PERSUASION

Persuasion, the most complex of all Austen's novels, is perhaps the most intimate and most moving of all her love stories. It is a novel of revived love in which courtship is relegated to a distant past and the fable concerns the reanimation of love.

In this novel we find largely two types of characters: those whom Jane Austen portrays sympathetically and those whom she depicts ironically. The portraits having ironic overtones in this novel are Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mrs. Musgrove, Mary and to a lesser degree the Musgrove sisters, and Captain Benwick. The pervasive ironic tone of the novel is well anticipated in the very beginning of it where Sir Walter is reading from 'the Baronetage'. It clearly indicates that he is obsessed with some past honours and personal vanities which have led him into snobbery. Consequently, this snobbery blinds him to the changing world in which he lives.

Persuasion is considered to be a finished novel of Jane Austen. The tone of the novel is rather a mellowed one and it is marked by a

mature wisdom that sometimes puts one in mind of the last plays of Shakespeare. With regard to this characteristic it has been observed:

"Persuasion may be called an autumnal novel. It is Jane Austen's last work, and the tone is mellow. Even the satire is gentler than in her other works. The book has a certain melancholy thought, even though the final outcome is a happy one". [1]

Jane Austen was the master of comedy, satire and irony. What she primarily aimed at was satire. Hence fools, snobs, hypocrites and ill-mannered people abound in *Persuasion.* In the beginning of the novel, we find a beautiful character-sketch of Sir Walter Elliot and this character sketch is certainly ironical and therefore a source of much amusement. He is described as a handsome man in his youth who still retains his look even at fifty-four. As a man he had a vanity, and situation and his personal appearance are all ironically expressed. Another evidence of ironical expression we find in the presentation of his character after his wife's (Lady Elliot) death:

"Be it known, then, that Sir Walter, like a good father, prided himself on remaining single for his dear daughter's sake. For one daughter, his eldest, he would really have given up anything, which he had not been very much tempted to do." [2]

1. *Masterpieces of World Literature,* Vol.-1; P-735 ed. Frank N. Magill, Harper & Brothers, New York
2. *Persuasion;* Ch-1; P-1212.

He claimed that he has not re-married for his dear daughter's sake. It is quietly disapproved by Jane Austen in an ironic aside. The fact is that he has had one or two private disappointments in his efforts for a second marriage. Significantly, the device of ironic expression helps Jane Austen avoid making involved commentaries on her characters. It is left to the reader to make out the full force of the irony, and to make the criticism himself.

The portrait of Sir Walter with which the novel begins reveals him as obsessed with past glories and personal vanity. It is savagely ironic – the opening passage in particular forms a brilliant expose of a man whose snobbery blinds him to the changing world in which he lives. Jane Austen's description of a father and his three daughters suggests an ironic re-telling of a traditional fairy tale, a Cindrella – type story in which the heroine's true worth is disregarded by her family. Here we find the variety of comic tones that Jane Austen effects in order to highlight the characters ; for instance, Elizabeth's proposal for economy, and also the way in which Jane Austen recreates the speech patterns of reprehensible characters are marked by sheer ridicule and comicality.

One may find another ironical expression in the authorial statement that Sir Walter, blameless as he was, was not only getting dreadfully into debt, but it was bearing of it very often. There is irony, further in the way, Sir Walter is reluctant to offer his mansion to a tenant though he has already agreed to let it out. It clearly presents a contrast between his pretension and the reality of the situation. It is ironical that he is very proud of his baronetcy but actually does little to redeem the honour. He has little sense of duty towards his estate and the people on it and he is pleased enough to amuse himself at Bath. Subsequently, Sir Walter speaks of his reservation in letting out the house. He would not like to let the tenant have the use of the park, the pleasure-grounds and his daughter's flower garden.

"As to all that", rejoined Sir Walter coolly, "supposing I were induced to let my house, I have by no means made up my mind as to the privileges to be annexed to it. I am not particularly disposed to favour a tenant. The park would be open to him of course, and few navy officers, or men of any other description, can have had such a range; but what restrictions I might impose on the use of the pleasure grounds is another thing. I am not fond of the idea of my shrubberies being always approachable; and I should recommend Miss Elliot to be on her ground with respect to her flower garden. I am very little disposed to grant a tenant of Kellynch Hall any extraordinary favour, I assure you, be he sailor or soldier."[3]

3. Ibid; Ch-3; P-1220

He supports his arguments against the navy and that are also ironically stated by Jane Austen. He regards the navy as a means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction. He thinks that a sailor grows old sooner than any other man. He objected the navy with an anecdote about Admiral Baldwin who looked Sixty-two years old though he was only forty-two. His two fold objection to the navy as an occupation is indeed very exaggerated as also his counting the number of ugly faces he has to encounter in Bath during his walk.

