

The Nineteenth-Century Novel
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Lecture – 15
Persuasion, Volume II, Chapters 19-24

Hello and welcome back to week 4's lectures. Today we are looking at the chapters which will wind off this novel. And we begin with an interesting character whom we have met at the beginning of the novel, and that figure is Mrs. Clay.

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Anne on Mrs Clay and Mr Elliot

- Mrs Clay's selfishness was not so complicate nor so revolting as his; and Anne would have compounded for the marriage at once, with all its evils, to be clear of Mr Elliot's subtleties in endeavouring to prevent it.

Let me first read the excerpt that is there on the slide and then we will take a quick and close look at the excerpt. And this is what Anne has to say about Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot. "Mrs. Clay's selfishness was not so complicate nor so revolting as his; and Anne would have compounded for the marriage at once, with all it is evils, to be clear of Mrs. Elliot's subtleties in endeavouring to prevent it."

So here we have Anne Elliot comparing Mrs. Clay's character with Mr. Elliot. And at this point, though the readers understand that the two of them more or less are symbolically similar, we can also call them as mirror images of one another, Anne feels that Mr. Elliot is the worse of the two. He is more evil than Mrs. Clay. In fact, she wants Mrs. Clay to go ahead and marry Sir Walter if that is what is going to happen, you know, she is not bothered about that.

What hurts her more, what disturbs her more is Mr. Elliot's subtleties, in fact, what is quite clear in Anne's mind is that Mr. Elliot is the more manipulative of the two. In fact, he is manipulating everybody in order to prevent on the one hand Mrs. Clay from marrying Sir Walter, because if that happens and if there is a male progeny, than that male heir would get the Hall, Kellynch Hall. So Mr. Elliot does not want that to happen. And at the same time, Mr. Elliot, as Anne knows from her talk with Mrs Smith, is quite a complex, sinister, cold hearted and manipulative figure.

So when she is able to compare all these set of attributes, she figures that, you know, Mrs. Clay is more, you know, is more of a better person than Mr. Elliot. So she thinks that Mrs Clay's selfishness is not so bad as the subtleties of Mr. Elliot.

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Anne on the Musgroves

- "What a blessing to be in such hands! Your father and mother seem so totally free from all those ambitious feelings which have led to so much misconduct and misery, both in young and old."

"What a blessing to be in such hands! Your father and mother seem so totally free from all those ambitious feelings which have led to so much misconduct and misery, both in young and old." So this set of words uttered by Anne to Mrs. Musgrove happens in the inn White Hart. White Hart is an inn in which the Musgroves stay while they are visiting Bath. So White Hart is in Bath and Anne is visiting the party.

The party containing the Musgroves' family. And Anne is able to get an update from Mrs. Musgrove about the potential marriages of her daughters, Henrietta and Louisa. And even though there are financial complications on either side, that is in terms of the, in terms of the marriages between Louisa and, you know, Captain Benwick, and Henrietta and Charles Hayter, even though there are economic difficulties to a certain extent, the Musgroves, the older Musgroves do want their daughters to be happy with their partners.

So when Anne gets to know about the primary preoccupations of the older Musgroves, this is what she says. She says that it is a blessing to have such parents, and there is an implication there, a subtext there, which states that Sir Walter is not an ideal parent. So it is not a blessing for Anne Elliot at least to be a daughter to Sir Walter Elliot.

He is not, you know, keen for his daughters to be happy. So which is why in the past he is not very welcoming of the engagement between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. And “Your father and mother seem so totally free from all those ambitious feelings which have led to so much misconduct and misery both in young and old.” So this excerpt, you know, which is the set of words spoken by Anne, is actually uttered to Charles Musgrove, who gives a kind of a rundown on the progress that has been happening on the part of the two, you know, sisters of his, in terms of their marriage.

And Anne tells Charles that his parents, that is the Musgroves, do not have so ambitious set of feelings, which implied that his father does have such feelings, and which feelings prevent his, you know, prevent his daughter from marrying somebody that she loves.

So that is what is implied here. While Anne is praising the older Musgroves, she is also kind of criticizing her own father there.

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Mr Elliot and Mrs Clay???

- She was just in time to ascertain that it really was Mr Elliot, which she had never believed, before he disappeared on one side, as Mrs Clay walked quickly off on the other; and checking the surprise which she could not but feel at such an appearance of friendly conference between two persons of totally opposite interest...

