Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FAY WELDON

Fay Weldon was born in England and raised in New Zealand, returning to the U.K. at age ten and later attending college at St. Andrews in Scotland. After several years as a successful advertising copywriter, Weldon began writing full-time and published her first novel in 1967. She has written over 20 novels, most recently *After the Peace*, which was published in October 2018. Weldon has also written extensively for television, radio, and stage and published works of nonfiction. In 2001, she was appointed to the CBE, a British order of chivalry. Weldon is the mother of four children and currently lives in England with her third husband.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Letters to Alice takes place against the backdrop of the feminist movement in the 1980s, which existed in the tension between the civil rights gains of second-wave feminism and the coming focus on individuality and diversity in third-wave feminism, which began in earnest in the early 1990s. The struggles of both Fay and Alice to refine their identities as creative, empowered women drives the story. Additionally, Fay's preoccupation with the value of reading over more modern forms of entertainment like television reflects the Western world's growing focus on technological advancement at the possible expense of valuing literature and engaging in quiet contemplation.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Letters to Alice is closely related to all of Jane Austen's works, in particular her early epistolary novel *Lady Susan*, which was not published during Austen's lifetime. *Lady Susan* features a free-spirited, somewhat immoral protagonist unlike those featured in Austen's published works. Weldon's novel shares its form and some of its themes with both *Lady Susan* and the series of letters that Austen wrote to her young niece Anna. Like the fictional Alice in *Letters to Alice*, Anna was herself an aspiring novelist. *Letters to Alice* also follows in a long tradition of epistolary novels, from classics such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to contemporary fiction such as Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*. Finally, *Letters to Alice* was one of many feminist novels published in the mid-1980s, perhaps the most notable of which is Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*
- **When Written:** Early 1980s
- **Where Written:** Unknown
- **When Published:** 1984
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Epistolary Novel
- **Setting:** Australia, Singapore, and England
- **Climax:** Fay finds out that Alice has secured a publishing deal for her novel.
- **Antagonist:** Enid and Edward, as well as social, cultural, and creative pressures on women and writers.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Courting Controversy. In 2017, Weldon controversially stated that feminism had succeeded to such a degree that women's lives are now easier than men's, saying of transgender women: "The only way men have of fighting back against the natural superiority of women is by becoming women themselves." Weldon even went so far as to publish a follow-up book to her feminist bestseller *The Death of a She-Devil* in which the protagonist is a transgender man who seeks the power of being a woman.

As Seen on TV. Weldon wrote the pilot episode of the popular 1970s television series *Upstairs Downstairs*.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens with an unnamed narrator writing a letter from Cairns, Australia to her eighteen-year-old niece, Alice. The narrator, who the reader learns at the end of the letter is named Fay, has not seen Alice in sixteen years but has heard from her mother—Fay's sister Enid—that Alice has dyed her hair black and green. Alice has told Fay that although she is studying literature in college, she does not see the point of much of her reading, in particular the works of Jane Austen. Fay wonders how she can possibly explain literature to Alice, but nonetheless she sets out to try.

Fay acknowledges the difficulty of appreciating serious literature in a world filled with distractions like television and popular novels, but she implores Alice to try and understand "the pleasures of a good book." In order to illustrate the value of literature for Alice, Fay describes a metaphorical place she calls the **City of Invention**. In the City of Invention, Fay tells Alice, all the architects are writers and the visitors are readers, coming

to explore and enjoy the excitement and beauty of the vast array of houses. Fay tours Alice through the City, noting how the neighborhoods differ, how some buildings withstand the test of time while others fall, and how some places are always the most popular with visitors. In her description, Fay also hints that she has been visiting the City since childhood, when her parents separated and she left home with her father while Enid stayed behind with their mother. To appreciate Jane Austen, Fay says, Alice must travel more widely in the City of Invention. She also notes that Alice intends to write a **novel** of her own, but tells her that she should not do so until she is older and better acquainted with the City.

Fay continues to write to Alice, detailing different aspects of literature and especially Jane Austen's works in each letter. She also hints at the events of her own life and Alice's. In the next letter, she expresses excitement at having just finished a novel and notes how much she always loves that sensation. Fay goes on to describe the various internal and external pressures that constrain writers as they work, such as the idea of the Muse, the opinions and needs of friends and family, and the social pressures on women to be charming even in their creative work. She notes that although the pressures of life can be exhausting, they can also provide the necessary fuel for creative work.

Fay is interested in the ways that historical context can shape a writer's work, and she gives Alice a detailed overview of the times in which Jane Austen lived. Far from being boring or timid, Fay argues, Austen's novels are actually a thoughtful and in some ways rebellious reaction to world around her. Fay focuses in particular on the many hardships of Georgian England, especially for women, and tells Alice how lucky she is to live in the modern day. Fay also notes that times changed considerably during Austen's short lifetime, and wonders about the role that novels might have played in that and other long-term societal changes. The reader also learns that Enid has written a letter to Fay, expressing concern about Fay's feminist influence on Alice.

After establishing Jane Austen's historical context, Fay goes on to detail Austen's life, from her childhood as the daughter of a clergyman, to her education at boarding schools, to her adulthood living in her mother's home following her father's death. Fay speculates that although Austen's family was cultured, loving, and relatively wealthy, Austen felt constrained by the need to always be well-behaved. Her novels, Fay thinks, draw from her challenging reality while simultaneously creating a more tolerable one for herself and her readers. Reflecting on the overwhelming desire that writers feel to pursue their work, Fay notes that Austen began writing at a young age and must have found a sense of mastery and excitement in her work.

Fay goes into further detail about the perils facing women in Georgian England, especially childbirth, and notes that Austen's decision not to marry or have children was a perfectly rational one. Fay analyzes Austen's early letters and writings to show Alice how Austen valued herself as a writer and understood the power of fiction, "raising invention above description." However, Fay also acknowledges the futility of trying to extrapolate meaning from old documents, saying of the available information about Austen, "You can deduce pretty much what you wish." Fay promises Alice further analysis later, but ends the letter saying she must pack for her return trip to England.

In her next letter, Fay reflects on her life as a professional writer, in particular the demands and exhaustions of having to travel and interact with her readers in person. She wonders about how Jane Austen's life would have been different, as she read to her family and friends at home and noted their reactions to her work. Fay tells Alice that this attention to audience is crucial for every writer of fiction, and advises Alice to always write for the real people who will read her books. She imagines Austen's writing table in her family's home, where she was often interrupted, and speculates that such a connection to the life of those around her might have made for ideal writing conditions. Furthermore, Fay feels that the writer's responsibility to readers can even be seen as a moral one, as novels demonstrate how people should and should not behave. In the City of Invention, effects clearly follow causes and give readers valuable perspectives on how best to life.

Fay writes one letter to her sister Enid, reassuring her that she is not corrupting Alice. Fay also asks Enid to consider reconciling with her, insisting that she did not base a fictional character in her novel on Enid, even though one character prepares her husband **bread rolls** in the same way that Enid does for her husband, Edward. Fay tells Enid that she misses her and hopes they can have a closer relationship.

