliot as a silly person. He is very much in the grip of snobbish and extravagant life. It is due to his luxurious life that he is forced to leave Kellynch Hall and go to Bath. He decides to let Kellynch Hall to a tenant, Admiral Croft and departs with Elizabeth and Mrs. Clay. Sir Walter decides for Anne that she must rejoin the family after Christmas and in the meantime she would be living with Mary in Uppercross and then with Lady Russell. Anne is not given any choice about her movements and it is her father who takes all decisions on her behalf.

Sir Walter Elliot is also too much obsessed with Baronetage. In the words of Jane Austen herself: Sir Walter -

was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt.¹

The novelist seems to review critically the snobbery of Sir Walter in particular and of such persons in general. Christopher Gillie observes:

He is idle, useless and stupid, but he is sure that his fine appearance, his deportment and his rank offer the only respectable criteria for a fine society.²

It is due to his attachment towards rank and nobility that he once happened to be severe with Anne as she had visited an early friend of hers; Mrs. Smith, who is now a crippled poor widow. Sir Walter's reaction is thus:

"Westgate Buildings!" said he; "and who is Miss Anne Elliot to be visiting in Westgate Buildings? – A Mrs. Smith. A widow Mrs. Smith and who was her husband? One of the five thousand Mr. Smiths whose names are to be met with everywhere. And what is her attraction? That she is old and sickly - Upon my word, Miss Anne Elliot, you have the most extraordinary taste! Everything that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul

air, disgusting associations are inviting to you. But surely you may put off this old lady till tomorrow. She is not so near her end, I presume, but that she may hope to see another day. What is her age? Forty?"³

The last question asked by Sir Walter Elliot reveals that he is also very much obsessed with age.

Richard Simpson makes an appraisal of Sir Walter:

He is at bottom a fool, with two fixed ideas to guide all his judgements. Vain of his own rank and good looks, these two points form his scale of comparison and rule of judgement for all men and all things.⁴

Simpson's view is based on what Sir Walter says in the novel, regarding the naval profession:

"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; I have observed it all my life."⁵

Sir Walter hates people belonging to naval profession. Jane Austen herself presents an account of Sir Walter Elliot's character:

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did; nor could the valet of any new-made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir waiter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.⁶

Sir Walter Elliot is very happy to receive his relatives - Viscountess Dalrymples and her daughter Miss Carteret, because they belong to the baronetage. On the contrary Anne is not at all interested in them. But she knows her father's character very well. Christopher Gillie attests to this fact.

She already knows her father's infatuation with appearances, especially his own, but she had to observe the absurdity of his cultivation of the Dalrymples merely because they have even greater prestige of rank, and she has to feel the extreme of his superciliousness to his social inferiors in his opinion that to be surnamed Smith and to live in Westgate Buildings is virtually not to exist at all.⁷

Mr. Croft very easily finds out Sir Walter's obsession with good looks. He tells Anne that:

"I should think he must be rather a dressy man for his time of life."⁸

Mr. Croft moves out all the large mirrors of Sir Walter when he rented in Kellynch Hall. There are also evidences to show that he is fond of make-ups.

Sir Walter wishes Lady Russell would wear rouge, and recommends the use of 'Gowland' to Mrs. Clay for her freckles.⁹

These references obviously point to Sir Walter's psychic aberration that reflects his conceit and his unnatural desire to mask oneself within the make-up materials.

Sir Walter Elliot also disapproves of Anne's marriage with captain Wentworth. He thinks that this marriage would be a degrading one because Wentworth is not a man of rank or nobility. But later in the novel, he approves of their marriage:

Sir Walter made no objection, and Elizabeth did nothing worse than look cold and unconcerned. Captain Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody.¹⁰

When Anne visits her father in Bath after her stay with Mary and Lady Russell, her father and sister welcome her back home not because of their love for her but merely to show her, their house and furniture. In the words of Michael Williams:

It could be said that Sir Walter and Elizabeth are lifeless machines, existing only to demonstrate, wearisomely and simply, what they are.¹¹

Jane Austen has not portrayed such a vain and foolish character as Sir Walter, in her other novels. He is presented as a worthless character who does not love his daughters equally but concentrates more on his eldest daughter Elizabeth as she is 'very like himself'. Of the three daughters of Sir Walter Elliot, Lady Russell is more attached to Anne, a most dear and highly valued god-daughter. The novelist states that Lady Russell loves them all, but it is only in Anne that she could fancy that her motherhood is reviving again. The love between Lady Russell and Anne is reciprocal.

However Lady Russell is not free from prejudices. Like Sir Walter Elliot, she too has an obsession towards rank and fortune. Jane Austen speaks of the nature of Lady Russell when the subject of Sir Walter's retrenching comes:

She was a benevolent, charitable, good woman, and capable of strong attachments; most correct in her conduct, strict in her notions of decorum, and with manners that were held a standard of good breeding. 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.¹²

In short, Lady Russell seems to be similar to Sir Walter Elliot in her weakness for baronetcy and rank. Nevertheless she shows a better conduct than Sir Walter in her benevolent and charitable tendencies.

