

The theme of social class in "persuasion"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

'Persuasion', written by Jane Austen in 1817, is a novel which grapples with the key social and cultural issues of living in a patriarchal society, in which social class is viewed to be very important. Due to this, we are able to draw contrasts and similarities between the modern day, and the 19th century. Social class presents the theme is an array of ways such as; through marriage, the problems of class, how people behave due to class, as well as superficiality of class.

Marriage plays a vital role throughout the novel, and social class is important in this as it seemingly dictates who one should or shouldn't marry. This is displayed by saying: " he had purchased independence by uniting himself to a rich woman of inferior birth." The verb ' purchased' conjures up an image to make it seem as if it was a transaction instead of pursuing love, and this is further emphasised by the noun ' independence', which creates a plethora of meanings and leaves the reader to create their own interpretations. One of which could be that he breaking the social norms by marrying someone outside of their class, and therefore becoming somewhat more independent as he is not reliant on social contradictions. Furthermore how hard it is to climb up the social ladder as to be highly regarded, you must be born into wealth, and not self-made as you'd still be seen to be ' of inferior birth'. The 19th century reader may be more understanding to this topic as it is common for people to only marry within their own class, and to marry someone who isn't seen to have the same status as you is frowned upon. However, this is highly contrasted in the modern day readers' perspective as nowadays marriage has almost no barriers and we are a more accepting society.

There is clear evidence that the social hierarchy presented is flawed for an array of reasons, an example of this is presented by saying: "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." The adjective 'obscure' demonstrates how if you are born into a certain wealth or situation, you will be shunned and looked down upon in society, in addition to this, the adjective 'undue' demonstrates how your future would have already set. The negative adverb 'never' demonstrates how it is seemingly unreachable, which is completely juxtaposed to what the modern day reader may think. Seemingly, we, the modern day reader, feel as if we are able to work to where we want to be, and that where we are born doesn't portray our future, yet this may be completely different to what the 19th century audience would think, as this is what society may think is normal.

Being of high social status makes you feel superior around others, however when Elizabeth and her father is in the presence of someone of even higher status, Anne says she: "wish[es] that they had more pride; for "our cousins Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret;" "our cousins, the Dalrymples," sounded in her ears all day long." The comparative 'more' demonstrates that Elizabeth and her father has a lack of pride when it comes to being in acquaintance with someone with a higher social rank. The use of the personal pronoun 'our' demonstrates how by having these social connections they are able to be viewed as highly ranked. By exaggerating the amount that Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret is mentioned due to the saying "all day long" we are able to gain an understanding that Anne hears an unbearable amount to do with them simply because of the fact that they are

a higher social rank. The modern day reader would be able to understand and emphasise with Anne, as we are able to see how important social class is seen to be and we are able to understand how much of a burden it must have been, however a 19th century reader may have understood Elizabeth's and her father's perception and actions.

Finally, we are able to see how superficial class is and this is highlighted by Anne saying: " they were nothing. There was no superiority of manner, accomplishment, or understanding. Lady Dalrymple had acquired the name of " a charming woman," because she had a smile and a civil answer for everybody." The sheer harshness and brutality behind the negative quantifier ' nothing' demonstrates how some may view the importance of social class. However this doesn't represent the majority of the 19th century's readers, as Austen was seen to write ahead of her time, and therefore it may speak to the modern day readers instead. The negative semantic field of being well-rounded is created by the words ' mannar', ' accomplishment' and ' understanding'; and this emphasises how superficial class is, as it doesn't matter how you act, or who you are, it is all simply about your birth and your family. Furthermore the verb ' acquired' demonstrates that she has obtained that name but it may have been easier than as it seems. In addition to this we are able to see how simple it is for her to be viewed as ' charming' as it is due to her ' smile' and the fact she is ' civil'. The modern day reader would completely see the flaws in class, and therefore feel empathy towards Anne, yet the 19th century reader may have seen this as a norm, and not seen this to be a flaw.

Overall we are able to see how the Austen presents social class to not only be an extremely important and key theme in this novel, but also a very flawed and imperfect theme. Historically, class and social status has played a key role in everyday life, and it is only recently that we were able to break out of this and become more accepting and understanding to human nature. Due to the ideas and flaws being apparent and clear in this novel, we are able to see how Austen is ahead of her time, and therefore her representation of class is that it is dysfunctional.