**The Austen Problem: Reason Vs Emotion**

*An Analysis of Anne Elliot’s dichotomy between reason and emotion in Austen’s “Persuasion”*

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In the quietude of Jane Austen’s literary landscape, "Persuasion" stands as a contemplative novel, marking both a reflective period in Austen’s life and a poignant conclusion to her illustrious career. This narrative, woven with the delicate threads of retrospection and maturity, holds a distinctive place as Austen's final complete testament to the intricate interplay of societal expectations and personal desires. “Persuasion” is a reminder of lost loves and second chances, set within the posh society of 19th century England, where the stringent constraints of social class, status, and familial responsibility are often imposed upon the trajectory of one's life and heart.

At the very heart of Persuasion lies the contrast between rational thinking and deep-seated emotion— the two forces behind the characters’ actions and ultimate destinies. Reason is depicted as the voice of societal expectation and duty, often leading to decisions without any emotional complexity or intelligence. Emotion, in lieu, is portrayed as a subdued but tenacious force of inner desire that challenges the uncaring logic of relations and the perseverance needed to sustain them. With a perceptive eye and incisive criticism, Austen shows how these forces collide and converge in the private lives of her characters, especially through Anne Elliot.

Anne’s decisions are a testament to the constant battle between reason and emotion, the conflict between the public image and social class her family upholds, and the intense desires of her heart. A heart that to date remains broken due to the unfortunate end of her engagement to Captain Wentworth, a parting that was the very epitome of choosing logic over feeling.

The interplay between reasoning and emotion in "Persuasion" isn’t just a story, rather it delves into the essence of humanity, exploring the chasm between the often-harsh norms of society and the compelling draw of authentic emotion. In this fragile balance, Austen weaves a tale that not only captures the spirit of her time but also speaks to the enduring internal struggle between the mind and the heart that is central to the human experience of love and making choices. This essay aims to meticulously explore the dichotomy between reason and emotion as depicted in Jane Austen’s “Persuasion” centering its focus on the character of Anne Elliot. It also seeks to shed light on how this dichotomy shapes her romantic relationship with Captain Wentworth, delving deep into the interactions between societal pressures and personal desires.

To begin with, the Regency era was a period of both rigid social decorum and growing romantic ideals that heavily influenced the ideas around courting and matrimony. During this era, marriages were less about passion, love, and a merging of souls and more about a rational arrangement to establish economic security and societal status. There was no room for emotionality in courtship, it was a time when young women like Anne Elliot were meant to judge their prospective husbands by their rank and fortune rather than heartfelt intentions or moral resonance. Austen was living and writing during these times, “Persuasion” portrays the spirit of a society in which the desires of the heart were to be weighed against reason and moderation. This historical backdrop is crucial for grasping the nuances of Anne Elliot's romance with Captain Wentworth.

In the earlier chapters of “Persuasion,” Anne Elliott emerges as the embodiment of logic and reason. She navigates her world in a silent, thoughtful manner, consistently valuing rationality over the tumult of her emotions. The readers are made aware of this through Anne’s decision to break off her courtship with Captain Wentworth, a choice influenced by the prudent counsel of her mother’s dear friend Lady Russell. Lady Russell, who was put in charge of Anne’s care post her mother’s death, deems herself a businesswoman, intending to secure Anne’s future within a family with rank, reputation, and wealth. She convinces Anne that Wentworth with his limited funds and hazy prospects of a reliable future will be unable to offer her a life of comfort and luxury.

The quote “*She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning”* (Austen 20.) encapsulates the central theme of the dichotomy between reason and emotion in the novel, particularly as it pertains to romantic relationships. It is intriguing because it raises an important concern that the novel will have to address the fundamental difference in the characters' perceptions of what is sensible and what constitutes love. Austen describes here the unnatural nature of the chronology of Anne's concept of love. Anne fell in love when she was only 19 years old to a handsome, and well-mannered man, but Lady Russell’s motherly persuasion ultimately ends up hurting Anne as it introduces her to the hard and fast rules of marriage and courtship at a very young age. Austen’s use of the word “forced” highlights Anne’s lack of agency suggesting to readers that her decision was made purely because of societal expectations and not her own free will. This dominance of reason over her innate need and desire for love paves the way for Anne’s emotional development.

However, Austen hints at a shift in Anne’s character, hinting to the readers that now that Anne has matured, she has begun to realize due to her loneliness in the past eight years the importance of romance— a sentiment she has always repressed in adherence to the dictates of reason. We are left hopeful of a change in Anne’s internal landscape as Austen suggests in her protagonist a newfound emotional intelligence and drive to grant herself the freedom of expression to feel desire and passion.