Fay continues to write to Alice as she makes her way back to England and eventually arrives in London. She goes into more detail about the relationship between Austen's novels and the politics of Georgian England, arguing that the powerful individuals in any society need to read good novels like Austen's in order to gain empathy and understand the live of those who have less power. In particular, Fay focuses on Austen's novel *Emma* and its commentary on the division—or lack thereof—between classes.

Midway through their correspondence, Fay abruptly reverses her position on Alice's novel, telling her that she should try and write it after all. From that point on, she intersperses her analysis of Austen with advice for Alice. She tells Alice to be aware of the challenge of finishing a novel, and how frightening it can be to expose it to the world even once it is finished. Fay refers to the particular difficulty of those close to the writer seeing themselves within the writer's fiction, as Enid sees herself and Edward in Fay's work. At one point, she sends Alice a partial draft of a short story on this theme, in which a young novelist named Grace D'Albier finds that publishing a

successful novel interferes with all of the close relationships in her life. Fay advises Alice to avoid writing about her own love life as well, simply because it will be boring, although Alice persists in writing about a dramatic series of affairs involving her college boyfriend and a married English professor. Fay also returns to the idea of the City of Invention and to describe critics as bus drivers, urging Alice to take note of them but to pay more attention to the reactions of those who visit the house she builds. However, Fay also tells Alice not to believe everything she says, but rather to pick through the letters and only use what seems helpful to her.

Fay returns to analyzing Jane Austen's works, in particular *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*. In the latter, Fay explores the contrast between the virtuous main character and her wicked—but witty—nemesis and speculates that the two characters might represent the conflict within Austen herself, who was sweet and dutiful on the outside while hiding her "rebellious spirit." Fay even wonders if this intense conflict contributed to Austen's early death, which she finds upsetting to contemplate. Fay tells Alice how Austen died at age 41 of a degenerative condition called Addison's disease, which could not be treated or even diagnosed at the time. Despite the tragic nature of Austen's death, Fay urges Alice to consider death as only a part of life, and to let its reality encourage her toward greater accomplishments while she is alive.

In the novel's final letters, the reader learns that Alice has failed her college exams and is contemplating attending a different school in America, which Fay has offered to pay for. Enid and Edward seem to blame Fay for Alice's failure. However, Alice is unexpectedly offered a publishing deal for her novel, which delights Fay. Fay encourages her to continue studying literature anyway, so that she can balance her life between analysis and creation. At the novel's conclusion, Alice's novel has become a huge success, outselling all of Fay's novels. Fay is happy for Alice's success and begins contemplating a new novel of her own, telling Alice that "the exhilaration of all this" makes her think that literature might truly lead to immortality. Finally, Fay announces that she will be attending tea with Enid and Edward, with whom she hopes to have a pleasant time by avoiding discussion of writing and feminism.

CHARACTERS

Aunt Fay – The book's narrator, Fay, is eighteen-year-old Alice's aunt. Fay is a successful novelist who travels the world writing and publicizing her books. She considers herself a feminist and also believes strongly in the power of fiction, creating the metaphor of the **City of Invention** to express the beauty and value of reading. Much of her letters to Alice center on Jane Austen's life and novels. Although she reveals few of her own biographical details, the reader learns that Fay's parents separated when she was a child, and that Fay left her childhood home with her father, while her sister Enid stayed behind with their mother. She has not seen her niece Alice, Enid's daughter, for sixteen years, indicating that Fay is largely estranged from her family. Fay also appears to be single and without children of her own, though these facts are not explicitly stated. Fay's reliability as a narrator is ultimately uncertain, as she sometimes contradicts herself and even tells Alice not to listen to everything she says. At the novel's conclusion, Fay seems to be hoping for a reconciliation with Enid and her husband, Edward, even though their values differ greatly from her own.

Alice – Alice is Fay's eighteen-year-old niece. She is in her first year of a university literature course in England, and although she aspires to write a **novel** herself, she is not convinced of the value of studying literature, in particular the works of Jane Austen. Alice dyes her hair black and green and seems to rebel against her parents, Enid and Edward, by initiating a correspondence with Fay, who is estranged from the family. Through Fay's letters, the reader learns that Alice enters into a series of seemingly melodramatic affairs involving her boyfriend and one of her professors. Alice bases her novel on these affairs and, although Fay initially cautions her to avoid writing about her own life, the novel turns out to be an immediate bestseller. Despite her success as a writer, Alice fails her exams and at the novel's conclusion, she is considering whether to continue studying literature at a different college in the United States. Aside from her relationship with her parents, Fay reveals little about Alice's life, mentioning only that she has a younger sister whom she once tried to drown when the two were children.

Jane Austen – The British novelist Jane Austen is such a central part of the correspondence between Fay and Alice that she becomes a fully realized character herself. The reader knows much more about Austen's life than those of either Fay or Alice, and Fay describes Austen as the lively, intellectual daughter of a pastor of a village in Georgian England. Though Austen's family was cultured and relatively well-off, the surrounding world was full of suffering, danger, and misogyny. Fay argues that Austen's fiction, though seemingly inane at times, is in fact a thoughtful and meaningful reaction to that context and especially to the rigid social roles imposed on women. Austen and her sister Cassandra were sent to a series of boarding schools in their childhood, where they may or may not have been happy. After her father died at a relatively young age, Austen spent the rest of her life living with her mother and never married. Austen died at the age of 41 from Addison's disease, which the medicine of her era could not diagnose or treat. Although Fay admits that ascribing specific intentions and emotions to historical figures like Austen is somewhat futile, she imagines that Austen may have ultimately preferred to live on through her novels rather than continuing to live a life in which she could never fully express her intellect and

creativity.

Enid – Enid is Fay's sister and Alice's mother. Little is known about her life, except that she stayed with her mother when the sisters' parents separated. Enid is married to Edward and is worried about their daughter, Alice, whom she feels does not take school seriously. Enid holds a grudge against Fay for encouraging Alice's rebelliousness and also for writing in one of her novels about the fact that Enid makes **bread rolls** for Edward, although Fay insists that the character who makes the bread rolls is not based on Enid. Despite the conflict between them, Enid seems to be interested in reconciling with Fay and invites her to tea at the end of the book.

Edward – Edward is Enid's husband and Alice's father. Fay does not reveal much of his character throughout the book, indicating only that he is against feminism and worries about Fay's corrupting influence on Alice. It is unclear whether he is interested in reconciling with Fay, but at the end of the book he is nonetheless planning to attend tea with her and Enid as long as Fay does not talk about "novels, writing, feminism, or allied subjects."

