



## How A Society Sees Someone Based on Their Wealth and Gender in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

### (Bagaimana Masyarakat Melihat Seseorang Berdasarkan Kekayaan dan Jenis Kelamin dalam *Persuasion* Karya Jane Austen)

**Faizah Izzati Syadri**

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Andalas

Email: faizahis.student.sasingunand@gmail.com

#### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the novel *Persuasion*, written by Jane Austen and published in 1817. This novel tells the story of Anne Elliot, whose family and godmother persuade her to break off her engagement with Captain Wentworth because he is not a noble nor wealthy. He is not suitable for Anne, who is a noble. The social class in the Regency period affected the upper class and the lower class, whether in economy, wealth, or social standing. The analysis applies a Historical biographical approach to relate the period and the author's life with the novel. The article uses a qualitative method to describe the findings. The novel represents that the upper class people of the Regency period had many scandals and did not care about the problems of the lower class, and that marriage was considered to maintain the economy and social stability for women. Additionally, it denotes that the Naval soldiers were treated politely after gaining wealth and social status, and Austen's life and values influence the plot and character of the novel. The findings conclude that the novel *Persuasion* reflects how society in the Regency period saw people by their wealth and gender.

Keywords: *Regency period, Persuasion, social class, Jane Austen's life*

#### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini membahas novel *Persuasion* karya Jane Austen dan diterbitkan pada tahun 1817. Novel ini bercerita tentang Anne Elliot yang dibujuk oleh keluarga dan ibu baptisnya untuk memutuskan pertunangan dengan Kapten Wentworth karena ia bukan seorang bangsawan dan tidak memiliki harta, sehingga tidak cocok untuk Anne yang merupakan seorang bangsawan. Kelas sosial pada periode Regency mempengaruhi kelas atas dan kelas bawah, baik secara ekonomi, kekayaan, maupun kedudukan sosial. Analisa ini menggunakan pendekatan Biografi Historis untuk menghubungkan periode dan kehidupan penulis dengan novel. Penulis menggunakan metode kualitatif untuk mendeskripsikan hasil temuan. Pada akhir penelitian, penulis menemukan bahwa kelas atas memiliki banyak skandal dan tidak peduli dengan masalah kelas bawah, dan pernikahan dianggap untuk menjaga stabilitas ekonomi dan sosial bagi perempuan. Disamping itu, kajian ini juga memperlihatkan bahwa prajurit angkatan laut diperlakukan dengan sopan setelah mendapatkan kekayaan dan status sosial, dan kehidupan dan nilai-nilai Austen mempengaruhi plot dan karakter novel. Temuan-temuan tersebut menyimpulkan bahwa novel *Persuasion* mencerminkan bagaimana masyarakat pada periode Regency melihat orang berdasarkan kekayaan dan jenis kelamin mereka.

Kata kunci: Periode Regency, *Persuasion*, kelas sosial, kehidupan Jane Austen

## INTRODUCTION

The Regency Era was seen as an age rich in culture and literature. The political and historical Regency period was thought to have begun with the Parliamentary Regency Act of 1811. Although the Regency period was officially recognized from 5 February 1811 to 29 January 1820, most people believed it covers a broader period, roughly starting in 1795 and extending until the Victorian era. During this period, a significant amount of work was made in the fields of fashion, architecture, and art. This period was only seen mainly by the elite social classes as an age of rich culture and literature. At the same time, the masses were poverty stricken due to a sudden population boom. The aristocrats who lived fashionably and paid little attention to the problems of those living in the slums defined the period primarily by their emphasis on style. At this time, it was thought that strictly following social rank was necessary for a civilized world to function (Arora 230). Thus, if someone did not follow the social rank, they would not be regarded as civilized.

One of the literary works of this period is a novel entitled *Persuasion* by Jane Austen, which was published in 1817. This novel tells the story of Anne Elliot, whom her family and godmother persuade to break off her engagement with Captain Wentworth because he is not a noble nor has wealth, so he is not suitable for Anne, who is a noble. Also, at that time, any relationship, whether marriage or friendship should fit into this specific niche that society had formed for them. Any deviation from this was seen as scandalous, and those who did so were shunned by society (Arora 230). However, later in the novel, they end up together because Captain Wentworth becomes wealthy after the war, and her family approves of their marriage.

