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The Changing Element: Beauty and Transition in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

Laurie Kaplan describes Jane Austen's final novel *Persuasion* as "a very physical book, and the men and women... are obsessed with their own bodies and the physical appearance of others" (3): a book where a character's beauty, or lack of it, never goes undiscussed. Beauty and attractiveness are a constantly recurring theme in *Persuasion*; in fact, the opening of the novel is an introduction to Sir Walter Elliot's pride in his own looks, which precedes the description of his daughter, protagonist Anne Elliot, as "an early loss of bloom and spirits" (30). Commentary on appearance is rife throughout the novel, both in narration and dialogue, and since Austen's novels are set in a society where status designates satisfaction, the correlation between beauty and social standing is often so close that the envy of one represents desire for both. For Anne Elliot, though, whose status and attractiveness is disappearing with age, desire fixes on Captain Wentworth, who is not only her long lost would-be lover, but a man who represents what, in Anne's youth, slipped out of her grasp: marriage, beauty, and most importantly, a place of belonging. Beauty, in *Persuasion*, acts as a symbol of the stability and self-satisfaction in a character, in their position in life, in society, in the home, and for Anne, who physically and symbolically moves and transitions throughout the novel, serves as an indicator of the changing perception and position of her character.

The Elliot family is especially concerned with beauty, as it is headed by Sir Walter Elliot, for whom “vanity was the beginning and the end” (6) and the “blooming as ever” (8) eldest daughter Elizabeth. Though financially inept and perpetually single throughout the novel, both Walter and Elizabeth are assured by their looks and by their high birth, and together they form an atypical but relatively complete household of man and woman. They are self-satisfied if only precariously settled, and this position of mind is reflected by their attractive looks and shallow personalities. Mary Musgrove, the youngest daughter, is in contrast “coarse” (8) and constantly complaining. Unlike her father and sister, she is not self-satisfied, but like them she has settled into her own place in society, which Kaplan locates at the sofa- the piece of furniture within the home that best “suggests her ennui, her... dissatisfaction with her lot in life” (2) and which ultimately defines her. But Anne has no similar place to recline, not in the Elliot home nor the Musgrove one- as an aging, unmarried woman, she is without niche in society, and so she is not described as attractive nor unattractive, like her sisters and father are, but rather as “faded” (7), a woman whose appearance and whose position in life has not been defined. When the Elliot family’s looks and place in the home are emphasized so closely and constantly, it is especially notable when Anne, who has no real place for herself, is also lacking in a concise description of appearance.

This spectrum of prettiness versus unprettiness across sisters is not a concept found only in *Persuasion*; the comparison of physical attractiveness between sisters is a common theme in Austen’s novels. But as Stephanie M. Eddleman points out, Austen often pairs sisters in her novels, most commonly by attractiveness: “Elinor and Marianne [in *Sense and Sensibility*], Jane and Elizabeth and Catherine and Lydia, [in *Pride and Prejudice*], Julia and Maria [in *Mansfield Park*]” (5). But there is no pairing of sisters in *Persuasion*, no show of solidarity between either

Anne and Mary nor Anne and Elizabeth that matches the sisterly bonds displayed in other Austen novels. Because while *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth is not as handsome as Jane, *Sense and Sensibility*'s Elinor not as beautiful as Marianne, what really matters is that both sisters are, in the end, *pretty*, neither needing to want for what the other has. Amongst the Elliots, Elizabeth is close only to their father because of their shared appreciation of their own beauty, and Mary is scornful of all her relations for treating her as "the last of [her] family to be noticed" (160), dismissed for the lack of attractiveness and clarity of mind that Elizabeth and Anne, respectively, possess. Anne's isolation from both her sisters, as she is not pretty enough to be the Elinor to Elizabeth's Marianne, or even the Marianne to "coarse" Mary's Elinor, creates in her character an unusual sense of loneliness in the world; her lack of beauty keeps her from forming the strong sisterly connection that the pretty protagonists of Austen's other novels rely on.

Wentworth, then, represents for Anne not just a second shot at love but something larger—someone with whom to belong, a position to hold in life, stability. While Anne has grown faded and plain in their time apart, gaining age and losing prospects, Wentworth has only become more "glowing, manly, open" (57); unlike Anne, he has found a place for himself, now as a renowned and wealthy sea captain, and his bettered looks reflect his success. As Anne's stability in life has become weaker, his has strengthened, and his security in himself has only served to make him handsomer, more robust, while Anne's insecurity, both within life and in her own personality, has caused her to wither.