Grace D'Albier – Grace D'Albier is the fictional protagonist of the short story that Fay sends Alice in Letter 11. She is first-time novelist on tour for her new book, which is about incest. Grace bemoans the fact that everyone, including members of her own family, assumes that her book is autobiographical when it is actually entirely fictional. She even reveals that her husband left her because of it. Fay does not finish her draft of Grace's story, telling Alice that it was pointless and without direction.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE PURPOSE OF FICTION

The narrator, Aunt Fay, begins writing to Alice, her eighteen-year-old niece, because she has heard from her sister Enid (Alice's mother) that Alice finds reading Jane Austen in her college literature courses to be "boring, petty, and irrelevant." Though Fay concedes that reading serious literature can sometimes be arduous, she implores Alice to continue her studies anyway, arguing over the course of the epistolary novel for the value of fiction as a means of exploration, self-improvement, and enhanced engagement with the world. Particularly because Alice herself wishes to write a **novel**, Fay feels that reading them must be an essential part of Alice's self-actualization. However, Fay does not argue for fiction as a simple doorway into straightforward truth; rather, she builds a case for reading fiction as a means of grasping that there are, in fact, many different truths that can all exist at the same time. For Fay—a novelist herself—countless realities exist simultaneously, and her letters to Alice seek to demonstrate how fiction can reveal that multitude of realities.

Fay's argument begins with an examination of the ways fiction can change its readers for the better. Depicting the act of reading as a process of exploration and exposure to new ideas, Fay focuses at first on the moral and instructional power of fiction. Throughout the book, Aunt Fay illustrates her points with the metaphorical **City of Invention**, where books are houses, authors are their architects, and readers are curious visitors who explore the neighborhoods. Her vivid descriptions of the City evoke the wealth to be found within books, depicting readers as explorers of a hidden geography, lit "by day by the sun of enthusiasm and by night by the moon of inspiration." She tells Alice that the City is where "we understand ourselves and one another, and our pasts and our futures." With such strong language and rich imagery, Fay makes it clear that she considers fiction a destination for new and essential learning. Fay also sets literature apart as a more effective form of learning than any other; she describes how reading brings the reader into a reflective space created by the author, where the reader is challenged to expand their thinking while still remaining physically safe. Fay notes that exploring the City of Invention is "all, really, education is about, should be about." According to Fay, fiction improves the world as a whole, beyond just the individuals who actually read. She notes that "if society is to advance then those that hath must empathize with those that hath not," recommending that people in positions of power should read more novels in order to use that power in a more humane way. Then, Fay argues, additional lives will be bettered, rather than just the reader's.

However, as Fay's letters to Alice continue, it becomes clear that Fay is not arguing that readers of fiction are any closer to understanding some absolute truth. They are instead learning to accept the notion that truth is not fixed, but rather infinite and constantly changing. For Fay, only the vast and varied works that make up literature as a whole can fully reflect this complex, sometimes paradoxical reality. Several times throughout the book, Fay points out to Alice that failing to question assumed truths is one of the biggest mistakes a person can make. She guesses at the so-called truths that Alice may not have examined and advises her that "the real Secret of Life lies in Constant Rule Revision." This repeated insistence on reevaluating truth underscores Fay's core argument that no absolute truth exists. Fay's analysis of Jane Austen's many novels also provides a detailed example of exactly what it looks like to use multiple texts as a window into simultaneous and even conflicting truths. Fay finds different insights into Austen's inner life from every one of her books, building a

portrait of the author that is both happy and unhappy, kind and cruel, obedient and revolutionary. There is no one correct or accurate interpretation of Jane Austen, an implication which seems to drive Fay's preoccupation with discussing her. At the novel's conclusion, Fay reflects on the surprisingly successful novel that Alice has written and contemplates writing a new one of her own. Thinking about all the many books that she and Alice have yet to read and write, Fay says that "the exhilaration of all this being…is enough to make us immortal." Here, the immense variety of fiction is more than just valuable; it actually transcends human life. Again, the very notion of truth depends on the combination of countless simultaneous truths.

While the character of Aunt Fay argues for the use of fiction in understanding the multifaceted nature of reality, the book itself also backs up that claim. The book includes multiple fictions within fictions and blurs the line between these different levels of reality, starting with the name shared by Aunt Fay and the author, Fay Weldon. Reading the book requires accepting all of these layered fictions at once, putting the real-life reader through a lived example of Aunt Fay's idea of simultaneous truths. The novel overlaps with literal reality in a number of ways: in addition to sharing a name with her main character, Weldon bases the exchanges between Aunt Fay and Alice on a real-life exchange between Jane Austen and one of her nieces. The real and fictitious elements are almost interchangeable throughout, illustrating the idea that imagined realities are every bit as real as lived experience. The characters of both Fay and Alice write novels that may or may not be based on their "real" lives. The protagonist of the short story draft that Fay sends Alice is also a novelist, but in contrast, she insists that her novel is not based on her life, even though her audience believes that it is. With so many layers of fiction and reality even within the lives of the characters, it becomes necessary for the reader to accept all of these intertwined realities as one coherent whole, even though the details remain uncertain and conflicting. At the novel's end, Fay's feud with her sister and brother-in-law seems to be ending, but Fay's statement that she will "be very happy" to avoid talking about novels, writing, and feminism rings false given Fay's outspoken character throughout the rest of the book. The reader is left wondering whether this happy ending is genuine or if, like the happy endings of some of the Austen novels that Fay analyzes, it is intended instead to make a point to the reader. By leaving the book's readers without a tidy ending and forcing them to accept multiple possible interpretations, Weldon again reiterates fiction's unique power to illustrate the complexity of reality.

THE AUTHOR AND THE READER

In addition to convincing Alice of the value of reading, Fay also seeks to illustrate the challenges and responsibilities of the author's life, using her own writing life and that of Jane Austen to support her argument. However, it quickly becomes clear that Fay views the burden of interpreting fiction as falling at least as much on the reader as on the author. Readers learn and grow in response to books, but their role is not a passive one; for Fay, readers must work together with authors in order to create shared meaning, and a work of literature is not complete until its audience has engaged with it.

Fay touches on a number of challenges in the life of a writer, from the anxiety of traveling for a book tour to the lack of rest and vacation. But perhaps the greatest challenge she describes is the pressure of writing while keeping in mind all the different sets of expectations and opinions that the writer is subject to. From the outset, Fay situates the writer in a context that is defined by the influence of others. At one point, Fay reflects on the power of writers to influence readers and wonders whether a successful writer should "bow his head beneath the weight of so much terrifying responsibility." However, that frightening pressure is balanced out by her belief that connections to others are what fosters the writing process in the first place. Contemplating the idea that Jane Austen might have been frequently interrupted because she wrote in the middle of a busy home, Fay notes that such interruptions would likely have been an asset rather than a burden. "Take away life," she tells Alice, "and you take away writing." In both positive and negative ways, the living world around an author profoundly affects that author's books, even before the books are written. For Alice, Fay herself seems to serve as an example of the whole range of influences that an outside party might have on an author. Sometimes she tells Alice to continue on with her writing; other times she cautions her away from it. By placing Aunt Fay in the role of critic and guide as well as author, Weldon allows her to embody all of the pressures that a young writer like Alice is subject to.

