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Emotional Experience and Outward Appearance: A Dichotomous Look at The Self in Austen's  
*Persuasion*

Anne and Wentworth's history together places them in an paradoxical spot of both intimacy and distance. Their past intimacy, assuaged by the passage of time (and rejection) demotes them to seemingly mere acquaintances. Yet, their emotional reactions to each other (particularly Anne's internal reactions to Wentworth, which the audience has access to throughout the novel) suggest otherwise. While their current conversations are more banal, their internal selves are ablaze. The narrative rests on this pivotal intersection of the outer self as it appears in the social world and the deep emotional inner workings of the individual. The novel explores the importance and intensity of emotions, and how they interact with both the social realm and the physical body.

The struggle of authentic communication is a huge component of the narrative. Anne and Wentworth's blocked communication is evident throughout the novel, especially when Anne laments, "How, in all the peculiar disadvantages of their respective situations, would he ever learn her real sentiments?" (Austen 207). This communication block can also be seen as a

“villain” or “anti-hero” in the text, as it stands as an obstacle to Anne and Wentworth’s love. This lack of communication also sets up an important dynamic that builds much of the tension in the novel.

While once so intimate, their conversations now seem so mundane. However, they have intense emotional experiences with these interactions, creating a disconnect between their inner feelings and outward expression. Social constraints, hurt feelings, nervousness, and uncertainty of the others’ feelings, fuels their lack of open and direct communication. This, in turn, intensifies their inner emotions. These repressed feelings then lead to more awkwardness, and the two build on each other.

We see this dichotomy between the calm outer-self and impassioned inner-self when Anne sees Wentworth for the first time (in the novel, after seven years) and “a thousand feelings rushed on Anne” (Austen 94). They do not even talk or engage in conversation, all she does is see him for a few seconds, and she is overcome with emotion. This inner-feeling vs outward-appearance tension is a critical component of *Persuasion* that rests at the heart of the love plot. The film industry realized this and tried to incorporate this tension, despite obvious obstacles to displaying hidden emotion in the medium of film.

When discussing the director’s cinematic choices in a film adaptation of *Persuasion*, Gottlieb states “The camera effectively registers the many stresses on Anne, in one notable instance by a special effect [...] When Anne first sees Wentworth, a moment in which she has to reconcile huge internal shock with external equanimity, he employed one of those Hitchcock zooms, in which the perspective skews queasily as you close in on a face” (106). Rather than deploying dramatic facial features (which would ruin the inner vs outer tension) or a narrator, the

film captures this intense inner feeling of emotion by using an outside force — the camera’s perspective — in order to inform the audience that something is important, strange, and different. This zoom makes time and space seem distorted, much like it must feel for Anne in this moment of heightened anxiety. Rather than seeing or hearing Anne’s distress, we experience it with her. The concept of experiencing with the character: of feeling their pain and seeing the world from the perspective, is an important part of storytelling, in novel or film form.

Character perspective is incredibly important in *Persuasion*. Warhol discusses *Persuasion*’s uniqueness, stating “Anne Elliot [is] the central consciousness through which the story gets transmitted. As Louise Flavin observes, ‘In no other Austen novel is so much of what happens filtered through a central consciousness (23)’” (Warhol 5). So much is focused on the consciousness: the internal and how one processes the world, which is filtered through the lenses of emotion and perception. There is a highlighted focus on not only the plot, but on how one processes events through their own perspective and the strong emotive experiences that color their perception. We only see the characters (such as Wentworth) through Anne’s eyes. True, we get accounts from Louisa, Mary, Henrietta, and others, but these are through dialogue that Anne hears, and thus, is still through Anne’s perspective.

Not only do emotions impact how one sees the world, but they impact the physical body as well. At the concert, Anne’s discussion with Wentworth is a very visceral experience: “in spite of all the various noises of the room, the almost ceaseless slam of the door, and ceaseless buzz of persons walking through, [Anne] had distinguished every word, was struck, gratified, confused, and beginning to breathe very quick, and feel an hundred things in a moment” (Austen 200).

Anne is focused with exact clarity on Wentworth and his words, and she perceives him fully. Her

numerous emotions are overwhelming, and most curiously, her body is affected; she begins to “breathe very quick.” These intense emotional experiences exude into the physical as they are this full-bodied reaction, which adds to the intensity. The struggle to stay composed is not only a mental one, but a physical one as well.