Now this is a scene once again in the White Hart. Anne is there with her friends the Musgroves, Mary and the others, and they are having a friendly conversation, and Mary notices something. And let me read from the book as to this particular scene here. So let me read from the section when Mary meets or sees Mrs. Clay. So Mary is looking at the window, Mary is looking through the window and she notices Mrs. Clay.

So she cries, “Anne! There is Mrs. Clay, I am sure, standing under the colonnade and a gentleman with her. I saw them turn the corner from Bath street just now. They seem deep in talk. Who is it? Come and tell me. Good Heavens, I recollect it is Mr. Elliot himself.” “No” cried Anne quickly, “It cannot be Mr. Elliot, I assure you. He was to leave at nine this morning, and does not come back till tomorrow. As she spoke she felt that Captain Wentworth was looking at her, the consciousness of which vexed and embarrassed her, and made her regret that she had said so much, simple as it was.”

So this is a very, you know, surprising catching out of Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot. They would not be aware of the fact that they have been espied by Mary and Anne Elliot, who confirms the identity, more or less, of Mr. Elliot.

So this is a very dramatic scene. One thing, it becomes clear that Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay are secretly meeting one another. Another thing is that she is aware of the whereabouts of Mr. Elliot

and that becomes problematic to Captain Wentworth. Why? Then that would imply that she is very familiar with his routine, with his plans, and that would imply a closer relationship to Captain Wentworth, whom we know and Anne knows is attracted and almost in love with Anne Elliot.

So this is a very dramatic moment in the novel, and it does once again prove the hypocrisy of Mr. Elliot. Why do we call it a hypocrisy? Because if you look at the earlier scenes in the novel, he has claimed that he is trying to distract Sir Walter from the attentions of Mrs. Clay. So when he is against Mrs. Clay in such an obvious fashion, he tells about all these problems to Anne Elliot, why is he meeting her in secret.

So there is kind of a underhand attitude to Mr. Elliot which is not very admirable. So let me read the excerpt that is the on the slide. "She was just in time to ascertain that it really was Mr. Elliot, which she had never believed, before he disappeared on one side, as Mrs. Clay walked quickly off on the other; and checking the surprise which she could not but feel at such an appearance of friendly conference between two persons of totally opposite interest."

So, again, this is a shocking scene because Anne does not expect Mr. Elliot to have a conversation with Mrs. Clay because he is against her desires. He is against her presence in the family, in the family of the Elliots. So, but there is a lot of secrecy to this meeting because, as we see, Mrs. Clay walking off quickly on the other side and Mr. Elliot disappearing in the opposite direction. So while there is this understanding that Mr. Elliot was away from Bath to visit a friend, so he has lied.

And this ties in with the earlier point that I made about his hypocrisy. So several personal follies are adding up against Mr. Elliot's character. So this friendly conference between Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay does throw a lot of doubt about the nature of their relationship, because everybody thinks that, at least Anne Elliot thinks that he is totally opposite to her interest in terms of the Elliot family.

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The Effect of Sir Walter and Elizabeth

- "the door was thrown open for Sir Walter and Miss Elliot, whose entrance seemed to give a general chill. Anne felt an instant oppression, and wherever she looked saw symptoms of the same. The comfort, the freedom, the gaiety of the room was over, hushed into cold composure, determined silence, or insipid talk, to meet the heartless elegance of her father and sister. How mortifying to feel that it was so."

Now let us look at the effect of Sir Walter and Elizabeth on the party at White Hart. So these two figures make a surprise entry to the place where this party of the Musgroves and Captain Wentworth are visiting. "The door was thrown open for Sir Walter and Miss Elliot, whose entrance seemed to give a general chill. Anne felt an instant oppression, and wherever she looked saw symptoms of the same. The comfort, the freedom, the gaiety of the room was over, hushed into cold composure, determined silence or insipid talk to meet the heartless elegance of her father and sister. How mortifying to feel that it was so."

So this is a rich paragraph which tells us of the internal understandings and assumptions and realizations of Anne Elliot. What is the effect of the entry? That there is a general chill. Everybody goes silent.

