

# The problem of perception: society's views vs. reality in persuasion



Society is notably poor at judging people's character. Good people can be disregarded for petty reasons and deplorable people can be supported for equally poor reasons. Such contrasts are common in *Persuasion* with characters like Sir Walter, Mr. Elliot, and Mrs. Smith. They all exhibit clear disparities between how they are viewed by their society and how they are depicted by Austen. In Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, the contrast between society's perception of people and their realities is used to reveal Austen's thoughts on the negative and often inaccurate views of society.

Mr. Elliot is used to show how society can mistake scheming, selfish people for well-meaning people if they are rich and charismatic. After a few years earlier marrying a "rich woman of inferior birth" (Ch. 1) and causing Sir Walter to "[consider] him unworthy of it" (meaning family respect) (1), Mr. Elliot came back to the family and was "not only pardoned, [the family was] delighted with him" (15). He manages to explain away the faux pas of his previous marriage and win back the favor of Sir Walter and the others. He becomes an agreeable man, "rational, discreet, polished" (17), but on a subsurface level, according to Anne "there was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others." Mr. Elliot becomes someone who people view as a good, agreeable person but he's really quite manipulative, selfish and untrustworthy.

Ms. Smith, in contrast, is a down-on-her-luck woman with poor social status who is nevertheless a good person. She is described as having "little to live on, and no surname of dignity" (17). She has little money and zero prestige. Upon hearing Anne had befriended Mrs. Smith, Elizabeth was disapproving and Sir Walter was disgusted. Lines like Walter's "Upon my word, Miss Anne

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Elliot, you have the most extraordinary taste! Everything that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations are inviting to you" (17) are common, displaying the fierce loathing from them. Why do they loathe her so? It's because of her prestige (or lack thereof), not her personality or actions. In reality, she is really a rather pleasant person to be around. Anne befriends her not because of pity, but because of her apparently rather unique ability to see past the surface of people to see their core character. What she sees in Mrs. Smith, underneath the impoverished, "disgraceful" exterior is a good, kind, jovial person. Chapter 21 is all about a conversation between her and Anne that reveals her social intelligence and the fact that society spits upon her doesn't change who she is.

Sir Walter Elliot is a perfect example of status meaning nothing when it comes to how good one's character is. The "Sir" in his name shows what the majority of his character is: a vain pile of titles. The only thing he likes to read is "his own history with an interest which never failed" (1). He cares much for nothing more than how he appears, and his personal character reflects that. Sir Walter is not particularly empathetic and is rather selfish, or at least isn't very charitable. Upon being presented with the idea of leasing out Kellynch Hall, he violently opposes it because it would make him look bad, even though the family needs it. He only agrees to it once it is framed in a way that makes Sir Walter Elliot look dignified. He's an honored person, but he's not all that honorable. Even if society views him as someone to be respected, he doesn't deserve that amount of respect.

These characters serve to drive home Austen's point that status doesn't define who you are and you should be who you are whether people respect <https://assignbuster.com/the-problem-of-perception-societys-views-vs-reality-in-persuasion/>

you as a good person or not. Mr. Elliot is a disreputable person, and Austen shows that even if society respects him, he's not a person one should aspire to emulate. Another message of the novel involves people clashing with the preconceived notions that others had about them. Mr. Elliot is revealed to be conniving, Sir Walter to be vain, and Mrs. Smith to be kind. These contrasts are stark and impactful, as Austen reveals the ironies of upper class British society at the time. The problem of perception is that people are not what they often appear to be; people can't be made to look past their preconceived notions most of the time. If we can persuade them to look deeper, however, society will end up better in the end.