

# Comparing pride and prejudice with letters to alice



The comparative study of texts and contexts demonstrates that composers write to reflect prevalent values and issues within their own society. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Fay Weldon's *Letters to Alice* exhibit connections in terms of the contrasting attitudes towards marriage and the divergent role of the composers. Austen's 19th century context provides a framework dictating the strict social norms and values of her time. Weldon, in a postmodernist 20th century context, comments on Austen's text and communicates a different view on issues of her time. By exploring values and connections between texts, enhanced perspectives are presented which could not be understood in isolation.

Marriage was crucial for the social and financial security of women in the patriarchal society of Regency England. Within Austen's Georgian context of *P&P*, the tension between rationalism of the Enlightenment period and Romantic literature influenced conflicting attitudes towards marriage. Charlotte's practical view of marriage is highlighted by Austen's authorial intrusion that "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance". Her passion is tempered by her pragmatism towards financial security, conveying the unsentimental reality of courtship and marriage. Within Austen's social context, a woman with limited income or beauty depended on marriage for financial security. Austen challenges the subservience expected of women through Elizabeth's defiant tone, "I act in that manner which will... constitute my happiness". The use of the narrative voice distinctively projects Elizabeth's claim that Darcy is "exactly the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her". Austen's view of an ideal marriage, based on mutual affection, was quite new in a society in which the

pressing need for women to find a marriage partner tended to dominate their lives. The “ truth universally acknowledged” ironically undermines the institution of matrimony with Elizabeth’s rejection of society’s traditional values. Despite marriage providing social status for women in a conservative society, Austen supports greater independence of women within a world determined by social decorum.

The postmodernist context presents a more liberal perception of marriage and the autonomy of women, in comparison with the financial connotations of marriage in the 19th century. Feminism and postmodernism seek to displace the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and Enlightenment philosophy respectively, subverting social expectations and pitting the individual against society. In LTA, Weldon affirms a shift in attitude from the absolute need of matrimony for women. In contrast with Austen, Weldon denigrates the importance of marriage by juxtaposing “ the stuff of our women’s magazines ... the stuff of their life”. The change towards a contemporary attitude reflects a society where marriage is relegated to a trivial obligation, denoted by the connotations of “ stuff”. Weldon’s sarcastic view of marriage as an “ outmoded institution” asserts her feminist outlook and suggests that it is socially acceptable for women in her society not to marry. Weldon’s context differs from Austen’s orthodox society as there are more idealistic undertones of marriage for “ esteem and affection” and “ expression of love”, conveying society’s emotionalist views. Her feminist perspective is further evoked by her criticism of marriage solely for convenience, through her rhetorical question, “ Are we to disapprove? I suppose so”. This highlights her belief in equality and independence, and that marriage is not

the only way to power. Hence, Weldon's view of marriage breaks away from the social mores of Austen's context, representing a shift in values and attitudes.

In the Regency context, Austen's comedy of manners satirizes the social proprieties of her society and promotes the importance of moral consciousness. In P&P, Austen explores human nature and exposes social vices within the microcosm of her English landed gentry. Her portrayal of indecorous social conduct encourages the responder to value virtue and good behavior in characters. Austen parodies society's refined manners by gently mocking Collins' "violence of ... affection" in proposing to Elizabeth. The contrast between "violence" and "affection" conveys his shallowness and hypocrisy, reflected in his proposal to Charlotte shortly after being rejected by Elizabeth. The oxymoron of Mrs Bennet's "querulous serenity" provides sarcastic amusement by ridiculing her comic, superficial personality. Austen critiques Lady Catherine's impropriety and lack of gentility through her insulting tone in addressing Elizabeth as an "unfeeling, selfish girl". In this way, Austen enhances our understanding of human society by exposing social flaws in her characters. Austen's moral instruction, that first impressions are often misleading, subtly emerges from Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy, based on his remark that "she is not handsome enough to tempt me". Elizabeth's epiphany induces a process of self-revelation when she discovers that "vanity, not love, has been my folly". Austen implies that genuine self-awareness through introspection is crucial for improving ourselves. Through the exploration of her social milieu,

Austen sustains moral judgement on her characters whilst conforming to conventions of her era.

Weldon's postmodernist views reshape our understanding of Austen by providing moral guidance and upholding the value of literature. The feminist stance of LTA promotes a culture based on knowledge and merit, in contrast with Austen's conservative society. Under the guise of " Aunt Fay", Weldon imposes her didactic belief that " readers need and seek for moral guidance". She advocates that people need past literature to make sense of the present world through reflection and conjecture. Weldon uses the imperative, " you must read, Alice", to convey a sense of urgency in her advice. Her informal, instructive attitude is juxtaposed with Austen's gentle satire, denoting a shift towards a more individualistic, postmodern society. The extended metaphor of the " City of Invention" forms the basis of Weldon's arguments for the significance of literature. Weldon's hyperbole of literature as the " essence of civilisation" reinforces the power of classic texts to communicate values that remain timeless and universal. She sees such texts as the epitome of education, and implies that Austen's P&P is a paradigm of the " master builders", remaining influential even in a modern context. Literature is personified as a dynamic influence that " stretches our sensibilities and our understanding", shaping our intelligence and emotions. Thus, Weldon edifies and promotes the importance of literature for the benefit of contemporary society.

Exploring connections between comparative texts demonstrates that texts are a product of their time and a commentary on the issues and values of their society. Despite differences in contexts and perspectives, certain

values and attitudes prevail in Austen's P&P and Weldon's LTA. Ultimately, the meanings of both texts are shaped and reshaped by considering the nature of the connections between them.