As the novel continues, the role of the reader takes on more and more power in the creative process. At certain points, Fay even seems to say that the reader has *more* responsibility than the author when it comes to gleaning meaning from literature. Despite her ideas about the moral responsibilities of authors, Fay also implies that works of fiction are in some way predetermined, able to exist only in the exact way that the author has created them. Of authors, she says: "They write what they write and if it was different, it would be a different book and have a different title, so fault-finding is self-defeating." With the author's work so clearly delineated, it seems then to fall to the reader to accept what the author has written and value it for what it is. Fay also suggests that the attention of readers can actually transform a written work into more than it was before. She tells Alice that widely read books come to contain "the concentrated magic of the attention of millions," which makes it a better book than one that lacks that magic. This somewhat far-fetched claim (which Fay herself expects

Alice to disbelieve) underscores the immense, even supernatural power that Fay ascribes to the audience of a work of fiction. This emphasis on the reader as the true actor in a work of literature even extends to the relationship between Fay and Alice. Though Fay offers endless advice, she cautions Alice against listening to her without question. She instructs Alice to view the letters as "a sack of rather dusty brown rice" that should be used as an ingredient, rather than a complete meal. As the reader, Alice ultimately has more power over the use of Fay's words than Fay herself does.

By detailing her own close reading of Jane Austen's works, Aunt Fay also models the way that a reader can actively create meaning. Fay puts her own advice into action, showing both Alice and the reader of *Letters to Alice* how a reader can join with the author to bring literature to life. Each of Fay's attempts to convince Alice of the worth of Austen's novels relies on Fay's own reactions to the work. For Fay, Austen's novels are worthwhile because of the reader's lived responses to them. Of Austen's work *Emma* in particular, Fay dwells on "the amazing phenomenon of shared fantasy," in which countless thousands of people all imagine the character Emma and feel a range of genuine emotions in response to her behavior. Fay concludes from this phenomenon that "Emma lives!" indicating that the audience, not the author, is ultimately responsible for bridging the gap between fiction and reality. Throughout the novel, Aunt Fay, Alice, Jane Austen, and Weldon herself all hold dual identities as both authors and readers. This constant blending of roles highlights the idea that the union of author and reader is the crucial mechanism for creating meaningful literature.

THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORY

Just as the audience collaborates with the author to bring life to written works, so too does historical context shape literature and its meanings. Aunt Fay presents Alice with an in-depth analysis of the pressures of history on Jane Austen's work, while also hinting at how external context has shaped Fay's own novels. However, Fay also makes it clear that history is not a straightforward oppressive force on literature. Rather, it is a lens for understanding an author's works and bringing them into conversation with the present. Through Fay's argument to Alice, Weldon suggests that readers and writers have a duty to examine history's influence on literature, as well as the reciprocal influence that literature may also have on history.

Throughout the novel, Aunt Fay cautions Alice against judging Jane Austen by modern standards and implores her to consider the many effects that Austen's context might have had on her work. What's more, Fay also suggests that Austen's novels played their own role in shaping history. The push and pull between literature and history in the case of Jane Austen illustrates the idea of a dynamic bond in which each shapes the other. Of Austen and her family, Fay tells Alice: "They may have lived in the past but they were just as real to themselves as we are to ourselves, and as complex." With these words, Fay rejects simplistic interpretations of the past. She argues that each moment in history was as multifaceted as the present, with countless—sometimes mysterious—ways of shaping those who lived through it. Through her detailed descriptions of life in Georgian England, Fay demonstrates how the customs of the era—in particular, the social roles available to women—would have influenced how Austen wrote about her heroines and their adventures. Even though the plots and characters may seem inconsequential to Alice, Fay notes: "Jane Austen's lifestyle (as they call it now) was very different, and her call to moral arms more muted; but it was there." By considering Austen's works from the perspective of their historical context, Fay seeks to uncover their continued relevance for modern readers. Fay also notes the innumerable smalls ways in which Austen's works subverted the values of their time. Of *Northanger Abbey*, for example, Fay suggests that the gothic plot parodies popular novels of that genre, throwing their values into question and hinting that Austen possesses "something capable of taking the world by its heels, and shaking it." Though Fay acknowledges that tracing the exact influence of works of literature through history is impossible, she maintains that books like Austen's do have the power to shape society slowly over time.

Weldon also uses the life of Aunt Fay herself to illustrate the effect of context on a writer's work. Even as she analyzes Austen's work and the history surrounding it, Fay's own letters show how she is influenced by the world around her, and vice versa. Several times, Fay notes how the local traditions and literary communities of the places she visits affect her work. The "slow, blank, powerful unconscious" of Australia intrigues her, while the idea of contemplating "the group soul" in Singapore terrifies her. Fay's own travels underscore the idea that specific places and times carry unique modes of being that have the power to influence writers. On a more personal level, Fay's writing also shifts the context of her own life in both positive and negative ways. In particular, Fay's sister Enid is angry at her for using details of Enid's life in one of her novels—that is, the fact that Enid makes **bread rolls** for her husband, Edward—which causes a falling out between the two sisters. However, it is also Fay's writing that seems to bring the women back together, as Fay's correspondence with Alice builds a bridge to communicating with Enid. The causes and effects of Fay's own writing enact a small-scale version of the historical dynamic that Fay perceives in Austen's work, providing the reader with a relatable modern example of how books and the outside world can shape each other.

Ultimately, Fay seems to conclude that the interplay of history and literature is neither something to celebrate nor something to bemoan. It is simply something to understand and, crucially,

bring to one's interpretation of the present. Writing of Austen's tragically young death, Fay calls for perspective, noting that death is only a natural component of a complete life, "part of the whole and not the definition of the whole." She implies that while readers should not ignore the darker truths of an author's history, neither should they exaggerate their significance. Of her bleak descriptions of childbirth in Georgian England, Fay writes to Alice: "I tell you all this so you don't forget to be thankful that you live now." By learning about the history surrounding Jane Austen's works, Fay believes, Alice will be better equipped to understand and appreciate the unique context that affects her own life and writing.

FEMINISM

The unique experience of being a woman in both the personal and professional spheres recurs throughout Aunt Fay's letters in *Letters to Alice*. At times, female identity is depicted as a liability, while it is an asset in other instances. Through the examples of Fay, Alice, and Jane Austen, Weldon builds an argument for reading and writing as feminist pursuits, through which individual women can reconcile conflicting sets of societal expectations and construct their own identities.

Fay notes that Jane Austen herself sometimes seems to reproduce the misogynist attitudes of her society. Fay speculates that Austen's novels reflect both the oppressive gender roles of her society and her own efforts to forge an identity within them. In her very first letter to Alice, Fay writes that Austen's novels generally reflect the realities of gender roles, rather than criticizing them: "She chides women [...] men, on the whole, she simply accepts." Fay also invokes Virginia Woolf's concept of the "Angel of the House," who whispers in the ear of young women and reminds them to be sympathetic and charming rather than confrontational. Austen's genteel works, in Fay's opinion, demonstrate the persistent presence of that oppressive figure. In her discussion of *Mansfield Park*, Fay suggests that the presence of two completely opposite female characters—sweet Fanny and disrespectful Miss Crawford—might point to Austen's struggle to accept her own identity as both a "good woman" and a "bad" one. Fay notes that the real Austen was both intellectually rebellious and loyal to her family, and wonders whether "the split between good and bad never, in Jane Austen, quite reconciled." In this case, even where Austen's work reproduces oppressive gender roles, it may also give its author a chance to come to terms with them.