Further in the novel we come across the Musgroves, a family starkly contrasting the Elliot’s.

*“Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove were a very good sort of people; friendly and hospitable, not much educated and not at all elegant. . .Anne always contemplated them as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance; but still, saved as we all are by some comfortable feelings of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments; and envied them nothing but that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humored mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters”* (Austen 29.)

Unlike Anne who has been *persuaded* to let rationality dictate her life the Musgrove children don’t seem to be bound by their parents' wishes, nor does the family seem to give much heed to aristocracy and marriage. Austen here offers the readers a glance into what life looks like for individuals who aren’t shackled by society’s rules. Charles, Henrietta, and Louisa Musgrove live satisfied, cheerful lives because their parents value the happiness of their children and not the ascension of some metaphorical social ladder.

Though she is more refined and well-educated than the Musgroves, she acknowledges that these attributes have not brought her the same level of emotional satisfaction. This is a classic example of the dichotomy between reason and emotion: while Anne's reason tells her to be content with her social and intellectual advantages, her emotions yearn for the warmth and care she sees in the Musgrove home.

This illustrates Anne’s growing recognition of the fact that although reason is essential it is the bonds of emotion that give life purpose and happiness. Through Anne's self-reflection Austen portrays that true fulfillment cannot be found in relationships made due to intellectual, financial, or social standing but rather in ties built on understanding, mutual respect, and adoration.

In Chapter Seven of “Persuasion,” Austen brings about a surprising turn, Captain Wentworth is back in Anne’s life, and he is as cold and distant as ever. *“She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity”* (Austen, 44.) It seems as if in the last eight years he has not found it in himself to forgive Anne for breaking off their relationship. In his mind, Anne is a shallow, untrustworthy woman because of how easily she was persuaded by Lady Russell and because she seems to value economic and social gain over matters of the heart.

The use of the words “over-persuasion,” “weakness,” and “timidity” Austen comments on how Anne’s actions are a failure of nerve and imply a broader societal failure to value an individual’s emotional integrity. Here she isn’t just bringing about Anne’s internal conflict but also commenting on the broader romantic dynamics of the time. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that what once seemed reasonable to Anne was, in fact, her simply giving in to external pressures—a decision that is disapproved of by her emotional compass, and seemingly by Austen's narrative voice as well. Additionally, Wentworth's "decided, confident temper" further emphasizes this contrast by showing him as an unwavering, adamant individual, which may translate into an emotional honesty that Anne does not yet possess. The contrast between his strength of character and Anne's seeming weakness highlights the dichotomy between acting on one's emotions (feelings) and conforming to social norms (reason).

In this passage near the end of “Persuasion," *“I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up because I should have suffered in my conscience. I have now, as far as such a sentiment is allowable in human nature, nothing to reproach myself with; and if I mistake not, a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman’s portion”* (Austen, 184.) we for the first time see Anne defending her earlier decision to break off her engagement with Captain Wentworth, Her words convey the depth of her inner struggle between emotion and reason and her quest towards finding a balance between the two.

Anne’s admission that she “was right in submitting” to Lady Russell’s advice is an indication of her strong confidence in the power of reason and implies that her actions were compliant with the social norms of the time and the sense of familial duty and social obligation that was demanded from women. The fact that she is concerned about the very thought of enduring “a troubled conscience” if she had gone through with the engagement indicates that beyond mere societal pressures, her decision came from a place of profound internal conviction. It reveals an inner moral compass— one where reason transcends mere social expectations. She expresses relief that, by following this path of reason, she has avoided self-reproach, which indicates her deep concern for living within the bounds of what she believes to be morally right, a significant aspect of her character's foundation.

Anne acknowledges her acceptance of the social conventions of her day when she declares that a "strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman’s portion." This acceptance, however, is not a mere surrender but rather the start of her journey to find a balance between rational understanding of duty and the emotional anguish of lost love. Hence, the point being that Anne was right to wait so long for Wentworth, and to allow herself to be persuaded by her trusted friends. Between her first and second engagements, Anne developed a stronger sense of character and a stronger love for Wentworth, and Wentworth also developed a deeper sense of love for Anne.

