

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Persuasion is populated by diverse family structures that contribute to the novel's representation of domestic government and produce much of its narrative energy. The Elliots, the Mr. Musgroves, the Charles Musgroves, the Crofts, and the Harvilles operate within a range of morals, values, and private "laws." Their idiosyncrasies allow for a rich discussion of early modern domestic life and of Austen's critical perspective on the family and, in particular, on the complex relationship between parents and children. Therefore, as you work your way through the discussion questions that follow, consider all of *Persuasion*'s families, as well as other of Austen's models of domesticity, including the Bennets and the Gardiners of *Pride and Prejudice*, the Dashwoods and the Ferrars of *Sense and Sensibility*, the Woodhouses and the John Knightleys of *Emma*, the Bertrams, the Prices, and the Crawfords of *Mansfield Park*, and the Morland's and Tilney's of *Northanger Abbey*.

1. **Family Government:** How would you characterize *Persuasion*'s various family systems—are they patriarchal, contractual, affective, or some combination thereof? Does one of these systems emerge as Austen's ideal? Is there a way in which Austen re-conceptualizes the traditional bundle of rights and duties that undergird the law of parent and child?

Consider the following passages:

- **The Elliot Family:** Vol. I, Ch. 1, p. 7, beginning with “—*Be it known then, that Sir Walter...*” and ending with “*...she was only Anne.*”
- **The Mr. Musgrove Family:** (a) Vol. I, Ch. 5, pp. 38-39, the paragraph beginning with “*The Musgroves, like their houses, were in a state of alteration...*” (b) Vol. I, Ch. 6, pp. 40-41, beginning with “*Anne had not wanted this visit to Uppercross...*” and ending with “*...all her ideas in as much of Uppercross as possible.*”
- **The Charles Musgrove Family:** Vol. I, Ch. 6, p. 42, the paragraph beginning with “*As to the management of their children...*”
- **The Harville Family:** (a) Vol. I, Ch. 11, p. 91-93, beginning with “*They all met, and were introduced*” and ending with “*...they only deserved to be respected and loved.*” (b) Vol. I, Ch. 12, p. 104-05, the paragraph beginning with “*It now became necessary...*”

2. **Marriage & Parental Consent:**

Part A: What are Sir Walter and Lady Russell's objections to Anne's prospective marriage to Wentworth? What do these objections tell us about what Sir Walter and Lady Russell value in family government? Are these parental figures acting in Anne's "best interests"? Why does Anne break off the engagement and how does her decision shape her development? Is there a case to be made for Anne's marrying Mr. Elliot?

Consider the following passages:

- All of Vol. I, Ch. 4, pp. 26-30 (Anne and Wentworth's initial courtship).
- Vol. II, Ch. 11, pp. 228-31, beginning with “*To see you, 'cried he...*” to the chapter's end (Anne and Wentworth discuss their past).
- Vol. II, Ch. 9, pp. 187-97, beginning with “*I beg your pardon, my dear Miss Elliot...*” to the chapter's end (Mrs. Smith relates her knowledge of Mr. Elliot).

Part B: Compare Anne's experience of marital choice to the experiences of and judgments on Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove. Consider the following passages:

- Vol. I, Ch. 9, p. 69, beginning with "*Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Hayter were sisters*" and ending with "*...Henrietta did seem to like him.*"
- Vol. I, Ch. 9, pp. 70-71, beginning with "*It suited Mary best to think Henrietta the one preferred...*" and ending with "*...unless you had been determined to give it against me.*"
- Vol. II, Ch. 8, pp. 172-73, beginning with "*It was a frightful hour...*" and ending with "*You were a good while at Lyme, I think?*"
- Vol. II, Ch. 10, pp. 203-05, beginning with "*Anne's only surprise...*" and ending with "*I hope you think Louisa perfectly recovered now?*"

3. **The Position of Mothers:** How does Austen characterize *Persuasion's* mother figures? What do these representations of motherhood suggest about the limited legal authority England gave its mothers? What do they suggest about the reality of the mother's authority in the home?

Consider the following passages:

"Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable; whose judgement and conduct, if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards.—She had humoured, or softened, or concealed his [Sir Walter's] failings, and promoted his real respectability for seventeen years; and though not the very happiest being in the world herself, had found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children, to attach her to life, and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit them." (Vol. I, Ch. 1, p. 6).

"[Lady Russell] was a woman rather of sound than of quick abilities... .. She was a benevolent, charitable, good woman, and capable of strong attachments, most correct in her conduct, strict in her notions of decorum, and with manners that were held a standard of good-breeding. She had a cultivated mind, and was, generally speaking, rational and consistent; but she had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them" (Vol. I, Ch. 2, p.12).

Mary Musgrove: See the incident of little Charles's dislocated collarbone and the debate over dinner at the "Great House." Vol. I, Ch. 7, pp. 52-54 beginning with "*The child had a good night...*" and ending with "*...it seems rather hard that she should be left at home by herself, to nurse our sick child'.*"

"...Mrs. Musgrove's real affection had been won by her usefulness when they were in distress. It was a heartiness, and a warmth, and a sincerity which Anne delighted in the more, from the sad want of such blessings at home" (Vol. II, Ch. 10, p. 207).

4. **The Future of Domesticity:** What type of family system can we anticipate Anne and Wentworth establishing after the events of *Persuasion*? How does this system compare to the domestic relationships formed at the conclusion of Austen's earlier novels?