Not only is Sir Walter Elliot vain about his looks, but he is also vain about his social position. A position in society is all that matters to Sir walter. He is extremely proud of his title as a baronet which is incidentally the lowest rank of honour that can be inherited and nothing pleases him more than a perusal of the book 'The Baronetcy' which contains the history of his family. When Mr. Shepherd refers to the Curate, Wentworth, as a gentleman, Sir Walter says:

"you misled me by the term 'gentleman'. I thought you were speaking of some man of property. Mr. Wentworth was nobody, I remember."[4]

4. Ibid; Ch-3; P-1223-24

Snobbery of the same kind is also evident in his preoccupation with social status and in disapproving of Anne's engagement to Captain Wentworth eight years ago he shows his utter disregard for her happiness. It is ironical because inspite of his snobbery he is less of a 'gentleman' less of a 'respectable' man than even the rough naval characters he so often ridicules.

Of all Austen's novels, *Persuasion* is the only one that strikes the reader from the beginning with its unique objectivity of tone. It opens with the action of Sir Walter's reading out from 'the Baronetage'. But it is not Walter's voice – a voice from within the book that invites the reader to enter into the world of the fiction. Similarly, in *Emma* we find Emma's comfortable social and material state of affairs as known to the general public of Highbury.

Jane Austen, therefore, can allow many of her characters to be seen through Anne's eyes, but she is content to do this consistently and adds her own coldly ironic gaze at frequent intervals. Compared with Austen's other novels, *Persuasion* is marked by a colder irony. Sir Walter Elliot is very different from pompously unimaginative Sir

Thomas Bertram in Mansfield Park. The authorial remarks at the beginning of the novel sum up his personality:

"Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage;.."[5]

In chapter 24, one may notice another ironical description of Sir Walter in the final summing up of the novel. Now, Sir Walter does not have any objection to Anne's marriage to Captain Wentworth because he, with his fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds and high position in the navy, is no longer a nobody. Sir Walter is also impressed by Wentworth's good looks and condescends to enter their marriage in the Baronetage.

"He was now esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him, and who could give his daughter at present but a small part of the share of ten thousand pounds which must be hers hereafter."[6]

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5. Ibid; Ch-1; P-1211
6. Ibid; Ch-24; P-1362

Having seen more of Captain Wentworth and having seen him repeatedly by daylight and having seen him minutely,

"he was very much struck by his personal claims, and felt that his superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against her (Anne's) superiority of rank."[7]

The absurdities, foibles and frailties of Sir Walter have been exposed through ironical statements in the course of the novel, and in such a manner that makes him look ridiculous.

Persuasion is the last of Austen's published novels and it seems to be more serious and reflective in tone compared with her other novels. The novel, in particular, could be classified as a novel of character, in which people are more important than the plot. The awareness of alternatives permeates its presentation of scene and character and the irony which is so closely associated with the authors technique of presentation becomes finely interwoven in the theme of the novel. Irony, as in other novels, pervades the whole story. In this

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7. Ibid; Ch-24; P-1362

connection, Mary Lascelles observes, "this irony is no mere symptom; it is the very tongue in which Persuasion is written."[8] It is needless to say that irony is her inspiration and her forte. Lord David Cecil remarks, "Her irony, her delicate ruthless irony, is of the very substance of her style. It never obtrudes itself, sometimes it only glints out in a turn of phrase. But is never absent for more than a paragraph."

A significant aspect of *Persuasion* is its presentation of the self projection of the author. The point is well underlined by Virginia Woolf and she believes that Jane Austen has translated her own experience into a fictional pattern in the course of the action :

"There is an expressed emotion in the scene at the concert and in the famous talk about woman's constancy which proves not merely the biographical fact that Jane Austen had loved, but the aesthetic fact that she was no longer afraid to say so."[9]

8. Mary Lascelles: *Jane Austen and Her Art*, 1968, Oxford Univ. Press; ed. Everyman's Library, Dutton: New York, 1972
9. *Quarterly Review, XXIV*, (January, 1921), Quoted in Casebook, *Northanger Abbey & Persuasion*, P-151-2

One may also find ironical implication in the portroyal of Elizabeth and much of the irony comes from the language employed by Jane Austen. She is also made to look ridiculous. At the age of twenty-nine, Elizabeth Elliot is unmarried and fears the approach of the years of danger of spinsterhood, and would have rejoiced to be asked in marriage by someone with a rank or title within the next twelve months or so. When married, she would be able to take her father's favourite book, 'The Baronetage' with great pleasure, 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; and more than once, when her father had left it open on the table near her, she had closed it with averted eyes and pushed it away".[10]