By expressing her sense of duty as an important aspect of who she is, Anne shows that emotion and reason need not necessarily always be incompatible. She suggests that by aligning one's behavior with both one's own principles and the expectations of society, it is possible to achieve a morally just and emotionally satisfying balance between the two. Essentially, Anne's path is an evolution in which she learns how to integrate emotion—which includes love and desire on a personal level—with reason, which is viewed as a moral obligation and societal duty. Austen uses Anne's fate to illustrate that there is an equilibrium that can be established between reason and emotion, suggesting that balancing these frequently at-odds facets of human nature is the way to achieve self-fulfillment in love and life.

When analyzing Anne Elliot’s character in “Persuasion” it is also essential to make note of where both the protagonist and the novel fit under the Jane Austen Umbrella. Anne’s is significantly different from Austen’s classic, more popular heroines who are usually expressive and boisterous in nature. Anne unlike them, is often pushed to the sidelines due to her inability to aptly communicate her feelings in public settings. Although Anne is a character that is frequently lost and silenced by her surroundings, barely ever making her feelings known, the way Austen describes her inward longing and yearning and her constant battle with reason makes her very similar in certain ways to the Dashwood Sisters, Elinor, and Marianne from Austen’s “Sense and Sensibility.”

Just like Anne restrains her emotions and instead practices patience and prudence, valuing her family's standing and social obligations over her feelings Elinor represents the 'sense' in "Sense and Sensibility", often suppressing her emotional turmoil to maintain social decorum and family welfare.

In both Anne and Elinor, a strong sense of duty governs their actions, often at the cost of their own happiness. The quiet fortitude and emotional resilience they display are often a stabilizing force within their families. The expectations of those around them and their own personal desires cause both women to undergo intense internal strife.

But as their stories develop, they both gradually can recognize and communicate their feelings more honestly. After realizing that her sense of responsibility had caused her to repress her actual feelings, Anne reconsiders her previous choices and permits herself to love Wentworth again. Like this, Elinor's emotional reserve is ultimately broken at the novel's conclusion when it is revealed that Edward is no longer engaged, allowing her to declare her long-hidden love.

Moreover, Marianne and Anne may initially appear to be quite different from one another, standing for two extremes in a spectrum regarding the dichotomy of passion and reason. Marianne embodies sensibility— she is impulsive, transparent about her emotions, and driven by her heart's desires. Anne, in contrast, initially appears to be meek and more subdued. Though they express it in different ways, both women, however, have a tremendous depth of feeling and intensity of emotion. Marianne wears her heart on her sleeve, and her emotions are always at the forefront. When she suffers heartbreak at the hands of Willoughby, her emotions are not just privately felt but publicly displayed. Anne, on the other hand, appears calm on the outside but finds herself going through an intense mental upheaval. She conceals her deep and ardent feelings for Captain Wentworth, yet they remain as passionate as ever. Though not as overtly expressed as Marianne's, Anne's inner emotional experience following their first separation is significant.

Despite their different ways of expressing emotions, both Anne and Marianne feel deeply and intensely. Anne's private feelings, much like Marianne's overt expressions, are characterized by an enduring love and a capacity for deep suffering. Austen allows readers to see the private side of Anne, her internal agony, and her longing for Wentworth. In moments of solitude, Anne allows herself to reflect on her feelings, and in these reflections, her emotional depth is as palpable as Marianne’s. For instance, upon learning of Wentworth’s return, Anne experiences a profound internal upheaval, though she maintains her outward composure. Both Anne and Marianne undergo significant character development throughout their respective stories. Marianne learns the value of discretion and the importance of tempering her emotions with reason. Conversely, Anne learns to assert her emotions, to give them a voice, and to pursue her happiness with Wentworth actively.

In conclusion, "Persuasion" stands as a testament to Jane Austen's nuanced understanding of the interplay between reason and emotion, a dichotomy that is masterfully embodied in the character of Anne Elliot. Her path toward emotional authenticity and moral maturity guides her transformation from a woman whose emotions are suppressed by the strict demands of her society to one who learns to voice her feelings. Anne’s story is a subdued but potent affirmation of a woman's right to emotional and intellectual autonomy. Austen portrays sentimentality not as a simple emotional pleasure but as a route to greater self-knowledge and moral behavior. Her transformation from a woman who obeys silently to one who acts per her feelings is a critique of the patriarchal systems that aim to control women's emotions. “Persuasion” suggests that Anne’s

ability to strike a balance between reason and passion is both a personal triumph and a larger social commentary on the advancement of women's voices and desires. The novel is so much greater than simply a romantic love story; it's also a powerful commentary on the capacity of women to successfully negotiate the intricacies of their inner lives and, in the process, subvert and fight the social conventions that aim to limit them.

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