They are apprehensive as to how to appropriately address the new guests, which is Sir Walter and his eldest daughter Elizabeth Elliot. And look at the second interesting word there, "oppression." There is a sense of being oppressed by these two figures on the part of the host there at White Hart. So there is a clear impression that Sir Walter and Elizabeth are oppressive, at least to the social circle of the Musgroves.

So this is the impact of Sir Walter and Elizabeth. And not only is Anne, you know, becoming oppressed, becoming depressed because of the arrival of the father and her elder sister, the entire

party is quiet. The entire party is quiet in the sense that they are unwilling to talk to the two guests because they do not know what is the appropriate means to do it.

So look at the set of words again - the comfort, the freedom, and the gaiety of the room was over because of these two entries, and they are all hushed into cold composure. They want to be following the right etiquette and they all are determined, you know, and they are silent in a determined way, and the talk is insipid, which means it is dull. And why is it dull? Because that is the way to talk to people from the aristocracy.

And the elegance that is there on the part of the father and sister is heartless, that is how Anne Elliot describes Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot. And Anne also says this, that it is mortifying it is embarrassing to realize that their father, the father of Mary and Anne Elliot, is capable of producing and provoking such an impression on the party at White Hart. And this term White Hart is also very symbolic, because it echoes the word, a set of words called White Heart, meaning there is a lot of innocence and symbolic purity to this place, which is absent in Camden place or other places associated with Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot.

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The White Hart

- "Minutiae which, even with every advantage of taste and delicacy, which good Mrs Musgrove could not give, could be properly interesting only to the principals. Mrs Croft was attending with great good humour, and whenever she spoke at all, it was very sensibly. Anne hoped the gentleman might each be too much self-occupied to hear."

Now the White Hart is a significant setting in terms of Persuasion because we will also come to know that the crisis to this novel is resolved at this particular spot. "Minutiae which, even with every advantage of taste and delicacy, which good Mrs. Musgrove could not give, could be

properly interesting only to the principals. Mrs. Croft was attending with great good humour and wherever she spoke at all, it was very sensibly. Anne hoped the gentleman might each be too much self-occupied to hear.”

Now what happens at the White Hart? What is the nature of the conversation happening at this particular inn. That is what it is. So number one, Mrs. Musgrove is quite talkative. And who is her audience here? The very sensible Mrs. Croft. This scene also reminds us of another scene that happened very early on, and that scene happens between Captain Wentworth and Mrs. Musgrove.

And that conversation centred on Richard Musgrove. Now Richard Musgrove is the son of the older Mr and Mr. Musgrove, who died at sea. And he was once under the Captainship of Captain Wentworth. So that was the context, and when Mrs. Musgrove is reminded of Richard Musgrove because of the presence of Captain Wentworth at Uppercross village, she initiates the conversation with him about her son, and talks about his letters to Captain Wentworth which were written under his guidance.

So in that scene, we are shown that Captain Wentworth is a patient and a keen listener to the narrative of Mrs. Musgrove. Now why is it interesting here? It is interesting because the same kind of patience and you know sympathetic understanding is exhibited by his sister, Mrs. Croft, who is patiently listening to the narrative of Mrs. Croft. I am sorry, Mrs. Musgrove, about her daughters.

And their complications in relation to the marriages which are going to happen. So Anne calls it minutiae, too intricate in detail, which even with every advantage of taste and delicacy would be interesting only to those who are directly involved in this set of circumstances. So the implication is that Mrs. Musgrove need not talk about that subject of her daughters' marriage in such great detail because it would not be interesting to the listener, who is Mrs. Croft here.

But despite the fact that Mrs. Musgrove is waxing eloquent on the subject, Mrs. Croft was attending with great good humour, just as Captain Wentworth was doing several, you know, set

of days before in the context of Richard Musgrove. So we can see that the siblings, Captain Wentworth and Mrs. Croft, do have that innate sense of sympathy to the other, and that is very very admirable and welcome in the eyes of Anne Elliot.

And Anne hoped that at least the gentlemen might be preoccupied with something else, that they would not be bothered by the rattle, in fact, of Mrs. Musgrove about her daughters' engagement and future weddings. So another thing that comes up for our attention is this point about Anne's being anxious that the gentleman would be caught up in something else so that they would not be bothered by Mrs. Musgrove's talk.

