

Cruelty in persuasion



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Jane Austen's insightful and influential novel *Persuasion* is an emotional tale of human conduct, and, in particular, of the moral implications of direct and indirect persuasion. The impact of the words of Sir Charles Grandison "... there is great cruelty in persuasion..." (VI Letter 34), which highlight the notion that the "act of persuading somebody to do or believe something" (Hornby 2000 869) can be perceived as cruel, that is, "cause pain or suffering" (Hornby 2000 869), will be discussed. This essay will also analyze the extent to which persuasion in the novel is cruel, and will show that the intention of persuasion is often selfish desire, not cruelty. Yet if the persuader is conscious of causing damage, this essay will argue that that can be considered cruel. Moreover, it will evaluate whether, if the outcome of the persuasive act is positive, it may outweigh the damage done to the victim. Finally, the nature of persuasion without negative consequences will be discussed. The novel revolves around significant acts of persuasion. One major aspect of the novel is that the protagonist and heroine, Anne Elliot, is persuaded out of a relationship and convinced to reject a marriage proposal from another major character, Captain Frederick Wentworth. She is swayed by the views of her father, Sir Walter Elliot, and, more importantly, the advice of her godmother and friend, Lady Russell. They believe the engagement to be improper, almost solely due to Frederick's low social and financial status. This causes a great deal of suffering to both Anne and Frederick. For many years after the event, Anne still feels that it "clouded every enjoyment of youth" (57), causing her "an early loss of bloom and spirits" (57). Frederick also suffers great agony and says he became "overwhelmed, buried" (246) and lived in "misery" (247) because of Anne's decision. However, it was not Lady Russell's intention to be cruel and cause

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such suffering. It was only as a result of her almost selfish determination to assure that Anne—and as a result, herself—were not permanently connected with Frederick, whom she saw as having not only “no fortune” (56), but also as “an aggravation of the evil” (57). The breaking of Anne’s engagement is seen by Lady Russell and her father as positive. From their perspective, her affliction is outweighed by the benefit of not being associated with the then-common and lower class Frederick Wentworth. Anne’s emotional damage, therefore, is largely due to the pressure of social norms and values.

Wentworth, a common sailor with no guaranteed prospects of rising in the social hierarchy, is not acceptable for the highly respectable, eloquent and affluent Elliot family. Anne’s judgement, too, is affected by social pressures. She reveals to Frederick that she was induced to believe the engagement as improper, as “all risk would have been incurred and all duty violated” if she had gone ahead with the marriage (246). From this it can be seen that she has been persuaded by society to not violate her duty by marrying below her status. Perspective, however, is of key importance in the cruelty of persuasion. Although some, namely Lady Russell and Sir Walter, believe that Anne’s and Frederick’s suffering is just, the victims themselves feel differently. Anne, although she does not blame Lady Russell, feels that “she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it” (58). Furthermore, she strongly believes that she should not have received “any of such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good” (57). This emphasises the fact that judging the cruelty of persuasion depends largely on perspective.

Whether or not the victim’s feelings and emotions are taken into account is influential in the way persuasion is perceived. It is much more cruel not to

take into account the victim's perspective, especially if they are likely to suffer. Furthermore, the predicted outcome of the persuasion can alter the persuader's perception, and if they nevertheless influence one's actions and the victim suffers, it is less tolerable. Lady Russell is at first, to a degree, blinded by her own determination to separate Anne and Frederick that she does not take into account her goddaughter's feelings. This changes over time, and although she never regrets her past actions, she becomes more sympathetic toward Anne. Persuasion does not always entail pain and suffering, however, and therefore is not always cruel, particularly when it is more like encouragement and is solely for a beneficial cause. Lady Russell, Anne and Mr Shepard, an Elliot family friend, all persuade Sir Walter Elliot and Ms Elizabeth Elliot, the eldest daughter, to "retrench" and move to more affordable housing. This does not involve direct pain or suffering and is ultimately for their own benefit. Similarly, many of Anne's close acquaintances in Uppercross, where she temporarily lives, often try to persuade her to encourage her younger sister, Mary, to be of more use and become more positive. Mary, who is not particularly fancied by some of her acquaintances because of her conceited character, is often irksome and unhelpful. For this reason, even her husband, Charles Musgrove, asks Anne to "persuade Mary not to be always fancying herself ill" (71). Likewise, Charles Musgrove's sisters and mother try to persuade Anne to encourage Mary to be more accommodating. Through this, it can be seen that persuasion is not necessarily always a negative act. Persuasion analyzes, and to a degree attacks, human behaviour, with particular emphasis on persuasion. Persuasion can be perceived as a cruel act. Yet the extent to which it is cruel is undefined. Personal benefit is more often the motivation

to persuade than the intention to cause pain and suffering is. As can be seen in Austen's final novel, persuasion can often have a good intention, even if the outcome is not so. Furthermore, the positive outcomes achieved can compensate the affliction caused. However, this is largely subject to perspective. In addition, the persuader's empathy for the victim can alter one's perception of cruelty regarding persuasion. Specifically, persuasion is regarded as more severe if the suffering that the victim will experience is taken into account, and the persuasive act is carried out regardless. Persuasion does not always entail suffering and therefore is not always cruel. Although there may be great cruelty in persuasion, it is subject to many factors that make it somewhat ambiguous and open to interpretation.