

Jane Austen's *Persuasion*



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Humanities at Hertog

Tuesdays & Thursdays | Jan. 6, 8, 13, 15
Syllabus | Winter 2026

HUMANITIES AT HERTO WINTER 2026

“SO MUCH SYMPATHY AND NATURAL GRACE”: JANE AUSTEN’S *PERSUASION*

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Persuasion (1817), Jane Austen’s final completed novel, is generally considered her most subtle and mature work. As a young woman, Anne Elliott fell in love with a captain in the Royal Navy but, taking the advice of her family, ended their engagement—and long regretted it. When she meets Captain Wentworth again years later, their circumstances have changed dramatically. Will his return help Anne resolve her feelings, or will it only make them stronger?

Fellows in this seminar will discuss Austen’s depiction of the competing loyalties to family and self; the tension between a fading aristocracy and a burgeoning meritocracy; the power of memory and the passage of time; the traits of true friendship; and much more. A close study of *Persuasion*, which Harold Bloom called a “perfect novel,” is a perfect way to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Austen’s birth.

This seminar will meet online weekly on **Tuesday** and **Thursday** from **6 to 8 PM ET**.

Course Materials:

- Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, Oxford World’s Classics edition (ed. James Kinsley)

Discussion Papers: Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1 ½ - 2 pages, single-spaced; please provide page numbers for textual citations). **Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET.** Please provide page numbers for textual citations. They should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to briefly present their ideas during the seminar.

Major Themes:

- The development of judgment and self-understanding
- The appropriate roles of duty and “self-denial”
- The significance of sympathy and concern for others
- The power of memory and the influence of the past
- The relevance of social class

Tuesday, January 6, 2026

6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session I: Meet the Elliots

Readings:

- “Biographical Notice of the Author” (pages 3-8); *Persuasion*, Volume I, Chapters I-VII (pages 9-54)

Discussion Questions:

1. What traits and virtues does Austen’s older brother Henry emphasize in the Biographical Notice? How does the letter shape what you expect from the novel to come? Based on what you’ve read for the first day, does the notice do the novel, and Austen’s voice as a novelist, justice?
2. How would you characterize Anne Elliot’s position among her family and friends? What role does she play in this circle, and to what degree do the others appreciate her?
3. What questions about social class does the novel raise so far? Which characters are most preoccupied with class and what is the narrator’s tone toward them?
4. Apart from matters related to class, does the narrator seem particularly critical of any characters? What personality traits come under attack or judgement?

Thursday, January 8, 2026

6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session II: Anne on the Road

Readings:

- *Persuasion*, Volume I, Chapters VIII-XII (pages 55-98)

Discussion Questions:

1. In the reading for today, do other characters demonstrate a sympathetic capacity on par with what we’ve seen from Anne? Are there any moments when Anne’s abilities to think of others are compromised?
2. What is the significance of the conversation Anne overhears between Wentworth and Louisa? How does Anne interpret it?
3. The scholar William Deresiewicz writes that in Lyme, “Anne found . . . what she did not know what she’d been searching for: something to belong to.” Discuss the validity of that interpretation.
4. Louisa’s accident in Lyme is one of the most dramatic events in the novel. How does it confirm or complicate our understanding of particular characters? How could it be understood as a symbol of courtship in the novel?

Tuesday, January 13, 2026

6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session III: Unlikely Matches

Readings:

- *Persuasion*, Volume II, Chapters I-VIII (pages 99-154)

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss Lady Russell's role in these chapters. Does her relationship with Anne undergo any changes? Does Anne's opinion of or attitude toward her develop?
2. Consider Anne's attitude toward Bath. What does she like or dislike about the place, and why? How do these opinions relate to other themes and ideas we've discussed so far?
3. How do the Dalrymples figure into the novel's exploration of class and manners? How do they compare to the Crofts in particular?
4. What accounts for Anne's distrust of Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot? On what grounds is she skeptical of them? Do her opinions seem reasonable, or do they illustrate the kind of snobbery she resents in other contexts?

Thursday, January 15, 2026

6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session IV: Revelations and Resolutions

Readings:

- *Persuasion*, Volume II, Chapters IX-XII (pages 154-203)

Discussion Questions:

1. Evaluate the behavior of Mrs. Smith in these chapters, especially in Chapter IX. Why does Anne doubt the information she provides? (It may be useful to recall references to gossip during the first scene with Mrs. Smith.) What do you make of Mrs. Smith's rationale for withholding information she knew about Mr. Elliot?
2. Discuss the significances of the conversation between Anne and Captain Harville in chapter XI. How does this conversation compare to the one Anne overheard for our second reading? How does it develop the ideas of sympathy and loyalty we've been discussing?
3. Toward the end of Chapter XXIII, Anne and Wentworth both say they "have been thinking over the past." What have they learned from that thinking? How helpful is it to understand *Persuasion* as a novel about coming to terms with the past?
4. How does the novel's final sentence about the merits of the Royal Navy build on what we've seen elsewhere in the novel? In what sense does the work's tone toward the navy complicate a reading of the novel as a straightforward conservative or progressive novel?