

ENGLISH: *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE/LETTERS TO ALICE*

“Reading is at the heart of the two texts.”

How has your study of the connections between the two texts illustrated this notion?

In ‘Pride and Prejudice’ and ‘Letters to Alice: on First Reading Jane Austen’, Austen and Weldon explore the relationship between offering instruction and receiving advice; both authors use their heroines to study the epistemological means by which individuals transform knowledge into opinion and judgement. Lying at the heart of this thematic connection is the notion of reading, and is illustrated by both texts as not only as an act of engagement with words, but as a metaphor allowing Elizabeth and Alice to navigate the author’s world and understand the characters that fill it. Other than the reading of books, letters and (mis)reading of people, an additional application of this notion exists within the relationship between the texts themselves, and addresses the way in which the reading of Weldon’s postmodern, epistolary and non-fictional work may affect the way a literary classic like ‘Pride and Prejudice’ is read by audiences of the post 1980’s society.

Through their exploration of the epistolary mode, both Austen’s and Weldon’s texts illustrate that the ability to read and empathise with other people requires self-knowledge, self-control and the application of reason as opposed to passion. The ability to read and re-read in the case of Elizabeth is at the heart of her transformation as a character, as it is the fundamental quality that allows her understand the true nature of the man who she vehemently accuses of being in the grip of the two flaws from which ‘Pride and Prejudice’ takes its title. The use of ‘I’ as a repeated acknowledgement of self-development “How despicably have I acted! I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away...Till this moment, I never knew myself” in Elizabeth’s epiphany after re-reading Darcy’s letter demonstrates that learning how to read Darcy has helped Elizabeth to deepen her own self-knowledge. The accurate reading of character is also valued within Austen’s text as a skill that will save all the Bennet sisters from compromising their happiness by marrying unwisely and bringing trouble to their families. Lydia stands as a prime character incapable of reading others sensibly. Her blindness and silliness is shown in Elizabeth’s reaction to her sister’s marriage to Wickham, where Austen accumulates the qualities she herself, and no doubt the gentry of the 18th Century, hold to be very undesirable traits for a young woman to possess “Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless”. Elizabeth’s treatment of the sister who refuses to read further into a man’s character beyond his handsome appearance and charm is heavily ironic, and their conversation works to contrast Elizabeth’s sophistication and politeness (and her ability to read truth in Wickham’s character) with Lydia’s ill-advised and wild interjections “...I dare say I shall get husbands for them before the winter is over.”; “I thank you...” said Elizabeth “but I do not particularly like your way of getting husbands.”. Lydia possesses neither self-control nor reason, and her inability to read people correctly results in her not being able to learn anything from her actions.

This notion of obtaining knowledge and advice in ‘Letters to Alice: on First Reading Jane Austen’ is demonstrated through reading, in the way Aunt Fay misreads Alice’s character by means of a correspondence invisible to the reader. Weldon’s use of the first person, in similarity to Elizabeth, automatically establishes an acknowledgement of the self “I am glad to be wrong about so much; I still maintain that it is better to read than not to read...” as Aunt Fay ironically learns that her own pride and prejudice against those who do not read literature have caused her to underestimate the capabilities of her niece. Weldon’s framing of ‘reading’ in its opposition, ‘not reading’ also suggests that Aunt Fay has somewhat subscribed to reason (i.e. the fact that Alice’s novel has sold more copies than all of Fay’s put together) but at the same time persists in praising her passion for her own love of literature. This is mirrored in ‘Pride and Prejudice’, where Elizabeth is required to use a scientific, independent and reasonable mind free from advice and opinion of Darcy and Wickham “She...weighed every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality – deliberated on the probability of each statement” in order to empathise with Darcy’s situation. This ability to empathise through the re-reading of other lies in accordance with Aunt Fay’s intertextual allusion to Auden- “...we must learn to stand in other people’s shoes and look out at the world with their eyes, or die”. The use of the imperative verb throughout the text is used by Weldon to offer instruction to the

reader regarding the value of reading, and the numerous gains that may be attained from it. Aunt Fay's didactic tone and use of italics "You must read, Alice...You must fill your mind with the invented images of the past" guides the reader through the argument that learning to read people is impossible if you cannot learn how to read yourself. The metaphor used to explore this notion is framed by Aunt Fay in terms of reading and its complementary action, writing - "You must know how to read a novel, for example, before setting out to write one". Aunt Fay also tries to convince Alice of the value of reading by framing it in terms of the things she thinks Alice has turned to for substitution. The effects of accumulation are compounded by the disapproving 'tutting' alliteration of 't' and the hissing 's' sound - "you turned to television for your window on the world: you slaked your appetite for information, for stories, for beginnings, middles and ends with the easy tasty substances of the screen...".

A more implicit manner in which the two texts address reading deals with the way readers respond differently to 'Pride and Prejudice' after reading 'Letters to Alice'. The subtitle of Weldon's text, "on First Reading Jane Austen" refers to the way Weldon changes readers' perception of 'Pride and Prejudice' by writing in what Austen has left out. Aunt Fay informs Alice about the less-than-romantic context in which Austen was writing, using the didactic letter form to remind audiences of the fact that novelists have the ability to control every aspect of the house they build inside the 'City of Invention'. Weldon's use of accumulation and abrasive repetition of 'c' in describing the lives of young women in Austen's context - "A young country girl...would be on the farm, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes - and carrying the water, and chopping the wood..." followed by the abrupt and sharp comment in the second person "Your reward would be in heaven" is a stark contrast with the fairytale-like quality of the lives of the Bennet sisters. This new knowledge has the effect of warning Austen's readers not to judge 'Pride and Prejudice' by its cover. The repetitious 'e' in "...it was a horrible time to be alive. Yet you could read and read Jane Austen and never know it" advises readers to examine the novel's context more closely in order to read the novel correctly, but the common failure to do so is justified by use of the short rhetorical question "And why should you?" "You do not read novels for information, but for enlightenment". Thus, this reveals the purpose for the existence of Weldon's text, that is, to provide modern readers with sufficient knowledge so that they can come to their own conclusions about the way Jane Austen meant her novel to be read.

The notion of reading is explored in both texts through thematic connections regarding the reading of character, the gaining of knowledge and advice through letters and books, the value of reading as a means for self improvement and the implicit manner in which the writing of 'Letters to Alice' has influenced the way contemporary audiences read 'Pride and Prejudice'.