While the characters experience these strong emotional experiences, they also remain part of a social realm which upholds certain expectations of behavior. Mind-reading becomes a necessary tool in navigating the social world amidst social restraint and concealed feelings. One needs to guess with the information they have and mind-read because open communication is blocked. One prominent example in the text takes place at the opera concert. Wentworth begins to act differently towards Anne when he sees her with Mr. William Elliot and becomes jealous, as he suspects they are romantically involved. Anne notices this difference, stating “The difference between his present air and what it had been in the octagon room was strikingly great. — Why was it?” (Austen 206). Anne essentially is mind-reading Wentworth’s mind-reading, creating a complex web of characters’ emotions, outward behaviors, interpretations of other’s behaviors, and interpretations of other’s interpretations, which all impact one another.

Another contributing factor to the intricate internal-vs-external double-sided nature of the characters can be weened from Wakefield’s criticism of the prioritization of superficial aspects in female education: “in the education of females, the same view actuates every rank: an advantageous settlement on marriage is the universal prize [...] their best years for improvement are sacrificed to the attainment of attractive qualities, shewy superficial accomplishments, polished manners, and in one word, the whole science of pleasing” (286 in Broadview’s *Persuasion*). She goes on to showcase the ridiculousness of the situation — that although

marriage is prioritized, what they are taught does not help to truly prepare them in the long run — when she states “the offices of a wife are very different from those of the mere pageant of a ball-room [...] the talents they require are of a more noble kind: something far beyond the elegant trifler is wanted in a companion for life” (Wakefield 286). These social rules and expectations contribute to the restriction of Anne’s communication with Wentworth down to the superficial, on-the-surface conversations they engage in. However, Anne possesses this deepness and “talents of a more noble kind,” especially in comparison with the rest of her family. In particular, Anne is a foil to Elizabeth, who acts as an “elegant trifler” and lacks any deeper attributes. However, Anne is still forced to interact in this world of frivolity and thus is unable to communicate directly with Wentworth because of the social restraints expected of women in her time.

Perhaps Anne is so skilled at concealing her inner emotions because the importance of outward appearance and manners were pressed on her all of her life. Sir Walter’s domineering personality and insistence on the importance of one’s image can take the role of “female education” here. Growing up with him must have taught Anne how to compose and hold herself in outward appearance, but did not teach her much about being a good wife or becoming a deep person (as Elizabeth holds as an example). Anne developed those qualities herself or through other influences.

Austen herself was an influencer and encouraged development of deeper attributes. She was able to address the complexities of the situations young women found themselves in and able to advocate the importance of personal inner feeling. Her niece sought Austen’s advice on whether or not she should marry a man she once loved but no longer felt the same affection for.

Austen's role of guiding her niece mirrors that of Lady Russell and Anne in *Persuasion*.

However, it is clear that Austen wants no part in "persuading" her niece, as she states "your affection gives me the highest pleasure, but indeed you must not let anything depend on my opinion. Your own feelings & none but your own, should determine such an important point" (Austen 279, Letter to Fanny Nov 30). This shows Austen's emphasis on the importance of coming to conclusions on one's own terms, and the importance of knowing and following one's emotions, not just in her novels but in her personal life and in the guidance of others' personal lives.

In her position, Austen reflects Lady Russell, but in their stances, they differ. Austen does still recognize and stress the importance of practical matters as she wrote "There *are* such beings in the World perhaps, one in a Thousand, as the Creature You & I should think perfection, where Grace & Spirit are united to Worth, where the Manners are equal to the Heart & Understanding, but such a person may not come in your way, or if he does, he may not be the eldest son of a Man of Fortune, the Brother of your particular friend, & belonging to your own County" (Austen 278, Letter to Fanny Nov 20). She states that a person of wit, mind, and character is rare, and even if he does come into young Fanny's life, he may not be as practical a match as her current suitor. In this way, she is similar to Lady Russell in that they both understand the importance of these practicalities, and want what is best for their young advisees. However, Austen still insists on the importance of following one's emotions and feelings as the leading factor to happiness and satisfaction, as she later states in her letter "I shall turn round & entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection" (Austen 278, Letter to Fanny Nov

20). This demonstrates that although Austen can recognize the importance of practical matters, feelings and emotions take priority, and this is reflected in her works. Perhaps Austen advocates that we may be persuaded by many factors, but ultimately, we need to realize our emotions and come to decisions on our own.

The loss of communication between two characters, and their journey on regaining this communication, takes the reader on a tension-filled journey as they follow Anne through mind-reading and balancing intense inner emotions with societal expectations and rules. As her last novel, *Persuasion* shows an deep complexity of the self: exploring both the inner and outer self, and the intricate ways both interact within one's social realm.

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