Dewi et al. (2024), Ferdinal (2020; 2021), Pratiwi (2021) are among researchers who pay attention on women's representation in literature. Pratiwi says that the analysis on how women were portrayed has always been on rise (p.57). Previously, some research had been done on the novel. The first article by Arora (2023) tells the realistic Regency of England based on Jane Austen's works "*Pride and Prejudice*" and "*Mansfield Park*." The article explores the patriarchal society and the dark side of the English upper class in the Regency period. The following article is by Ross, which tells the scandal of the upper class, and another article is by Palileo, which is about marriage in the Regency Period. These two articles are necessary for the author's analysis because they cover the topics regarding society during the Regency Period. The studies above have been informative on the relationship between gender and marriage in the Regency Period, but they only cover the information in Austen's other novels. On the other

hand, this article will delve into how society in the Regency period saw people by their wealth and gender in the novel *Persuasion*.

The novel *Persuasion* by Jane Austen tells the story of how certain norms and ideals create boundaries on love and reflect the societal perspective of the Regency Period at that time. The novel shows the social standing and values upheld by English society in that period. Through her characters, Austen explores how gender and economic status influence a person's behavior and opportunities in the eyes of society.

## THEORY AND METHOD

According to Guerin, historical-biographical criticism regards a literary work primarily, if not solely, "as a reflection of its author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work" (p. 51). The Historical-biographical approach reflects the society in which it was produced. It is also the reflection or an expression of the author's life, such as his or her experience, concerns, and thoughts. This approach is not only about the society or author's life but also the political situation at that time. For example, Septiani et al. (2021) mention "Social construction exists in all aspects of our life ... through literary work, intellectual life of the society can be seen" (pp.100-1). Ferdinal (2013; 2015) affirms that studying historical-biographical contexts is necessary to investigate certain works of literature.

The novel *Persuasion* by Jane Austen was published in 1817, which happened to be the Regency period, and the novel setting is also in that period. A historical-biographical approach is needed to understand the work so we can understand the actions of the characters and society in the novel. Furthermore, this approach will also provide closure on how Austen's upbringing influenced how she portrays the characters in the novel.

The author gather the data from primary and secondary sources. The author read the novel thoroughly to gather precise material for the analysis. Therefore, the novel *Persuasion* serves as the primary source. On the other hand, the other data were collected from websites, journal articles, and literary books. They function as secondary sources to support the primary data.

## DISCUSSION

### *The Upper Class in the Regency Period*

Jane Austen in the novel *Persuasion* represents aristocrats who lived fashionably and paid little attention to the problems of those living in the slums defined the period primarily by their emphasis on style. At this time, for a civilized world to function, strictly following social rank is necessary. The aristocrats or the upper class lived fashionably and did not care about the problems of the masses who were in poverty due to a sudden population boom (Arora 230). The novel shows that the aristocrats were more important than and above the commoner. So, they did not care about people who they did not think of as being of great value or as part of the high class.

An aristocratic ruling culture is based on presumed privilege, in which the private interest of inherited property is equated with the public good. The fact that so many people during the Regency seemed to enjoy being exposed and even risking it for pleasure shows how much public scrutiny encouraged scandalous behaviors. The motivation for creating a scandal, be it sex, money, social privilege, or political power, was to weigh the potential pleasures of participating in wrongdoing against the risk of facing public attention, either because of a progressive goal to create systems for effectively managing private motives for the public good, or because of a nostalgic assumption that private interest imposed on public affairs constituted the privilege of an elite class, this pleasure of risking exposure induced an insatiable appetite for scandal (Ross 103). So not only does this behavior affect the economy of the ordinary people badly, but it also affects the government, which makes it corrupt and dirty.

