

Term II Midterm Debrief



At Lyme (*Persuasion* [1995]), dir. Roger Michell.

Dear Class:

It has been a pleasure to once again read your midterm essays and see how far you've come as theorists and thinkers. Over the course of our class time on *Persuasion*, I have been thinking about “persuasion” as a mode of relating to thought, particularly others' thought. As Anne suggests in the novel, the capacity to be persuaded is not necessarily a mark of weakness. I hope you have been persuaded by some of the arguments you've heard in class, as I have been persuaded by many of your arguments in your midterms. The purpose of an essay or exam answer is to persuade, so as writers *and* readers we are all in the business of persuasion. In your midterm examinations you were asked to consider how loss is one of the novel's principle engines. In this quiet, evocative novel, Austen demonstrates the paradoxical condition of loss; the losses we experience are powerfully *productive* in their capacity to forge new relationships and new ways of being in the world. The losses the characters experience are not replaced – as early Freudian theories would suggest – but *grieved*, or afforded a spectral presence in the characters' lives. In other words, these are losses that are not experienced as *lack*, but occupation. The novel is interested in the peculiar yet widespread productivity of loss, in which it marshals the resources to remain present in the face of absence. Although losses are conceived conceptually as lack, they are experienced as possessions – possessions that we don't have but that have us – and it is the dissonance between these two positions that produces the myriad forms of grieving expression explored in the novel. Written in a time of war, Austen explores the diversity of ways that one can be

with grief in times of incalculable loss. The social etiquette for grief that Austen observes and mocks reminds us that it is not only individuals, but also communities, that grieve. War is a situation that reminds us that loss and grief are not only personal problems, and in a way are always shared. By observing how social custom tries to regulate grief and make it legible as a social activity, we see just how ungraspable losses are, and the degree to which they escape easy categorization and economization. As students of Austen, we might consider this work to be a thought experiment in the juxtaposition of widely different modes of grief. In this debrief I have outlined some key areas where students had trouble, and have offered some solutions for future work.

Problems:

1. Analysis

Some students responded to the exam question by listing several instances of loss in the novel without drawing out an argument, or arguments, *about* these instances. For instance, some students described how Anne, Sir Walter, Captain Benwick, and Mrs. Smith (to name a few) grieved in the novel without explaining what their grief suggests about the condition of grief, or how the novel is thinking about grieving. In some cases, students did not show how these instances of grieving were connected. When asked to think about losses that fuel the novel, you must make an *argument* about what those losses mean, how loss is a form of meaning in the text. Remember that describing events from the text should also be done judiciously in the service of furthering an argument.

2. Details

In this round of midterms, I was very pleased to see that more students were employing details from the novel to develop their arguments. Some students' essays were saturated with details to the point that they were lists of events with little in-depth analysis of those events. It is important to be attentive to the *way* you used details in an essay. When making an argument, we show how the novel is working through its problems and concerns in the minute details. A good essay explains the concerns of a text *through* its details. An essay – especially a short midterm essay – does not need to discuss every loss that fuels the novel; rather, it should deeply and concisely discuss and analyze the details that help prove the argument.

As always, there were some essays in which students gestured to events from the novel without giving enough detail. For instance, if you refer to the “hazelnut scene,” you must explain what Captain Wentworth says about hazelnuts, whom he is talking to and who is listening, and how this scene is relevant to your argument.

3. Focus

Some students began their essays with strong theses but were distracted from their main argument as the essay developed. It can be easy to get distracted in a stressful situation like an in-class exam, but it is very important to stay focused on your argument and expand on it over the course of the essay. The best essays began with a strong thesis and read smoothly and cohesively.

4. Accuracy

Some students misremembered names of characters or details from events in the text. In order to craft a *persuasive* essay, it is very important to record details from the novel accurately. Reviewing the novel,

class notes, and the class blog will help you remember these details with ease.

Some Solutions:

1. Argument

The best essays began with a strong argument, or series of strong arguments, and judiciously used details from the text to develop that argument(s). These essays considered what the novel was thinking *about* loss, or what it meant for loss itself to be an engine. While it is very important to manage your time appropriately in an in-class exam, I encourage you to spend a minute or two crafting a strong, confident thesis to direct your essay. The better you yourself know what you want to argue, the more confident and persuasive your essay will sound.

2. Judicious use of detail

The best essays did not attempt to include every loss that fuels the novel. Instead, students referred specifically to the details they needed to write a well-informed, convincing essay. These essays explored the problems and concerns of the novel through its details, rather than allowing the details to fill in for lack of argument. Remember that the purpose of an essay is not to “prove” that you've read the text and can recite all its events. Your argument and your specific choice of relevant detail will show your command of the text.

3. Focus

Staying focused on your argument in an in-class exam can be difficult. I suggest writing a very short outline of your essay (including your argument) before you begin writing. Spending the time making an outline might seem like waste of time, but by giving yourself a “map” of your essay, you give yourself the ability to write deliberately and to stay on course. An outline will save you time and help you pace yourself as you write because you won't need to stop and think about what you want to say next.

4. Complexity

The best essays realized that *Persuasion's* exploration of loss is filled with complexity, paradox, and contradiction. They noticed that moments where grief is clearly “schooled,” like when Mrs. Musgrove issues her “fat sighings,” are not separate from moments where grief seems more authentic, like when Anne cries at the piano. The differences we see in modes of grief do not express an inconsistency in the novel, but suggest that difference is necessary *to* grief. The strongest arguments seized the supposed inconsistencies in the novel and drew on them to make a statement about loss and grief.

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