However, Aunt Fay also identifies countless examples of writing working to counter sexism and misogyny, in both Jane Austen's time and in the 1980s, when *Letters to Alice* is set. In each case, the act of writing serves as a form of rebellion, in which a female author is able to use her work to shape her own reality rather than accepting the oppressive rules of her society. The immediate physical danger that women faced in Jane Austen's era, especially from childbirth, is perhaps the most striking example of the oppression that Fay describes throughout her letters. She notes that Austen is often criticized for seeming to ignore these dire circumstances, but Fay argues that by creating thoughtful heroines and happy endings, Austen was successfully imagining a different, less dangerous model of womanhood. In *Pride and Prejudice* especially, Austen turns the stark reality of a woman's practical need to marry into a pleasant, often comical romance. Living in a world that limited her agency as a woman, Austen seems to use her novels as a way to regain the power of self-determination. Although Fay does not face the same kind of peril that women of Austen's day did, she is still burdened by expectations tied to her identity as a female writer. She hints at the danger she faces when traveling alone for her work, and at the idea that readers take issue with her unflattering descriptions of men and boys. Fay also tells Alice that Alice's father, Edward, views Fay as "dangerous to the structure of society" because she is a feminist. Nonetheless, Weldon shows Fay continuing to write her way toward an improved society, in this case by directly rebelling against Alice's father and advising his daughter to become a feminist writer herself.

Although Fay does not claim that literature has the capacity to erase oppressive gender roles, she nonetheless concludes that it is a meaningful way for women to gain power and live out feminist ideals. Discussing Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*, Fay describes the protagonist's love of reading novels and quotes a section in which Austen writes: "If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?" The inclusion of this text hints at the literary bonds between Fay, Alice, Austen, and even Weldon herself, underscoring how works of literature can bring women together and help them find shared strength in their creative powers. At the novel's conclusion, Fay tells Alice that she expects her reconciliation with Alice's parents to go well as long as she does not talk about writing or feminism, among other subjects. Clearly, the world in which Fay lives continues to challenge her attempts to define her own identity as a woman. But again, Fay nonetheless insists that "the **City of Invention** will stand," finding joy and selfhood in the continued process of creation and exploration that literature affords her.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CITY OF INVENTION

The City of Invention, a metaphorical place that Fay invents to show Alice the richness and excitement of reading fiction, represents the infinite realities that fiction

makes possible. Fay tells Alice that all authors are architects creating houses in the City of Invention, and that readers are the visitors who arrive to explore the vast and varied city. Each neighborhood represents a different genre, and critics serve as tour guides and bus drivers. According to Fay, all novels are part of the City of Invention, even though the houses vary enormously and some may turn out to last longer or be more enjoyable to visitors. Fay also argues that cause and effect are clearer and more rational in the City than in real life, and that visiting it allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of morality and meaning than they can anywhere else.

ALICE'S NOVEL

The novel that Alice wants to write—and eventually does write—serves as a symbol of the complex reality of being a creative woman. At first, Fay discourages Alice from working on the novel, telling her that she is too young and has not read enough to write well. Fay also disparages the novel's content, which she thinks is dull and trite because it is based on Alice's own romantic affairs. However, as the book continues, Fay grows more encouraging of Alice's efforts even though Alice is still reluctant to read the books Fay wants her to. Fay's shifting perspective, which seems to change almost at random in some cases, illustrates the complication of writing as a woman about stereotypically feminine events. On the one hand, Fay is tempted to dismiss Alice's novel because of its seeming inanity, much as readers sometimes dismiss Jane Austen's work. On the other hand, Fay values the novel for its reflection of Alice's reality and celebrates Alice's ability to define her own life through creative work. Though ultimately very successful, the novel does not solve all of Alice's problems, leaving Alice to continue sorting through the same questions of creative identity that Jane Austen faced in her own time.

BREAD ROLLS

Throughout Fay's letters, the bread rolls that her sister Enid bakes for her husband, Edward, symbolize the difficulty in separating art from reality. The crux of the conflict between Fay and her sister Enid lies with these rolls; Enid habitually sets the dough to rise before going to bed so that he can have fresh bread in the morning, a process that Fay depicts in one of her novels. Enid perceives Fay's writing as critical toward her, and Edward and is angry at being portrayed unfavorably, even though Fay insists that the character in the book is not meant to represent Enid. The bread rolls come up frequently as a shorthand for a tense relationship that can exist between a writer and those close to her. Fay argues that although novelists borrow details from reality, their true task is invention rather than description, and she is annoyed that Enid refuses to believe she invented the character in the book. Additionally, the bread rolls add nuance to the book's theme of feminism, as they show a wife completing an act that could either be subservient or simply loving, depending on the viewer's interpretation.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Carroll & Graf edition of *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* published in 1984.

Letter 1 Quotes

But no one burns *Emma*. No one would dare. There is too much concentrated here: too much history, too much respect, too much of the very essence of civilization, which is, I must tell you, connected to its Literature. It's Literature, with a capital 'L', as opposed to just books.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

As she begins trying to convince Alice of the immense value of reading, Fay introduces the distinction between Literature and "just books," making it clear that Jane Austen's works belong in the category of true literature. By equating literature with civilization, Fay begins to demonstrate just how powerful she believes literature to be, hinting with the word "concentrated" that books like *Emma* somehow contain more truth than the real world that produced them.

Additionally, Fay uses this moment to draw a connection between literature and history, laying the foundation for the reciprocal relationship that she explains in more detail in later letters. For Fay, history influences literature profoundly and vice versa, and this quote marks one of the first times that she explicitly states this crucial claim.

Here in this City of Invention, the readers come and go, by general invitation, sauntering down its leafy avenue, scurrying through its horrider slums, waving to each other across the centuries, up and down the arches of the years. When I say 'the arches of the years' it may well sound strange to you. But I know what I'm doing: it is you who are at fault.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Alice

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In order to illustrate the wonders of literature for Alice, Fay describes a vast, exciting metaphorical city that she calls The City of Invention, in which authors build houses and neighborhoods for visiting readers to explore and learn from. By depicting the City as both pleasant and frightening, Fay demonstrates literature's unique capacity to reveal simultaneous conflicting truths. The City is a place where readers come to find a multitude of coexisting realities, rather than one absolute truth.

By showing readers from different generations in conversation with each other, Fay also illuminates that idea that literature both affects and outlives its own historical context. Additionally, she includes a literary reference to a poem called "Hound of Heaven" and blames Alice for not understanding the reference. By placing the burden of understanding on Alice, her reader, Fay underscores the point that readers have as much responsibility for creating meaning from literature as writers do.