In the novel *Persuasion*, we can see an example of this, and her family is an example of this case. Her family lives extravagantly, especially her father and her sister, who both are hedonists. This makes her family have debts, but despite having enormous debt, neither of them wants to give up the comforts they believe are essential to their aristocratic way of life and the dignity that goes along with it, which makes them unable to pay their workers' salary and rent their estate to the Crofts. This extravagant lifestyle can be seen in the novel when her father replied to the suggestion of a modest lifestyle because of the debt, "What! every comfort of life knocked off! Journeys, London, servants, horses, table— contractions and restrictions every where! To live no longer with the decencies even of a private gentleman! No, he would sooner quit Kellynch Hall at once, than remain in it on such disgraceful terms" (Austen 15-16). Because

of this, they took Lady Russel's advice to go to Bath because "Sir Walter and Elizabeth were induced to believe that they should lose neither consequence nor enjoyment by settling there" (Austen 17). In the end, they rented the mansion since it still allows them to maintain their dignity and extravagant lifestyle.

### ***The Impact of Social Class in the Regency Period***

Social class is essential in the Regency period. We can see in the novel *Persuasion* that Anne's family and her godmother persuade her to break off her engagement with Frederick Wentworth because, at that period of time, based on societal norms, the fate of women depended on their marriage partner, whether their husband is rich or have good social standing (Arora 230). So, it is realistic for her family to persuade her not to be married to him. As Salsabila (2022) mentions females seem to be considered the lowest creature in any way, such as how they do not recognize the importance of education and prefer to do jobs that are considered easy like taking care of the household (p. 98).

When Anne was engaged to Frederick Wentworth, he was still a nobody. However, when he gained wealth after the war, the attitude of the aristocrats was different. They became friendly and respected him. Many aristocrats wanted to be close to him, including her family. Nobody objected when he asked permission to marry Anne to her family because he had no flaws. He is the perfect bachelor based on that period's standard.

In this period, marriage serves as a means of achieving both financial and social advancement. As one of the few paths to social prominence and financial stability, marriage was viewed as the primary goal for women. Society places expectations on women to marry well and maintain the prestige of their families (Palileo 3). This makes marriage seen as a way to gain or secure wealth and not to be happy with the person we love. We can see in *Persuasion* that Anne's father and sister, Elizabeth, are searching and trying to get men of wealth and rank to marry Elizabeth in the hope of improving their family status in society.

So, social class affected marriage during this period. Many married for wealth rather than love due to society and the economy. The novel's protagonist, Anne, is one of the lucky people because she can marry the person she loves despite the challenge. This also happened because Frederick Wentworth had gained wealth, so for the people who love someone of a different status, it is not easy to marry, which is a rare case.

Another thing that also affected is how the upper class viewed the Navy people after the war. In the novel, Anne's father views navy people negatively and says, "A sailor grows old

sooner than any other man" (Austen 23). Nevertheless, when he met the person who rented his estate, Admiral Croft and his wife, he changed his view and said that the Admiral did not look horrible. However, the main reason Sir Walter Elliot changed his view was that after the war, the sailors gained fortune and became respectable. Thus, he also changed his view of Frederick Wentworth. We can also see the polite and friendly attitude of the aristocrats toward Captain Wentworth when he came to the concert and also when he met the Musgrove family.

### ***The Reflection of Jane Austen's Life in the Novel***

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 at the rectory in Steventon. She was the seventh child and youngest daughter out of eight children of George Austen and his wife, Cassandra. Austen has six brothers, with the oldest, James, and the youngest, Charles. She has one sister, Cassandra Elizabeth Austen, who is the person who was the closest to Austen in her life (Butler 8). Many scandals happened in the upper classes in the year she lived. This relates to the characteristics of the aristocrat's character in her novel *Persuasion*. As a work written by Jane Austen, *Persuasion* becomes the reflection of her life and the time period in which she lived, as seen in how she elaborates on the characterization in her novel and presents the scandals, norms, and restrictions that appeared in the story.

Jane Austen never married throughout her life despite the fact that women depended on marriage for economic and social stability at that time (Arora 231). However, there were a few times in her life that she nearly got married, but she never made it down the aisle. Despite the numerous repercussions, Austen continued to prioritize love and affection over notions of comfort, convenience, and financial stability (Manimozhi 2368). This is correlated with the novel *Persuasion* because in the story, the protagonist, Louisa, and the Crofts married because of love. Austen's values of love and affection made her write that her characters are married because of love and live happily despite never being married in her entire life.