Lady Russell is the cause for the breaking of Anne's engagement with Captain Wentworth. She thinks that Wentworth is not suitable to Anne as he has no fortune. Vivien Jones, on this aspect of Lady Russell raises some questions and provides answers to it -

What then were Lady Russell's criteria in dissuading Anne from marriage? What are the sets of values on which she based her opinion, which we are implicitly invited to reject? The vocabulary of that first paragraph suggests an overriding concern with 'material' values: Anne's advantages, which she is thought to be 'throwing away' (as opposed to selling for a high price?) are, first and second, her 'birth' and 'beauty' and only lastly her 'mind'; and Lady Russell is worried because captain Wentworth is a 'stranger without alliance or fortune': he had little hope of 'affluence' and no 'connexions'. Lady Russell's primary concerns are with 'material' comfort and social position — hence her worry that Wentworth is a 'stranger' and her mistrust of his 'uncertain profession'.¹³

The critic obviously points to the Sir Walter-like mind of Lady Russell and indirectly confirms that she is the father-surrogate of Anne who unfortunately possesses the same kind of weaknesses. Anne is again and again persuaded by this seemingly worldly-wise woman. To quote Elizabeth Bowen:

Tormentedly yielding to persuasion on the part of a worldlier older friend, Anne, at nineteen had broken off her engagement to Frederick Wentworth, the then young, penniless naval officer.¹⁴

To ordinary minds, Lady Russell's advices may look wise; but having seen the shallowness of Sir Walter, a really wise person will not go in for either looks or ranks. Anne too has the grounds to yield to Lady Russell's persuasion. Ignored by an arrogant father and elder sister, she has found in the worldly-wise Lady Russell her first friend - whose words, accordingly carries undue weight. According to Michael Williams:

There is Lady Russell, genuinely concerned for Anne, genuinely fulfilling the maternal role, yet also motivated by her notions of what Anne might become, and too rigidly certain of what Wentworth will not become.¹⁵

This vigorous persuasion, though leads to Anne's breaking off her engagement, it gives her an opportunity to evaluate the social weaknesses of her own family which at last leads her to her own decision-making as Malcolm Bradbury states:

At this point the real significance of the persuasion is that it has committed Anne to exploring life from within the family, and it is only when the moral and social weaknesses here have been fully exposed that she can have real grounds for judging Lady Russell to have been wrong.¹⁶

In short, such a persuasion happens to be a psychic stimulus to Anne to bring about her own correction.

Lady Russell's advice has made Anne to give up her eight years of youth. But Anne does not ever feel that Lady Russell is wrong in her advice. In the conversation between Anne and Wentworth there is evidence for it:

"You should not have suspected me now: the case so different, and my age so different. If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk. When I yielded, I thought it was to duty; but no duty could be called in aid here. In marrying a man indifferent to me, all risk would have been incurred, and all duty violated."¹⁷

Anne has already come out of the complexities and now she could see things in an objective way.

Lady Russell feels that Mr. Elliot would be a perfect match for Anne. This occurs when she is unaware of Mr. Elliot's true nature that he is cold and cruel. Her conversation with Anne reveals her intention:

"I own that to be able to regard you as the future mistress of Kellynch, the future Lady Elliot – to look forward and see you occupying your dear mother's place, succeeding to all rights, all her popularity, as well as to all her virtues, would be the highest possible gratification to me. You are your mother's self in countenance and disposition; and if I might be allowed to fancy you such as she was, in situation, and name, and home, presiding and blessing in the same spot, and only superior to her in being more highly valued! My dearest Anne, it would give me more delight that is often felt at my time of life!"¹⁸

If Sir Walter Elliot loves Elizabeth because she is his own reflection, Lady Russell is drawn to Anne because she resembles her mother in her disposition. The complexity of the relationship between Lady Russell and Anne is well explicated here. Lady Russell seems to be a mother-surrogate whose extreme sense of possession destroys the life of her ward. Fortunately Anne is able to demolish the complex structure and finally establish her own identity.

When Lady Russell praises Mr. Elliot's untainted manners little does she realise that she is judging him only externally. But when she comes to know that she has made a mistake in judging Mr. Elliot's nature, she is really pained at heart. In the words of Jane Austen:

She must learn to feel that she had been mistaken with regard to both; that she had been unfairly influenced by appearances in each; that because Captain Wentworth's manners had not suited her own ideas, she had been too quick in suspecting them to indicate a character of dangerous impetuosity; and that because Mr. Elliot's manners had precisely pleased her in their propriety and correctness, their general politeness and suavity, she had been too quick in receiving them as the certain result of the most correct opinions and well-regulated mind.¹⁹

Lady Russell realises that it is time to change her opinions regarding people and her judgement about them, concentrating merely on external appearance is completely wrong. Jane Austen puts it in this way:

There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do than to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes.²⁰

Such a change of nature seems to be possible in Lady Russell because unlike Sir Walter, she is capable of genuine love and warmth to Anne. Margaret Kirkham observes:

Further refinement of Lady Russell's character was indeed so that she might appear more credibly as both 'generally speaking, rational and consistent', despite her 'prejudices on the side of ancestry' (p. 11), and warm-hearted.²¹

Both Sir Walter and Lady Russell have implanted their own notions in the mind of Anne. However the very persuasions act as stimulus to Anne's mind in order to make it sharp and sensitive. Earlier, Anne was naive and flexible allowing her father and Lady Russell to rule over her psyche but luckily she comes out of their grips and starts acting independently. The selfishness of Sir Walter and the partial selfishness of Lady Russell luckily do not make Anne a neurotic instead they become her eye-openers for her self-scrutiny.

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