> Some build because they need to, have to, live to, or believe they are appointed to, others to prove a point or to change the world. But to build at all requires courage, persistence, faith and a surplus of imagination. A writer's *all*, Alice, is not taken up by the real world. There is something left over: enough for them to build these alternative, finite realities.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Alice

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

As part of her tour through the City of Invention, Fay attempts to describe to Alice what kinds of individuals end up building houses there and becoming authors. She suggests that many writers essentially have no choice but to write, as the real world leaves some part of themselves untapped. However, Fay does not glamorize the calling of writing, depicting the creation of literature as an arduous, exhausting process much like building a physical house. The way that Fay depicts authors within the City begins to reveal the recurring theme of the author's work, which is fraught and tiring even as it allows the author the unique privilege of building new worlds.

Again, Fay also describes works of literature as alternative realities, implying that the multiple worlds of literature are every bit as true as the real world.

Letter 2 Quotes

> The Angel of the House stood at Jane Austen's elbow, that is my guess, and she never quite learned how to ignore her—except perhaps in the early *Lady Susan*, for the writing of which, I imagine, she was gently chided by her family, and drew back quickly as at the touch of a cold, cold hand, and never tried that again.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

In the course of describing to Alice all the various pressures and outside influences that an author experiences while writing, Fay introduces Virginia Woolf's idea of the Angel of the House, who encourages female writers to be ladylike and pleasing to their readers. She speculates that Jane Austen also experienced this subtle constraint on her work, and uses this idea to develop the theme of gender expectations as a significant force in the lives and work of female writers.

Additionally, Fay depicts Austen's family—some of her primary early readers—as the agents who amplified the voice of the Angel of the House. Their role here exemplifies Fay's argument that readers create literature as much as writers do, in this case through their criticism of work that did not fit their expectations of what women should write.

> It takes great courage and persistence to swim against the stream of communal ideas. The stream itself is so much part of daily existence, it is hard to see it for what it is, or understand that it flowed in a quite a different direction in other decades.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

After listing all of the unquestioned beliefs that she guesses Alice holds, Fay points out how difficult it is to express opinions that go against the dominant values of one's time. From this perspective, Fay argues that some of Jane Austen's ideas—like the need to marry for love—seem trite to modern readers but were actually revolutionary for her time. By showing Alice all of the ways that she unthinkingly fails to question the values of the present day, Fay demonstrates why Austen should be commended for questioning those of her own era. This argument relates closely to the theme of understanding history as a prerequisite for understanding literature and also suggests that Austen's works may have helped influence gradual changes in social conventions.

Letter 3 Quotes

In the days of the Empire, women followed their husbands around the globe, and shipped their children back to England to live in unspeakable boarding schools, where they were as like as not sexually abused, beaten, and starved, without apparent alarm to anyone. You do not know, little Alice, how recent or how lucky you are.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Describing the state of the world in which Jane Austen grew up, Fay focuses on the immense dangers facing women and children of that time, which were simply viewed as facts rather than causes for concern. By informing Alice of these realities, Fay provides further evidence for her argument that Austen's work must be considered in the context of her historical era and that any concern she showed over the state of the world was unusual at the time.

Fay's vivid language here also underscores the profundity of challenges facing women of Austen's time. Her characterization of Alice as "lucky" shows that despite the challenges still facing women of the modern day, their circumstances have never the less improved, perhaps in part due to the efforts of previous generations like Austen's.

I think indeed she bowed her will and humbled her soul, and bravely kept her composure, as a good nun in a good convent might, and escaped into the alternative world of her novels: and simply because she *was* so good, or did become so, and her self-discipline was so secure, she brought into that inventive world sufficient of the reality of the one we know and think we love, but which I think she hated, to make those novels outrun the generations.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50-51

Explanation and Analysis

Detailing Jane Austen's childhood and family relationships, as well as the trauma they may have caused her, Fay speculates that Austen's fiction might have been in some way a reaction to these pressures, most of which stemmed from her female identity in a repressive time.

In addition to developing the feminist overtones of Fay's broader arguments, this quote illuminates the dual role that the outside world could have played in the creation of Austen's novels. On the one hand, the desire to escape from reality might have motivated Austen to create an improved fictional world. At the same time, Austen recognized her audience's need for the familiarity of the real world, an understanding which drove her to reflect the world she knew within her fiction. Again, Fay shows the purpose of fiction to be this unique blending of truths, in which the real and the imagined coexist as equals.

Letter 4 Quotes

You see! The born novelist. She is raising invention above description; what she makes herself above what the real world has to offer. She will put up with writing a history so long as she doesn't have to get the dates right, and mocks those who take the whole thing seriously, and so long as she can be biased.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Fay quotes from one of Austen's early works, a satirical history of England, as an example of the value that fiction writers must necessarily place on imagination. By including Austen's own thoughts on the need for invention in interpreting history, Fay provides new evidence for her claim that fiction always influences history and vice versa.

Additionally, this quote serves as a meta-commentary on the novel itself, as it seems to express Fay's attitude toward her letters and perhaps even Weldon's toward her book. For Weldon, Fay, and Austen, facts and stories alike are meant to be intertwined and repurposed, creating a new and more complex world out of these many coexisting truths.

But I do dislike all these 'ifs', and 'may haves'; they can only be speculation; and are in a way parasitical: the present sucking nourishment from the past, the living from the dead, as if there wasn't enough emotion and event now to sop up all our desire for analysis and explanation.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Fay tells Alice about a letter written by one of Jane Austen's cousins, in which the cousin expresses annoyance at Austen's "whimsical and affected" nature. Fay goes on to speculate regarding what exactly about Austen may have irritated the cousin, but in this quote, Fay undercuts her own speculation, emphasizing how futile it is to try to interpret the past in definite terms.

Fay's preoccupation with interpreting the past nevertheless continues throughout the book, even as she wonders about its utility. This tension between Fay's theories and her behavior hints at the theme of needing to view the relationship between history and literature as important but not fixed. Here, she advocates for finding a way to balance attention to history with the need to stay focused on the present, even as she struggles to obtain that balance herself.

Letter 5 Quotes

Fiction, on the whole, and if it is any good, tends to be a subversive element in society. Elizabeth Bennet, that wayward, capricious girl, listening to the beat of feeling, rather than the pulsing urge for survival, paying attention to the subtle demands of human dignity rather than the cruder ones of established convention, must have quite upset a number of her readers, changed their minds, and with their minds, their lives, the society they lived in: prodding it quicker and faster along the slow, difficult road that has led us out of barbarity into civilization.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81-82

Explanation and Analysis

Contemplating the complexities of the relationship between literature and society, Fay speculates that an analysis of Jane Austen's influence on her readers might serve as a microcosm of the way that authors and readers work together to move society forward. For Fay, the example in this quote provides a platonic ideal of the role of each: the author offers a new and challenging way of approaching life, and the reader actively engages with that model and brings it to life in the real world.

In addition to providing an example of the way that readers and writers should engage with literature, Fay also argues here for the historical value of literature. Just as the realities of historical context affect the fiction of each era, so too does that fiction help effect the real change that shift society out of one era and into another.

