

Class rigidity and social mobility

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In late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England there was a sort of moral 'code' of behavior and standards that are to be maintained by the middle and upper classes of society. Austen realistically mirrors this 'code' through the characters and plots of her novels while showing that social flexibility was narrow and class boundaries were strict. The topics of class stringency and social mobility are important areas in Jane Austen's literature. We begin to see that Austen is not a revolutionary as she supports and preserves the morals and customs of societies hierarchy.

However she often encourages and backs the emergence of new wealth permitting greater social mobility. In Austen's world the naval and tradesmen' professions are means by which it is acceptable for peoples to advance their social situations. In *Persuasion* and *Emma*, we witness class rigidity as well as class mobility. Characters in the Navy and those who are newly risen from or 'in trade' have obtained fortune enough to become accepted into society's upper classes, which suggests that Austen allows some flexibility in her hierarchy. But, in Austen's world there are 'rules' and limitations to social acceptance and Sir Walter Elliot and Mrs.

Clay, and Mr. Elton are reprimanded for overstepping their 'bounds'. Wealth is then the most principal determining factor of social standings and 'suitable' matches. With wealth in mind Austen is traditional in her respect for class stability, but she recognizes the benefits of larger social flexibility with new wealth. Austen uses irony and success of the naval and tradesmen' to show the advantages that new wealth has on social mobility. Sir Walter takes great offense to the naval profession and speaks, I have strong grounds of objection to it.

First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of A man is in greater danger in the way of being insulted by the rise of one whose father, his father might have disdained to speak to, than in any other line. (Austen, *Persuasion*, 20) Sir Walter is representative of the upper class of the past. He holds tight to his morals and values the traditions of his ancestry. It is evident here that he has great difficulty in separating someone from his or her family and cannot fathom how one would not follow in his father's footsteps.

This quotation also presents that Sir Walter Elliot personally feels insulted when someone of a random family who started off below him can end up above him. He feels that he should be superior to most Navy men because the Elliots have been at the top end of the hierarchy for so long. When Sir Walter says "undue distinction" it is ironic because he implies that his distinction was well earned and the distinction and honors of a naval officer is not. He absurdly believes he should be superior because he didn't have to do any work to achieve his title.

At *Persuasion*'s end, Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot were to be married. Austen described Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, [he] was no longer nobody. 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. *Persuasion*, 232) This

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passage shows that new wealth attained by people of low birth can have a great deal of social power just as ancient families have social influence. It says that Wentworth was no longer a 'nobody, so he was now worthy of Anne's hand, daughter of a baronet, as his earnings put him on an upper class scale. By using a passive voice here it implies that society would agree that it does not matter that his wealth came from a profession, wealth is wealth, and he will be held in high regard for his earnings. The narrative also pokes fun at Anne's father, Sir Walter Elliot for being imprudent with his money.

This suggests that Wentworth is more favorable to support Anne than Sir Walter, even though he thinks himself highly superior to Wentworth. After Frank Churchill arrives in town Emma takes him to shop at Ford's and says "you will be adored in Highbury. You were very popular before you came, because you were Mr. Weston's son" (Austen, Emma, 155). Mr. Weston was a former army captain and earned enough money to buy his own land putting him in a higher social situation. This quotation shows that not only is Mr. Weston associated with Highbury, he is held in high regard there.

Frank Churchill is also a very wealthy man of the trade and because of his known wealth he is the talk of Highbury society. Through satire of the high-class society (Sir Walter), and through approval and regard for 'new and trade' professions as a means of social mobility, Austen shows that the current social structure is moderately changing for the better. Although there are benefits of social mobility from new wealth peoples and patrons, tradition in maintaining class structure is imperative and belonging to a class should

be accompanied with finances. After Mr. Elton proposes to Emma, the narrator attempts to understand Mr.

Elton's motives. Perhaps it was not fair to expect him to feel how very much he was her inferior in talent, and all the elegancies of mind. The very want of such equality might prevent his perception of it; but he must know that in fortune and consequence she was greatly his superior. He must know that the Woodhouses had been settled for several generations at Hartfield, the younger branch of a very ancient family" and that the Eltons were nobody. (Emma, 105) The narrator suggests that Elton cannot comprehend how he is not fitting of Emma because he himself is unfit.

The snobbish tone in this passage attempting to commiserate with Elton is indicative of Austen's disapproval of such a notion. The narrator is trying to fathom why Elton thinks he is of high enough rank to even ask Emma something of the sort. It says 'he must know suggesting that he should know that he was in the wrong. The narrator calls the Eltons nobodies; this serves as a reminder of their economic situation and place in the social hierarchy. Anne sees a possible threat in the way Mrs. Clay a polite widow recommends herself to her father Sir Walter Elliot.

Anne thinks she is widely overstepping her boundaries in regard to rank. Anne, " felt the imprudence of the arrangement an acute mind and assiduous pleasing manners, infinitely more dangerous attractions than any merely personal might have been. Anne was so impressed by the degree of danger, that she could not excuse herself from trying to make it perceptible to her sister" (Persuasion, 33). Anne believes it is her obligation as a member

of the upper class to protect her family's name. She calls the match a danger and inappropriate because she knows the meaning of a 'suitable' match, matching in class and rank.

She is mindful of her social structure and how it functions and is greatly offended by even the possibility of low rank coming into her family by marriage. Because Anne is the heroine in *Persuasion* and we as readers associate with her ideals, it becomes clear that Austen wants us to know that marrying into a family with wealth without having wealth oneself is unacceptable. It is evident that Austen is conventional in her respect for societal traditions as none of the marriages in Austen's fiction of which she approved was economically unwise.

In close, Austen sticks to tradition but is lenient in accepting new wealth into her social structure. Austen reveals class mobility when she eventually allows Anne to marry Wentworth even though they are of different heritage. The match is acceptable, as he has through the Navy accumulated fortune and good merit enough to secure Anne's status. She also uses the ridiculousness of Sir Walter to convey that to be of the upper class it does require hard work and management, as he is thoughtless with his money causing him to fall in rank. Mr.