

ENGLISH ADVANCED: MODULE A

How have the meanings of the texts, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Letters to Alice* on First Reading Jane Austen been shaped and reshaped by exploring the nature of the connections between them?

The study of a secondary text, Fay Weldon's *Letters to Alice*, enables a greater understanding of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to be gained. By exploring connections between the two texts, new perspectives are presented which could not be gained in isolation. As social commentators, each author examines the value of 'good literature', marriage, self awareness and the position of women. The secondary text *Letters to Alice* thus presents new perspectives on the original text, enriching an appreciation of it. Austen's text in turn demonstrates the way in which values have both changed and remained static, enabling a greater understanding of Weldon's context.

Using her writing to explore the nature and value of good literature, Fay Weldon uses Austen's canonical text *Pride and Prejudice* as her reference for good literature. In doing so she explores the craft of writing and the power of language, making *Pride and Prejudice* paradigmatic of the "master builders" of which her extended metaphor of "The City of Invention" is comprised. This results in Austen's text being viewed as a literary masterpiece, making the reader aware of the superior construction of novel *Pride and Prejudice*. By suggesting that "[novels] have stories and characters and plots and conversations...all these must work to a given end", Weldon draws attention to Austen's objective writing style, combining both authorial intrusion and character dialogue. This is evident through Lady Catherine's suggestion that "if I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient", in which Austen uses dialogue to reveal and satirise her snobbery. Thus Weldon's secondary text has reshaped the way the reader views and appreciates *Pride and Prejudice* as an educative piece of superior literature. Austen's text then reveals the extent to which the value of good writing remains universal, enhancing an understanding of Fay Weldon's context.

As a social commentator, Austen's exploration of the concept of marriage has enabled new perspectives to emerge. This is clear through Charlotte Lucas' pragmatic approach to marriage, "without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object. It was the only honourable provision...". Austen's authorial intrusion thus highlights her decision to marry not for love, but as a means of gaining social and financial security, something relatively foreign in a modern context. Weldon's secondary text, however, makes apparent the realities of Austen's context through the inferiority of women, who were "born poor, and stayed poor, and lived well only by their husbands' favour". She insists that married life "was not rosy", and in the *Landed Gentry* a husband could "beat you, if he saw fit, and punish your children likewise". It is thus by approaching the realities of Austen's context from the perspective of her own society that Weldon enhances an understanding both of Austen's context, and of her own.

Weldon similarly draws on the realities of Austen's context to challenge her audience's perception of Mrs Bennet, whose "sole purpose in life was to get her daughters married". The subject of Austen's ridicule for her petty actions and lack of intelligence, Weldon conversely suggests that Mrs Bennet was "the only one with the slightest notion of the sheer desperation of the world, whom everyone laughed at throughout". It is in this way that Weldon approaches *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of her own context, enriching an understanding of Austen's society. The connections between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Letters to Alice* then prompt a modern audience to acknowledge and appreciate the way in which society has changed.

Lastly, as social commentators both Austen and Weldon foreground the extent to which the importance of self-awareness remains universal. Austen addresses this through the character of Mr Collins, using authorial intrusion to suggest that he "was not a sensible man". As the subject of ridicule, Austen thus presents her ideas about self awareness. Likewise, by affirming Elizabeth's moral growth, "til this moment, I never knew myself", Weldon suggests that Austen aims "to encourage her readers towards virtue and good behaviour". It is in this way that Austen educates

her reader about the universal value of self-awareness, enabling a greater understanding and appreciation of the connection between Austen and Weldon's contexts.

Finally, each text is used to closely explore the position of women in terms of the respective contexts of each author. Austen's novel highlights marriage as the predominant focus of many of the female characters, Weldon's secondary text then enhancing our understanding of the necessity of marriage for survival. This is apparent in *Pride and Prejudice*, which examines the relationship between Lydia and Wickham, who, living together outside of marriage, represent what was considered unacceptable at the time. From a modern context this is easily dismissed as something relatively incomprehensible, illustrating the way in which the value of 'appropriate relationships' has evolved as the position of women has changed. This is reinforced through Weldon herself, an educated single mother with a successful career, the embodiment of "strong' women, women who work, think, earn, have independent habits". It is thus Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* which has enabled a more thorough understanding of Weldon's context. Weldon conversely highlights the way in which some things remain the same, by likening Lydia, "the country girl whose face was her fortune", to the "young girl from Java who marries a rancher from Northern Queensland to survive". This challenges the audience's understanding of their own context, by comparing Lydia, from the context of Jane Austen, to Weldon's modern context, in terms of the way in which the position of women has both changed and remained the same.

It is in this way that, by exploring the nature of the connections between the two texts, new ideas have emerged as each text enriches the reading of the other. This facilitates a greater understanding and appreciation for both texts amongst readers, and has enabled meanings to be shaped and reshaped in terms of the comparative contexts of each author.