We do not need offices and a muted typewriter and no disturbance—we need a table half-way between the fire and the window, and the muted sound of the world around: to be of that world, and not apart from it. It is easier for women than for men, and the world being what it is, and women writers, to their great advantage, are not allowed wives.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Telling Alice about rumors that Jane Austen was often interrupted while working, Fay argues that such interruptions would represent a valuable connection to her household and the outside world. Rather than hindering Austen's writing, Fay believes that this immediate connection to other people and society at large would have fueled Austen's creative energy. Again, the idea of the reader and the influence of historical context are presented as key ingredients in the creation of fiction.

Here, Fay also complicates her analysis of the burdens placed on female writers. She begins by acknowledging that women often end up catering to the needs of men, which means that the wives of male novelists are tasked with making sure that their working husbands are never interrupted. However, Fay views this as a liability for men, since being waited on means that they are cut off from the outside world. This isolation, Fay argues, hinders the men's creativity. With this analysis, Fay advances her idea that being a working writer allows a woman to subvert gender roles into creative advantages.

Letter 6 Quotes

❝ You are *not* the model for Chloe in *Female Friends*. Too many of my friends claim that role, in any case, for you to be able to do so sensibly. Any woman who waits upon her husband as a servant upon a master—and they are legion—all too easily sees herself in Chloe. But I *made her up*. I promise.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Edward, Enid

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Writing to her sister Enid, Fay denies—seemingly having done so many times before—that she based a character in one of her novels on Enid. Although the character does routinely make bread rolls for her husband in the same way that Enid does for her husband Edward, Fay argues that this overlap does not mean that Enid and the character are the same person.

With this quote, Fay demonstrates both how fiction can be an effective pressure on society and how the overlap of fact and fiction can be uncomfortably challenging for readers and writers. Fay suggests that many women identify with the character of Chloe and might alter their behavior as a result, providing an example of how fiction grounded in reality can lead to real-life change, especially when it comes to gender roles and patriarchal pressure. However, for Enid, her similarity to Chloe leads only to resentment and fear, which in turn cause Fay pain. Here and throughout the book, Enid provides an example of the risks and challenges of creating and consuming fiction, which go hand in hand with its benefits.

Letter 7 Quotes

❝ So what *are* you going on about? I hear you repeat. Why this reverence for Jane Austen, who was blind (in our terms) to so much? I will tell you. The gentry, then as now, *has* to read in order to comprehend both the wretchedness and ire of the multitude. It is not only ignorance in the illiterate we need to combat, it is insensitivity in the well-to-do. Fiction stretches our sensibilities and our understanding, as mere information never can.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93-94

Explanation and Analysis

After describing further details about the social ills of Jane Austen's time, Fay attempts to convince Alice that Austen's work is socially valuable even though it includes no specific mention of those ills. She distinguishes again between fiction and "mere information," arguing that reading emotionally powerful stories like Austen's would have made the wealthy readers of her time more sensitive to the pain of the less fortunate, while just knowing about the facts of that pain would not have the same effect. For Fay, reading high-quality fiction is directly linked to changes in the reader.

In addition to arguing for the individual need for personal improvement through fiction, this passage also illustrates Fay's view of fiction's role in the development of society. She has shown in previous chapters how much influence Austen's historical context had on her work, but here she shows the other side of that equation by explaining how Austen's work could have in turn impacted society. For Fay, the relationship between novels and history is ongoing and reciprocal.

I am trying to explain that writing must be in some way a shared experience between reader and writer: the House of Imagination built with doors for guests to enter in, and pegs for their coats, and windows for them to look out of: it is no use being a recluse. You will die of hypothermia and malnutrition if you live alone in your house, however beautifully constructed it is. It must be a welcoming place, or exciting, if dangerous, or educative, if unpleasant, or intensely pleasurable.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Using Jane Austen's *Emma* as an example, Fay details the various ways that that authors can make their houses in the City of Invention hospitable to readers. Writing without thought for audience, Fay implies, is worse than not writing at all, and can even harm the writer. At the same time that it details the responsibility of writers, this passage also highlights the immense importance of readers in bringing a work of literature to life. When writers and readers both live up to their responsibilities, then fiction is able to fulfill its purpose of reflecting and expanding the complex, contradictory nature of reality.

Letter 8 Quotes

As if it were decreed that your mother Enid should put bread rolls to rise every night for your father Edward's breakfast, in order that a certain paragraph in a certain novel should be written. As if the City of Invention, little by little, using a chapter here, a paragraph there, is waking from its slumber and will eventually be more real than life itself, and we its servants, its outrunners.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Edward, Enid, Alice

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Fay tells Alice how irritating and challenging it can be to publish a novel, in part because the author's loved ones will insist on seeing themselves in the fictional work. Fay seems to say that this belief is preposterous, and that the author's friends and family are being irrational for fearing that their lives will be turned into fiction. She reiterates her call for rational, active reading as the true partner of writing, and reveals the less positive side of the way that fiction can influence reality.

However, her tone and word choice in this quote seem to hint at another layer of Fay's belief. Even as she details the readers' fears in the name of dismissing them, she seems to elevate these anxieties, as if some part of her did indeed believe the irrational idea that fiction might define individual lives. This moment of uncertainty adds depth to the thematic idea that literature and reality are constantly interacting, with the exact mechanisms of cause and effect impossible to know.

Letter 9 Quotes

All over the country irons were held in suspension, and car exhaust bandages held motionless and lady gardeners stayed their gardening gloves, and cars slowed, as Emma spoke, as that other world intruded into this. It does more and more, you know. We join each other in shared fantasies, it is our way of crossing barriers, when our rulers won't let us. ET and his like is our real communication. Hand in hand the human race abandons the shoddy, imperfect structures of reality, and surges over to the City of Invention.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Alice, Jane Austen

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

While driving home from a bookstore, Fay happens to hear a radio adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma* and listens to it raptly. She imagines all of the other listeners paying attention to the same scene at the same time, and presents this large-scale immersion in fiction to Alice as proof of the power of the City of Invention. She shows how the actions of real individuals are changed by fiction in the moment and indicates that this shared experience is one of truest forms of human communication.

Additionally, by invoking the idea of rulers that try to stop people from talking to each other, Fay returns to the theme

of fiction's power to shape real-life history by bringing individuals together and offering them a new reality that may be preferable to their own.

Letter 10 Quotes

Now, inasmuch as those engaged in particle physics will assure us that a particle alters by virtue of being observed, so we can never really know what anything is like, because the knowledge interferes with what we wish to know, it doesn't surprise me that a painting, so imbued with the force of attention, changes its nature. Heats up. Hot property!

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Alice

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 116-117

Explanation and Analysis

Fay tells Alice a story about touching a painting by a famous artist and feeling, before she knew who the artist was, that the painting was hot to the touch. Although she thinks that Alice and many others will disbelieve her, Fay takes this incident as evidence of the power of an enthusiastic audience. In this quote, she suggests that viewers of art, like readers of fiction, create not only metaphorical change in the art they are viewing, but also material ones. This is perhaps her strongest assertion yet about the essential role of the reader in the creation of art.