What is that implication there? The implication is that the gentleman, and the gentleman is A, to be protected from silly talk, and B, that, you know, the gentleman should not be affected by women's anxieties and preoccupations because it might not be interesting to the listener. But the subject matter of Mrs. Musgrove's talk is about a mother's anxiety to settle her daughters as appropriately and comfortably as possible.

So Anne's desire that the men should be protected somehow, is slightly disturbing in terms of the gender dynamics of that novel.

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Anne on the merits of women

- "We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change would soon weaken impressions."

Now we have come to this stage in the novel where we are embarking on the lengthy scene or the lengthy conversation that happens between Captain Harville and Anne Elliot about the merits of either sex in terms of romantic trajectories or courtships. So the two major figures here are Captain Harville and Anne Elliot. And the scene, once again I would like to remind you, happens in White Hart. And White Hart has symbolic connotations with purity, with good heart, and it is a crucial setting in terms of the narrative structure of Persuasion.

So who are the listeners of the conversation that is taking place between Captain Harville and Anne Elliot? The key listener that we should be aware of is Captain Wentworth. And what exactly is he doing? He is writing a letter to someone in order to arrange for a portrait of Louisa Musgrove to be gifted to Captain Benwick.

So that is the job he is engaging in, and Captain Wentworth is writing to the particular craftsmen who will get ready the portrait of Captain Benwick so that it could be gifted to Louisa at the occasion of their wedding. So he is engaged in the task of writing a letter, while Captain Harville and Anne Elliot are talking. And this is what Anne has to say about the merits of women, and their fidelity in romantic relationships.

She says, “We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change would soon weaken impressions.” So she has a list of the merits or the place of women in 19th century society, early 19th century society which will inevitably construct women’s psyche in a particular way, so that they are more loyal, more, you know, true to their beloved men. And she says that we live confined lives, we are confined in homes, therefore our feelings prey on us. The word “prey” is very interesting here because prey is associated with, you know, hunting, isn't it, you know, if an animal preys on a creature it means that animal is eating it, isn't it. She says that the feelings almost eat us up, we constantly are anxious.

And whereas the men are forced into exertion, the men are busy in the public sphere. And Anne is very cleverly contrasting the public sphere and with the private sphere of the women, and she

says that your profession, your pursuit, your business will take you into the world in such a way that you will forget about the issues related to the private sphere, and the very nature of your position in the world, in the public space will weaken your impressions about your romantic object, your interest in the women. So this is Anne's argument.

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Anne on Men

- "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."



And it is here, we have another excerpt which states that, "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." So this is Anne's response to Captain Harville's comment that women are fickle. This is Captain Harville's comment, and he says that, "I can pick up a lot of examples from literature which suggest that women are quick to forget their romantic interest."

And Anne's response is that it is men who write all these books, so men have all the advantage in terms of education, in terms of the way they tell their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree, and the pen literally is in their hands. And she says that I will not allow books to prove anything. So there is a lot of irony here.

If you just take a moment out of this narrative, if you step back from this novel, there are two things that become clear. This novel is penned by a woman, Jane Austen, and Jane Austen is the

one who has held the pen in writing it. And number two, through this book she is trying to prove something. Persuasion is trying to prove something. Now these are the two ironies that is there in this excerpt in a larger sense.

But within the world of this particular novel, Anne is quite legitimate in arguing that the greater power rests on men. And she says that our books are not to be trusted when it comes to proving anything about the female sex. And this one other point that we need to remember is that when Anne is making this comment, Captain Wentworth is holding a pen, and he is writing a letter and when Anne makes a set of very radical statements, his pen literally falls down on the floor, and he is distracted.

So there is a set of power, there is a lot of power in Anne's voice there, which kind of plucks the pen out of Captain Wentworth. So it is a very symbolic moment in the novel.

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Women's privilege??

- "All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one; you need not covet it), is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone."

So finally, she says that all the privilege I claim for my own sex, for the female sex, and it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it, is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone. So this is the moment in the novel when Captain Wentworth's pen drops, and both Anne Elliot and Captain Harville is momentarily distracted by that dramatic scene there when Captain Wentworth looks for his pen

So in terms of the set of ideas that she claims, what she is stating here is this. The privilege of the women is that they love longest. They are the most loyal, and even when there is no hope about any kind of fulfilment in romantic relationships, these women do stay loyal, their sense of fidelity is higher than the men. And she says that it is not a very enviable one, nobody can, you know, covet, be envious or jealous of such a, you know, sense of spirit on the part of this women because it is a depressing state to be constantly pining and longing, when there is no hope of an existence of the other is completely gone.

