How does the study of Letters to Alice enrich your understanding of the complexity of social expectations in Pride and Prejudice?

Studying texts from varying time periods extenuates the reader’s understanding of the complexity of social expectations of different societies in particular contexts. Texts from differing contexts have distinct perceptions of universal values such as social expectations, which are dissimilar. The perception of marriage and the success of women changes throughout time and through the juxtaposition of texts from specific contexts enriches the reader’s understanding of the complexity of social beliefs and how society has changed. The bildungsroman novel Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen in 1813 provides a unique insight into the Regency Era where marriage was essential to fulfil social expectations for women to become successful and improve their social status and wealth. The epistolary text Letters to Alice: On First Reading Jane Austen by Fay Weldon in 1984 applies an understanding of Austen’s context through a contemporary perspective and new wave feminist background to assist readers to a broader and enriched understanding of distinct contexts.

Examining how the perception and value of marriage is regarded in texts that have differing contexts enriches the reader’s understanding of the expectations of women in society. In the world of Jane Austen, marriage was fundamental and an essential role for women to be perceived well by society. It was perceived as the salvation to a comfortable and better life in a patriarchal society in which women had little control or autonomy over their own lives because of restrictions and societal conventions. This is explored throughout Pride and Prejudice, where Charlotte Lucas highlights the importance and how critical marriage is for the survival and status of women in the Regency Era. “I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home;” emphasises Charlotte’s perspective of marriage as an essential role and a social expectation through the repetition of personal pronoun “I” and strong modality of “only”. Her perspective of marriage as an opportunity and security is highlighted in her realistic and pragmatic awareness. Furthermore, it also encapsulates that marriage is a vital role within her life to establish her social status as well as financial security. For both Charlotte and Mr Collins, marriage is socially acceptable and mutually beneficial despite their lack of affection, to fulfil social expectations. This is reinforced through the cumulative listing of Mr Collins “character, connections and situation in life” which reinforces the concept that marriage is centred on status and money. Contrastingly, Weldon expands on the notions of marriage within Letters to Alice through her clear feminist presentation of context. “I doubt she’s read a novel since an overdose of Georgette Heyer made her marry your father” uses both colloquial language and pop culture allusions to imply that Alice’s mother was inspired to marry from reading romance novels. This is a juxtaposition to marriages of the Regency Era which were not spontaneous. Additionally, the allusion to the romances of Georgette Heyer, suggests that marrying for “love” or “romance” doesn’t necessarily lead to ultimate happiness, emphasising how social expectations of contemporary contexts for marriage is focused rather on happiness and emotion. Moreover, the grave tone in “but I cannot imagine that her ladyship would at all disapprove of you” within Pride and Prejudice reveals how Mr Collins is a strict follower of social expectations of his context and proposes to Elizabeth to satisfy the desires of Lady De Bourgh. Thus, showing how marriage within the Regency Era was arranged on the values held by society, rather than love. By comparing this expectation of marriage to Weldon’s context in Letters to Alice reveals how the perception of marriage has shifted from traditional social expectations of the Regency Era. The rhetorical question “Would Darcy have married Elizabeth anywhere else but the City of Invention?” reveals how atypical Darcy and
Elizabeth’s relationship is for the Regency Era and was quite controversial and unusual for its time. By referencing the larger City of Invention metaphor, Weldon is able explain how their marriage does not necessarily reflect the context, but rather our modern context, and therefore could only exist as fiction within the Regency Era. Additionally, the juxtaposition of contexts is accentuated in “Jane Austen is reputed to have fainted away when … told by her mother, ‘It’s all settled, we’re moving to Bath’ … None of us fainted the day my father came home and told my mother … that he was leaving us”. The comparison between Aunt Fay’s own experiences and Jane Austen’s reflects the different social expectations of marriage across time. This juxtaposition between past and present, contrasts the marriage dynamic and how family relationships change across contexts. Therefore, the comparison of contemporary expectations to traditional social beliefs of the Regency Era enriches the reader’s understanding of marriage.

The comparison of how texts portray the success of women in different contexts reveals the constant expectation to achieve specific roles in order to be perceived well in society. Although, the definition of an accomplished woman is defined differently to the individual, according to their context and social status. Within Austen's context, women were expected to be educated, proficient in the arts and run the household. This is illustrated within Pride and Prejudice when Mr Darcy underlines his definition of an accomplished woman as one with “a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages”. Through the use of cumulative listing, the overwhelming amount of accomplishments women were expected to achieve within the Regency Era are illustrated. Such expectations were unachievable for women to attain, which is encapsulated through the high modality of Elizabeth exclaiming that she “never saw such a woman”. The strong modality emphasises the unattainable social expectations of the Regency Era. Unlike Austen’s Era, Weldon with her feminist context outlines the importance of women achieving independence especially as a woman, within Letters to Alice. The rhetorical question “Pace your father, especially for a woman. For if you can look after yourself, who will look after you?” illustrates how success for women within contemporary contexts is determined by self-autonomy. Aunt Fay proposes this question within her letter to emphasise the importance of independence for Alice, as within modern contexts, the success of a woman is determined on her own ability to make an earning to survive. This is directly juxtaposed to the expectations within Pride and Prejudice, whereby success depended on women marrying and depending on a man; “That he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.” In addition, the success of women in Austen’s period was also determined financially which is shown through Lydia’s praise to Elizabeth for her marriage to Darcy; “It is a great comfort to have you so rich.” The positive connotation that comes with having wealth shows the importance of success in life through fortune, particularly for women in the Regency Period. Thus, showing how marriage is a successful path for women to gain financially and be perceived well by society.

Contrastingly, in Letter to Alice, the hyperbole and alliteration in “I know your father feels that feminists (as non-feminists regard me) are dangerous to the structure of society” reveals how the success of women in contemporary contexts have not completely shifted from traditional beliefs of the Regency Era. Aunt Fay whom we can see is a successful woman, is viewed as a feminist, who is “dangerous” to long established beliefs regarding the role and success of women, particularly in regard to marriage. This is similar to Pride and Prejudice where Elizabeth is perceived dangerous to the structure of society, which demonstrates how two varying contexts similarly perceive women who refute values of the particular time period as a threat to the stability of the social structure. Also, the colloquial language and juxtaposition of marriage between historical and modern contexts as “the stuff of our women’s magazines, but it was the stuff of their lives, their very existence” reveals the
current triviality of marriage and how it is not linked with success, but rather reading material. This comparison shows how the significance and importance of marriage to the success of women throughout time has vastly reduced. Therefore, the social expectation for women to succeed is determined in varying ways, according to the context.

A reader’s understanding of the complexity of social expectations is enhanced through the comparison of texts from varying contexts. The comparatively study of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Letters to Alice* encapsulates the similar and contrasting complex societal expectations of the 20th Century to the Regency Era.