We have irony in the way in which Jane Austen describes Elizabeth's proposal of economy. Elizabeth can think of only two forms of economy: to cut off some unnecessary charities, and to refrain from refurbishing the drawing room, and secondly, to stop the practice of taking a present for Anne on her return from her yearly pleasure

10. *Persuasion;* Ch-1; P-1213-14

trip to London. She has nothing to propose of deeper efficacy. On the contrary, she feels herself ill-used and unfortunate, and is not willing either to lose her dignity or to give up the comforts to which she is accustomed.

Elizabeth is made to look even more ridiculous in her relations with Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay. Her desire to get married to Mr. Elliot, the heir-presumptive, has once been frustrated but when he tries to make up with the Elliot family, Elizabeth's hopes are revived. As for Mrs. Clay, Elizabeth is not prepared to admit that this woman has any designs to marry Sir Walter. Elizabeth's confidence in Mrs. Clay becomes ironical in the light of Mrs. Clay's subsequent conduct, namely, her running away to London to live as Mr. Elliot's mistress.

According to Andrew H. Wright[11], Jane Austen's themes are ironic. Irony is here intended to mean the juxtaposition of two mutually incompatible views of life. In *Persuasion*, it is the conflict between love and prudence and Jane Austen defends both values warmly. She is deeply concerned with both aspects of the contradictions she

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11. *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure*: Andrew H. Wright (OUP, New York, 1954)

perceives in human experience. Another eminent critic, Professor Chevalier opines that 'the basic feature of every irony is a contrast between a reality and an appearance' and Professor Marvin Mudrick[12] calls irony a 'neutral discoverer and explorer of incongruities', Chaucer, Cervantes, Swift, Jane Austen all tried to search for the meaning of 'irony' but in vain and came to conclusion that it is useless to look for any definition or meaning of it. There is vigor, humility and sympathy in their searching and finally reached judgment but never serene certainty.

In the course of Austen's narration in the novel *Persuasion*, the readers find a number of ironical remarks about both Sir Walter and his eldest daughter Elizabeth. As for example, when Anne goes to Bath her father and sister are glad to see her –

"For the sake of showing her the house and furniture and met her with kindness." [13]

Sir Walter forgives the conduct of Mr. Elliot in marrying a woman of inferior birth because she was-

12. *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense & Discovery: Marvin Mudrick.* (University of California Press, 1968).
13. *Persuasion;* Ch-15; P-1291.

"a very fine woman with a large fortune', [14]

and because she was in love with Mr. Elliot . Sir Walter acknowledges these facts as a sufficient justification,"

"and though Elizabeth could not see the circumstance in quite so favourable a light, she allowed it to be a great extenuation."[15]

Both father and daughter feel very happy in the company of Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret and talk to everybody of –

"Our cousins in Laura-place, our cousins, lady Dalrymple, and Miss Carteret."[16]

They make amends to Lady Dalrymple for their past neglect of her, and having made up with her they feel much honoured. The author, in this context, observes ironically:

"The toils of the business were over, the sweets began."[17]

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14. Ibid; Ch-15; P-1293
15. Ibid; Ch-15; P-1293
16. Ibid; Ch-16; P-1299
17. Ibid; Ch-16; P-1299

Father and daughter also agree that the Crofts should not be presented to Lady Dalrymple and that they should be allowed to find their own level in Bath. The attitude of Sir Walter and Elizabeth towards Lady Russell is also ironically depicted. Elizabeth says that Lady Russell quite bores her with her talk about new books, and goes on to say:

"I thought her dress hideously the other night. I used to think she had some taste in dress, but I was ashamed of her at the concert. Something so formal and 'arrange' in her hair! and she sits so upright! My best of love, of course."[18]

In this small but amusing speech, we have Elizabeth's hypocrisy and her pretentiousness. Sir Walter makes a similar observation about Lady Russell. He says that he would call on her soon but he actually proposes only to leave his card at her house. He would not like to pay her a morning visit because morning visits are not fair to elderly women who do not use adequate make up. He would be happy if Lady Russell were to wear rouge to cover her ageing look.

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18. Ibid; Ch-22; P-1341

The most penetrating ideas of Austen have developed in *Persuasion* through the delineation of characters – but the exploration is conducted in such a way that it never becomes too intense. Hence, the underlying seriousness in not allowed to disturb the total comic effect. In Jane Austen's novels this effect is usually achieved through irony and a certain level of artistic distance is established at some certain points of the story. Anne Elliot who is one of Jane Austen's most sympathetic creations, does not totally escape the ironic focus that defines the approach of the whole.