Another thing that correlated with the novel is the Navy. She wrote about the Navy because, at that time, Napoleon's War was taking place. Austen wrote about the Navy positively in the novel because she has brothers who entered the Navy. She heard many stories from her brother, and this gave her a good understanding of the Navy. In the novel, Austen wrote about Captain Wentworth's friend's condition: "Captain Harville had never been in good health since a severe wound which he received two years before" (Austen 113). She wrote not only positive things about the Navy and war but also the consequences of war to a person.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the previous analysis and discussion, the author came to a conclusion about the novel "*Persuasion*" by Jane Austen that reflects how the society in the Regency period sees someone by their wealth and gender. The society of this period treated people of great rank and wealth politely, especially the upper class. This made the lower class impacted negatively, as did women, who are the weaker sex in society. Thus, women must be married not because of love but because of the economy and social stability. However, not only did it have a negative impact, but it also had a positive impact on the Navy. Before the war, the upper classes had no regard for the Navy, but as a result of their financial success after the war, they were regarded with respect. Austen's life and her value of love have a significant influence on the novel's plot and characters. Thus, the value society placed on an individual in the Regency period is reflected in her novel *Persuasion*.

## REFERENCES

- Arora, Vidusha. *Regency England Through the Realistic Lens of Jane Austen*. Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL) 11.1 (2023): 230-234.  
<http://www.rjelal.com/11.1.23/230-234%20VIDUSHA%20ARORA.pdf>
- Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2019.  
<https://www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/persuasion.pdf>
- Butler, Marilyn. (2010, January 10). *Austen, Jane (1775–1817), novelist*. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.  
<https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-904>
- Dewi, C., Ferdinal, F., & Sudarmoko, S. (2024). Tubuh sebagai Manifesto: Pandangan Politik Sally Rooney dalam Normal People. *JURNAL AL-AZHAR INDONESIA SERI HUMANIORA*, 9(2), 147-155.
- Ferdinal, F. (2013). Censorship, resistance and transformation in modern Indonesian literature. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(1), 269-272.
- Ferdinal, F. (2015). Injustice: Revealing Human Rights Issues in Ali Akbar Navis's Short Fiction. *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 1(1), 126-132.

- Ferdinal, F. (2020). Women's Rights and Colonization in The Short Story of The Jakarta Post. *Vivid: Journal of Language and Literature*, 9(1), 1-11.
- Ferdinal, F. (2021). Terror Narrative: Representing State Violence in Modern Indonesian Literature. *OKARA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 15(2), 109-125.
- Guerin, Wilfred L. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature: Fifth Edition*. Oxford University Press, 2005. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ADq-EvffCanvnkT8MCzeB-iVP8I20pXk/view?usp=sharing>
- Manimozhi, V. (2020). *Marriage Money and Society in the Novels of Jane Austen*. *Malaya Journal of Matematik*: 2366-2368. <http://www.malayajournal.org/articles/MJMOS200611.pdf>
- Palileo, R. *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE BY JANE AUSTEN*. (2023). [https://www.academia.edu/download/98707337/Second\\_Essay\\_Palileo.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/download/98707337/Second_Essay_Palileo.pdf)
- Pratiwi, R. E. (2021). Perempuan Dan Sastra Dalam Sejarah Sastra Indonesia: 1998-Sekarang. *Linguistika Kultura: Jurnal Linguistik Sastra Berdimensi Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 56-63.
- Ross, Marlon B. *Scandalous Reading: The Political Uses of Scandal in and around Regency Britain*. *The Wordsworth Circle* 27.2 (1996): 103-112. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/TWC24042632>
- Salsabila, M. (2022). Women Stereotypes in The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath. *Linguistika Kultura: Jurnal Linguistik Sastra Berdimensi Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 94-100. <https://doi.org/10.25077/jlk.11.2.94-100.2022>
- Septiani, R. M., Devi, R., Zurmailis. (2021). Fighting Body Ideal Construction in America as Expressed in Julie Murphy's *Dumplin*. *Vivid: Journal of Language and Literature*, 10(2), 100-107. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25077/vj.10.2.100-107.2021>