So there are a lot of comparisons that she makes indirectly here. Number one, she is comparing herself with Captain Wentworth. Number two, she is comparing Captain Benwick's relationship to Fanny Harville.

In terms of Captain Wentworth, there is no hope for her, at least for the major portion of the novel. No hope for Anne at all, because she sees Captain Wentworth flirt with Louisa and Henrietta. So even in that context, Anne implies that she has stayed loyal. So that is a reference to this last phrase that hope is gone. And the second one is when existence is gone, for example, Fanny Harville is dead.

And what is the status of Captain Benwick's loyalty? He is not loyal to her even for a year at least, on the other hand he has engaged himself to Louisa Musgrove. So there are, you know, hits at these two men that Anne knows of in the context of this worldview. So perhaps Wentworth knows that, and which is why he has been shaken up and drops his pen. So, while she is having a conversation with Captain Harville, she is also indirectly having a conversation with Captain Wentworth. That is the highlight of this particular critical scene in *Persuasion*. She is not directly engaging with Captain Wentworth, because that kind of space is not at all possible. In fiction, courting men and women do not get a lot of privacy. And even in reality they did not get such a, you know, a space for intimate conversation.

Therefore they have to do such conversations in an indirect way, and that is what Anne Elliot adopts here. And she, you know, exploits that moment. She in fact goes to town in that set of ideas that she discusses with Captain Harville.

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Anne on her past and present

- "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;...a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion."

Now all is well, all is well in the sense that Captain Wentworth realizes that Anne is still in love with him. So what he does is he writes a letter to Anne too, and leaves the letter for her at the table, and he makes a gesture so that Anne realizes that that he has left something for her to read. So when Captain Wentworth leaves the room with Captain Harville, Anne picks up the letter, reads it and sees that Captain Wentworth has made a declaration of love to her.

He is proposing marriage for the second time, and Anne is delighted. So Anne is able to get what she wants, and that achievement is made possible through that conversation that she has with his friend, Captain Harville. So there is a very dramatic scene once again towards the end of the novel, when Anne, you know, takes a walk with the Charles Musgrove back to her home and in that long walk she meets Captain Wentworth.

And then Charles Musgrove leaves Anne with Captain Wentworth, and goes on his business. And in that walk, in that walk, the intimate walk that they have, the private walk that they have, Anne is able to talk about her past and present to Captain Wentworth. And this is a set of ideas that she tells him. She says, "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. A strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion." So in this particular statement, she says that when I

rejected you eight and a half years ago, I think I did the right thing. I have no regrets. And this is a very bold statement for Anne to make to Captain Wentworth, because Anne knows, Captain Wentworth knows, the reader knows, that there has been a lot of heartache because of that breakup with Captain Wentworth.

And Anne is also aware that Captain Wentworth is very resentful about her behaviour in the past when she gave up on him. So with all this knowledge, it is really a brave move on her to declare that she has done the right thing by rejecting him eight and a half years ago. She says that, it is a sense of duty that I owe to myself. She says that I am right in obeying my guardian, Lady Russell, so that is the subtext there.

And she says that if I had rejected the advice of my guardian, I would have suffered in my conscience. My conscience would have criticized me, would have pointed a finger of blame at me, and now I am free of that. I did, you know, follow the advice of my seniors and superiors, and now I am able to live a life without any kind of reproach or regret. And she insists that, you know, being dutiful, doing one's duty is a kind of a woman's portion, a dowry that she brings to her marriage.

And here once again we are slightly disturbed by the gender dynamics that influences Anne Elliot's discourse here. Earlier we saw that Anne tells Mary Musgrove that nursing is a women's job, she should not expect her husband Charles to help, you know, her, in terms of nursing the sick child. And then, you know, elsewhere we also saw that Anne wants to protect the gentlemen from the superficial, silly talk of the men.

And now she talks about a women's portion as being connected to their sense of duty. So all these, you know set of ideas expressed by Anne tell us one thing, which is that Anne is a woman of her times. We need not look at her as a modern woman just because she is the heroine of Persuasion. She is a character who expresses and embodies the double standard and gender roles established traditionally and conventionally by a 19th century society. Thank you for watching I

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