



# What is Happiness? — An Initial Exploration of Social Ethics in “Persuasion”

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**Abstract:** The evolution of human society is a history of building communities. Jane Austen, a highly acclaimed British female novelist, also paid attention to the theme of community. This paper attempts to interpret the social ethics in Austen’s works through different virtue ethics to glimpse the true happiness. In Austen’s view, a virtuous person is naturally a happy one. “Persuasion” meticulously portrays the decline of the geographical community in the English countryside during a period of social transition and the dissolution of the blood community, conveying deep humanistic care and a beautiful hope for a new type of community. This paper calls for the construction of a harmonious spiritual community that transcends geography and class, united by friendship and centered on emotional bonds. This community is formed by individuals with virtue, from which we can gain many insights and further consider the relationship between community and modern social ethics, or rather, how to draw the boundary between the two.

**Keywords:** Happiness; Social ethics; Community; Persuasion

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## 1. Introduction

Jane Austen, known as the “mother of the English novel,” excels at depicting the lives of a few families in a village, showcasing the living conditions, ideological values, and rural customs of the gentry. Her later representative work, “Persuasion,” continues the theme of emotional entanglements among gentlemen and ladies within the “two-inch ivory” small world, set against the beautiful backdrop of Uppercross Cottage and Kellynch Manor[1]. The story unfolds along the emotional revival between the female protagonist, Anne, and her long-lost love, Captain Wentworth. However, the novel’s significance extends beyond touching love stories and moral teachings about love and reason. It reflects the unique cultural landscape of the rural areas during a period of social transition and the many dilemmas faced under internal and external pressures. The novel focuses on the anxiety caused by the lack of community consciousness and reveals the undercurrents beneath the calm surface of the countryside. Current academic research on “Persuasion” concentrates on feminism, post-colonialism, and narratology, with little discussion on the social ethics implied within[2]. This paper is an attempt to observe the symbiotic relationship between Austen and social ethics from “Persuasion.”

## 2. The Concept of Community in “Persuasion”

Looking back through history, if emphasizing the individuality of virtue leads ethics towards moral philosophy, then emphasizing the public nature of virtue leads ethics towards political philosophy. If ethics as moral philosophy faces individual goodness, then ethics as political philosophy faces the goodness of all. To prevent virtue from being simplistically understood as qualities relied upon to fulfill specific duties and to avoid falling into relativism, Aristotle realized that a “common standard” must be given to virtue. For the whole society, virtue and the good life should not be relative or variable but should have publicness[3]. In this light, whether virtue has publicness is an extremely important issue. MacIntyre pointed out that Aristotle’s ethics, in terms of its main virtue theory, which regards different goods as different purposes of human practices, human goods as the purpose of all other goods, and a community of practice that requires just rules, grasps not only the essential characteristics of human practices within the Greek city-state but also the essential characteristics of human practices themselves[4]. This is the publicness of virtue. To this day, in a more concrete view, Tönnies expanded the meaning of publicness to sociology. He believed that above the blood and geographical communities formed spontaneously based on kinship and neighborhood relationships, there exists “a vital organism full of vitality, which is the true and lasting guarantee of common life.”[5] This is the highest type of community that truly belongs to humans, centered on friendship, emphasizing the connection of human souls, valuing tolerance and resolution, and calling for frank communication. Obviously, spirit is based on emotion, united by friendship, and established in the interaction and communication between people[6]. Although Austen did not propose a clear concept of community, her thoughts on the dilemmas of traditional communities and the

hope to rebuild communities in new social contexts are similar to many subsequent rural writers such as Thomas Hardy. As Williams said, communities after the 18th century “seem always to be used to evoke good associations.” Emotion plays an important role in Austen’s construction of the English rural community, not only enhancing the spiritual communication and emotional bonds among community members but also integrating into an inclusive community, thus moving out of the dilemma of the collapse of the old community and resisting the impact and disorder brought by new values. “Persuasion” can be seen as a typical case, which is not so much about the emotional revival of the male and female protagonists as it is about the author’s attempt to build a new spiritual community based on emotion and communication. Critic Tanner pointed out that “Persuasion” witnessed the disintegration of the traditional hierarchical order dominated by the gentry in the English countryside[7]. The marriage between the male and female protagonists no longer relies on a fixed estate to construct a stable geographical community structure, but only depends on personal affection. In the process of transitioning from tradition to modern core families, the importance of emotion and the advocacy of companionate marriage have increased day by day.

### **2.1 The Cornerstone of Community: Emotion**

As a work that praises emotion, emotion in “Persuasion” is first and foremost a precious and unbreakable emotional force. The main theme of the work is the loyalty and persistence towards love.

### **2.2 The Bond of Community: Friendship**

At the same time, the role of friendship, which maintains the community, is also deeply presented. The novel explores a new model of friendship, which transcends the shackles of blood relations and forms a broader and deeper social relationship, playing a significant role in building a deep community.

## **3. Conclusion**

In fact, looking at the definition of happiness, the three major Western traditional ethical theories — Aristotelianism, utilitarianism, and Kantianism—all consider “happiness” as the “ultimate goal of human moral activity.”[8] However, what happiness is, the relationship between happiness and virtue, and how to achieve happiness have always been core issues that humans constantly ponder. Aristotle reasonably regarded happiness as the prosperity of life, but his view of happiness as the inevitable result of virtue cannot explain the moral dilemma in society where the virtuous are unhappy and the fortunate are not virtuous. Utilitarians regard the achievement of the greatest happiness as the ultimate goal and the highest principle of morality, which, although intuitively morally attractive, can lead to moral instrumentalism and even the elimination of virtue. Kant appropriately demonstrated the relationship between virtue and happiness, but his attempt to introduce God to ensure the consistency of virtue and happiness is difficult to guide people in the modern secular society[9]. Therefore, regarding the issue of happiness and its relationship with virtue, the above three theories have not provided us with the final answer but have provided us with an opportunity for further thinking and research. Returning to the text, Austen focuses on the anxiety of the transition from agricultural civilization to industrial civilization, recreating the dilemma of the traditional rural community in danger, while also highlighting the expectations for a beautiful rural future and profound thinking on community construction centered on emotional care through the imagination of the female protagonist, Anne Elliot. From the perspective of community, entering “Persuasion” can not only deeply understand Austen’s rural writing but also prompt us to think about the power and value contained in emotion and friendship during the community construction process[10]. I believe that with the development of the times, as long as we can properly handle the relationship between community and modern social ethics, the individuals with virtue in Austen’s pen can surely build a harmonious spiritual community that transcends geography and class, united by friendship and centered on emotion, and find the expected happiness.

## **References**

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