But with Wentworth back in her life, with the prospect of marriage and love and stability on the horizon once more, Anne's attractiveness begins to fluctuate as her prospects and sense of self improve. When she meets him again for the first time, Wentworth's impression of the now-aged Anne is described by Kaplan as "perhaps the most egregious comment on physical looks"

(4) in the entirety of *Persuasion*: Mary tells Anne that he thought Anne “so altered he should not have known [her] again” (49), lacking in the beauty he had known in her youth. However, he does not label her as plain, or even aged; the ambiguity of the word “altered” in describing Anne’s appearance continues the theme of Anne’s looks being undefinable, washed out, adrift, just like her character and her place in society between youth and spinsterhood. His comment, and attentions to the self-assured and thus attractive Musgrove sisters, only encourage Anne’s despondence at first, which does little to improve her sense of self and therefore her looks. But as Anne starts to come into herself through the course of the novel, as she becomes more aware and assured, her appearance slowly starts to become more defined as well. For Anne, her physical appearance suggests not only a sense of stability within life, but within her own sense of purpose and self.

The resurgence of Anne’s beauty, then, comes at a time when she most concretely proves herself to her companions, the audience, and herself. Prior to Louisa Musgrove’s fall and subsequent concussion, a gentleman (later revealed to be Anne’s cousin Walter Elliot) visibly finds Anne, “having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind” (97), attractive, and his noticing of her prettiness spurs Wentworth’s realization that he too “[sees] something like Anne Elliot again” (97), an echo of the youthful beauty he had fallen in love with. Anne’s handsomeness, like Wentworth’s, is notably improved by time spent by the sea, hinting at the cohesion the two could have in the future as captain and captain’s wife. Within the same chapter, Wentworth is struck by Anne again, not this time by her appearance but rather by her competence. As the rest of the Musgrove family and company flounders in the face of Louisa’s concussion, only Anne is proved capable of addressing the situation with a level head, impressing not only Wentworth and their companions but also proving herself capable in her

own mind. It is no coincidence that the return of Anne's beauty and her deftness in face of calamity occur so closely within the plot; as Anne gains back the vitality and security that likely brought her and Wentworth together in their youth, her faded beauty returns along with it, a symbol both to Anne's companions and to the audience that Anne has repossessed herself, that she is finally beginning to find her place.

And of course, love is what finally solidifies Anne into a settled state, both within society and within appearance. Lady Russell notes that Anne's good looks seems to have returned in "a second spring of youth and beauty" (116) when she and Anne reunite, a direct suggestion that Anne has reclaimed herself during her time in Bath, with not only her good looks but a more youthful and vigorous sense of self returned. It's implied that some of Anne's rejuvenation is due to Wentworth's reentering her life, as their reunion is in some ways a metaphorical return to youth. However, it's Wentworth's confession of love to Anne and their renewed engagement that officially consolidates her second spring for good; several onlookers note how Anne appears "glowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness" (230) after she and Wentworth have mutually declared their love for each other, but in her haze of happiness Anne doesn't even think "about or care for her" (230) her new admirers. Finally, with love in Wentworth, a place in the home and in society as a captain's wife, and a sense of security in herself and in her life, Anne has gained the sense of stability in life and in herself that brings beauty back into her looks and happiness back into her life.

Beauty as a symbol of stability in the self in *Persuasion* is used as both a comedic reoccurrence and as a plot tool- Sir Walter's vanity despite being a foolish and inept father is an amusing recurring joke, while Anne's return to the vigor and beauty of her youth through the course of the novel is a triumph. Using beauty as a backdrop, especially with varying degrees

amongst sisters, is a recurring theme in Austen novels, but the drastic shifts of beauty between the Elliot sisters and within Anne herself is a unique and intriguing usage of symbolism within the novel. By using beauty both as an isolator, as Eddleman defines it, and as a locator of social position, as Kaplan identifies, Austen creates Anne's beauty as a subplot all its own, linear to her character development and a symbol of the satisfaction that Anne ultimately earns.

Works Cited

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Jane Austen's *Persuasion* depicts a young woman's struggles with love, friendship and family. Anne Elliot who is pretty, intelligent and amiable, had some years before been engaged to a young naval officer, Frederick Wentworth, but had been persuaded by her trusted friend Lady Russell to break off the engagement, because of his lack of fortune and a misunderstanding of his easy nature. The breach had brought great unhappiness to Anne. *Persuasion* is so close to Austen's own life that many like to think of it as autobiographical. *Persuasion* is about love rediscovered. *Persuasion* was published in December 1817, just a few months after Jane Austen's untimely death at the age of 41. It was an untitled novel when she died. She referred to it to her sister, Cassandra as 'The Elliots' and that is probably what it would have been called had Jane Austen lived to see it published. Her brother Henry named it *Persuasion* after he read it himself, realising that it was really a book about how others could persuade or influence to the detriment of others. *Persuasion* is a novel which has some topical references as well so it is a more appealing novel because