Jane Austen's portrayl of Mary is steeped in irony. She has a great deal of the Elliot pride. She believes in the importance of social connections as much as her sister Elizabeth. She does not think Charles Hayter a fit match for Henrietta because he is nothing but a curate:

"You know," said she, "I cannot think him at all a fit match for Henrietta; and considering the alliances which the Musgroves have made, she has no right to throw herself away. I do not think any young woman has a right to make a choice that may be disagreeable and inconvenient to the principal part of her family, and be giving bad connections to those who have not been used to them. And, pray, who is Charles

Hayter? Nothing by a country curate. A most improper match for Miss Musgrove of Uppercross."[19]

Mary's general dissatisfaction with life, her habit of grumbling and complaining, and her exaggeration of her ailments are all ironically conveyed to us. The least indisposition gives her a feeling that she is sinking. When she is alone, she imagines that she is being neglected and ill-used by everybody, especially by her husband's family. She complains that her children are unmanagable, and that her husband always ignores her. She feels hurt if her husband is away from her six hours at a stretch. Speaking of Captain Benwick, she says that he will sit poring over his book and not known when a person speaks to him, or when one drops one scissors, or anything that happens.

There is irony also in the way her attitude to her parents-in-law, Mr. And Mrs. Musgrove, is depicted. She criticizes her mother-in-law for humouring and indulging her (Mary's) children and for giving them so much trash and sweet things that they are sure to come back sick and irritable for the day. She says that Mrs. Musgrove's

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19. Ibid; Ch-9; P-1255

servants do not do any work but keep loafing about in the village. She tells Anne that the Musgroves should call on her before she goes to call on them. When Louisa meets an accident, she protests that she must stay to nurse her. She asserts that she must prove her usefulness to her sister-in-law and besides, how she can go home without her husband? The irony here is obvious: her anxiety to remain with her husband is greater than her wish to Louisa. Austen here ridicules Mary's selfishness when Mary leaves her sick child in the charge of Anne and herself goes with her husband to attend a party at the Great House.

One may find another ironical treatment of Austen when Mary writes a letter to Anne. In the letter Mary represents herself as an unlucky person who is always absent when anything desirable is going on. She complains that she is always the last of her family to be taken notice of. She speaks of her indispositions and says that she is sure to catch an infection in the throat, deploring the fact that her sore throats are always worse than other peoples. According to her (Mary), Captain Benwick is not a great match for Luisa, but a million times better than marrying among the Hayters. Mary, indeed has to be recognised as one of the principal comic characters created by

Jane Austen in *Persuasion*. She provides more humour even than her father.

We have also found some elations in the ironical gesticulations about Mrs. Musgrove. This appears particularly in Mrs. Musgrove's grief over her dead son Richard for whom she never cared when he was alive. Richard was a very troublesome, hopeless, stupid and unmanageable son. When the news of his death came to the family, nobody in the family had felt much grieved and Austen comments coldly:

"The real circumstances of this pathetic piece of family history were, that the Musgroves had had the ill fortune of a very troublesome, hopeless son and the good fortune to lose him before he reached his twentieth year; that he had been sent to sea because he was stupid and unmanageable on shore; that he had been very little cared for at any time by his family, though quite as much as he deserved; seldom heard of, and scarcely at all regretted, when the intelligence of his death abroad had worked its way to Uppercross, two years before.

He had, in fact, though his sisters were now doing all they could for him, by calling him 'poor Richard', been nothing better than a thick headed, unfeeling,

unprofitable Dick Musgrove, who had never done anything to entitle himself to more than the abbreviation of his name, living or dead." [20]

The calm cruelty of this outburst seems to be the author's response to the hypocrisy of the wretched young man's surviving relatives in using his death as a means of claiming sympathy for themselves on various social occasions. It is characteristic of the 'no nonsense' air about the novel. Jane Austen has hardly time to laugh at Sir Walter Elliot. His vanity makes him so absurd as to be quite despicable. The irony in this case arises from a contrast between 'pretence' and 'reality'. Mrs. Musgrove's grief is more of a sentimental pose than a genuine experience. It is in this connection that Jane Austen makes one of her most humorous remarks in the novel:

"Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronise in vain – which taste cannot tolerate – which ridicule will seize." [21]

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20. Ibid; Ch-6; P-1240
21. Ibid; Ch-8; P-1250

Immediately after her fit of grief, Mrs. Musgrove gives a happy glance round the room, and says that –

"Nothing was so likely to do her good as a little quiet cheerfulness at home."[22]

Another ironical remark about Mrs. Musgrove occurs when the author tells us that, while giving to Mrs. Croft the history of her eldest daughter's engagement, she speaks –

"in that convenient tone of voice which was perfectly audible while it pretended to be a whisper"[23]

Anne felt that she did not belong to the conversation and yet, as Captain Harville seemed thoughtful and not disposed to talk about her daughter's engagement. Yet another ironical remarks about Mrs. Musgrove runs as follows:

"Mrs. Musgrove, who thought only of one sort of illness, having assured herself with some anxiety, that there had been no fall in the case; that Anne had not at any time lately slipped down, and got a blow on her head; that she was perfectly convinced

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22. Ibid; Ch-14; P-1290
23. Ibid; Ch-23; P-1350

of having had no fall; could part with her cheerfully, and depend on finding her better at night."[24]

Persuasion, in fact, consists of several separate stories interwoven and balanced in order to create a pattern. The central love affair of Anne and Wentworth is highlighted by the various sub-plots which involve the different groups of characters. The romantic entanglements of Louisa and Wentworth, Louisa and Benwick, Henrietta and Wentworth, Henrietta and Charles Hayter, Mr. Elliot and Elizabeth, Mr. Elliot and Anne, Mr. Elliot and Mrs., Clay and Mrs. Clay and Sir Walter compose a seemingly endless list of possible combinations. Together they give the novel its shape by providing a range of comparisons with the main relationship which helps to isolate its unique quality. In some ways Jane Austen is also giving us an ironic variant on the popular formats of romantic fiction of her day. It is, indeed, very apt to say that she (Austen) reverses the conventional plot mechanism focusing on youthful romance.

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24. Ibid; Ch-23; P-1356

The narrative style of *Persuasion* differs from those of the earlier novels of Jane Austen. In this novel the novelist herself tells the story on a larger scale than what we have noticed in her other novels. The conversation between characters and the use of pertinent monologues are not provided in abundance. Her adherence to such a style recalls that of the eighteenth century masters like Richardson and Fielding. These older novelists often treat the stupid and wayward characters very harshly in their writings. To Austen this sort of treatment appears to be unwanted. Her irony can become deadly enough. As to this characteristic of Jane Austen, Walter Allen has observed.

"... she may not harass her stupid characters with practical jokes, as the older novelists did, but her verbal play with them is at first no less shocking to those of us who were brought up on the pieties of humanitarianism."[25]

If we make a thorough survey of the novel, the grab of irony over the whole novel becomes explicit to us. She has gathered the pretence and the truth that provides the ironic vision. Simple irony is a statement that implies the opposite of what one says or implies more than it is saying. The technique of ironic statement frees Jane

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25. *The English Novel* (A Pelican Book): Walter Allen; P-109-10.

Austen from the necessity of making involved commentaries on her characters. It is left to the reader to understand the full force of the irony and to make the criticism himself. A further technique of irony is to put a speech into a character's mouth which is not intended by the speaker as irony but becomes ironic in effect. In this case, the character is made to say more than he intends, though it is left to the reader to notice the implications. When Elizabeth says to Anne who has warned her that Mrs. Clay might have designs on Sir Walter –

"As I am rather better acquainted with her sentiments than you can be, I can assure you, that upon the subject of marriage they are particularly nice; and that she reprobates all inequality of condition and rank more strongly than most people."[26]

The reader who has seen Mrs. Clay acknowledges immediately that Mrs. Clay had so much success. The propaganda she has put out has been accepted by Elizabeth who is then lulled away from any suspicious of her friend. The speech becomes ironic at Elizabeth's expense revealing her as the dupe of Mrs. Clay whom she is defending.

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26. *Persuasion;* Ch-5; P-1230.

We have also found that many critics have commented their different views on the ironical design in the novel. Marvin Mudrick in his *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* locates the source of the irony in a contrast between the values the author intends to uphold and those prevailing in the actual world. Mudrick's theory of irony comes close to Douglas Bush's moralistic approach in so far as it focuses on the author's personal judgements. Another eminent critic, John Odmark analyses the structure of the novel and considers the ironic vision to be the principle which determines the structure of the novel.

"As a rule irony in Jane Austen's fiction has been defined primarily in terms of content. What I want to draw attention to is the fact that irony is above all a structuring principle that determines the shape of all the novels."[27]

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27. *An Understanding of Jane Austen Novels: Character, Value & Ironic Perspective*: John Odmark (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981); P-1