Fay's statement that "we can never really know what anything is like" also relates back to her insistence on the impossibility of defining the true nature of reality. For Fay, the multifaceted reality created by the interaction of fiction and the real world is the only essential truth.

Letter 11 Quotes

Journalists, in particular, who work so cleverly from the real world, understand description, but not invention. It is not surprising. They lose their jobs if they do invent—novelists get sued if they don't invent. So I, Grace, D'Albier, must go round the world, stared at as a victim of paternal and maternal incest: and though my parents still speak to me, they do so in a rather stiff way. They can comprehend that I made it up, but their friends can't.

Related Characters: Grace D'Albier (speaker), Enid, Aunt Fay

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

Grace D'Albier is the protagonist of a partial short story that Fay writes based on her recent promotional tour for her novel. Grace, who is also a novelist, has written a book about incest and finds that everywhere she goes, her readers—including some of her own family and friends—believe that her novel is autobiographical. This assumption strains all of Grace's close relationships, acting as an exaggerated dramatization of the kind of tension the Fay suffers when Enid assumes that a fictional character is based on her. For Grace, fiction intrudes on the real world in a very real and destructive way, showing how significantly novels can affect the lives of their authors and readers.

With its similarities to Fay's own story, Grace's story also adds a layer of confusion and complication to the novel's already-complex overlapping fictions. At this point, the novel as a whole begins to seem even more like a microcosm of the City of Invention, in which numerous realities exist simultaneously and separating them from each other becomes nearly impossible.

Writers are not so rational about the writing of their books, you see, as students of English Literature like to think. They write what they write and if it was different, it would be a different book and have a different title, so fault-finding is self-defeating. And if you think your brain is dying slowly, that your head is held trapped by iron bonds of boredom, it is no more than you deserve. When you study a writer's work in depth you are stealing from that writer: so much he or she offered to you gladly, but you are greedy: you are demanding more.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Alice

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

When Alice tells Fay that she is miserable and bored trying to complete analytical assignments for her literature class, Fay replies that criticism of fiction is an inherently dull task because novels are already complete in themselves; she

implies that a good novel hides no secret meaning that is not already apparent to an active reader. This claim adds additional responsibility to the reader's role, demanding that they collaborate with the content laid out by the author rather than wishing for that content to be different.

In making this statement, Weldon also seems to thwart those who would analyze her book, even though the complexity of her narrative invites analysis at the same time. Again, the novel's paradoxes force the reader to accept conflicting simultaneous truths, even when it comes to the meaning of the novel itself.

Letter 12 Quotes

The rebellious spirit, raging at being so cast out by mother and father, learning the defences of wit and style—Miss Crawford. The dutiful side, accepting authority, enduring everything with a sweet smile, finding her defence in wisdom—Fanny. So tempting, in fact, that I shan't resist. I shall offer it to you as an explanation of Jane Austen's determination to make the unctuous Fanny a heroine.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134-135

Explanation and Analysis

Describing the plot and characters of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Fay notes that the two characters—one wicked, one virtuous—seem to represent two opposing forces within Austen herself. Although Fay thinks that this representation leads to a somewhat unentertaining heroine, she nonetheless views it as an example of the power of fiction to enact opposing realities simultaneously. Fay remains unsure of whether her interpretation is an accurate reading of the historical facts, further reinforcing the difficulty of ever truly differentiating fact and fiction.

Additionally, Fay views these characters through a feminist lens, casting Miss Crawford as the person Austen might have been if she were not bound by strict gender roles and Fanny as the person that Austen felt society forced her to be. This example illustrates especially clearly how literature can become an escape and a refuge for women, allowing them to reconcile conflicting identities in a way that would be impossible in real life.

Letter 13 Quotes

The novel must be used to set before the reader examples of good behaviour. I am frequently asked why I write about anti-heroines and anti-heroes, and not role models, and all I can say in my defence is that what I write is what I write and there is not much I can do about it.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Analyzing an 1816 letter by the novelist Walter Scott about the rise of realistic novelists including Jane Austen, Fay tells Alice that such novels became popular in part because they promised to show their readers examples of how they should live in the real world. While Fay admires Austen's work for much the same reason and has said previously that she feels authors hold a sacred responsibility to instruct their readers, she nevertheless finds that she herself is not able to include actual models of good behavior in her fiction.

By revealing how she herself fails to live up to some of the standards in which she instructs Alice, Fay reiterates that readers must accept writers' fiction as it is, while also casting doubt on her own authority. That doubt then serves, paradoxically, as evidence for the thematic idea that fiction reveals many conflicting truths rather than one certain truth. Readers cannot be sure what Fay really means or whether they can trust her, and so learning to accept these conflicting versions of reality becomes a requirement for reading the novel.

Letter 14 Quotes

Alice, we will, as they say, be a long time dead. You must carve your living self as sharply into the Rock of Eternity as you can. Please send your novel off; don't do as you threaten and forget it. Of course it's more than likely to be rejected and come back, and of course you will then feel rejected and discovered in your presumption. But if you embark on these things, you can't draw back.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

After detailing the tragic circumstances of Jane Austen's early death, Fay tells Alice that although it is painful to contemplate a person's death, it should nonetheless be considered as only one part of that person's story, rather than a defining characteristic. Accordingly, she urges Alice take risks while she is alive and try to use her novel to contribute to the world, much as Jane Austen did in her own time.

This quote illustrates both the power of literature's interaction with history and its uncertainty. Fay admits that Alice's book may meet rejection, but she argues that it is nonetheless her best hope for increasing the vitality of her life. The action of putting the book out into the world is worthwhile, Fay argues, even if the results are not positive on their surface.

Fay's forceful language of sharp carving also connects thematically to her previous call for Alice to ignore the desire to be silent that so often affects women. Accordingly, it seems that Alice's novel is important not only as a work of fiction, but also as a symbol of the feminist ideal of speaking up and defining one's own reality, even in the face of discouraging forces.

Letter 16 Quotes

❝ Sometimes, I think, the exhilaration of all this being so great—of ideas, notions, fantasies, speculations, claims false and valid, advice good or bad, the pattern made by altering truth as day melts into day, is great enough to make us immortal. These things have been, and so in a sense always will be: they are not finite in time. Only our bodies are that. Let them blow us all up if they want, reduce the planet to ashes (as they say)—the leap between nothing and something, once made, is always made.

Related Characters: Aunt Fay (speaker), Jane Austen, Alice

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

After finding out that Alice's novel will be published, Fay excitedly announces that she has begun work on a new novel of her own and muses about how joyful it is to be a part of the complex, infinite web of ideas and experiences that makes up the literary world. While the end of the novel does not provide the reader with a tidy conclusion, it does provide this final celebration of the conflicting, even confusing overlaps between fact and fiction. Here, Fay argues one more time that this multifaceted reality is more meaningful than any clean-cut version of the truth. She even hints at the notion of "claims false and valid," suggesting that some of her own claims throughout the book may not have been entirely truthful. Nonetheless, this last depiction of the exhilarating interchange between writer, reader, and history is especially vivid, leaving the reader with an impression of abundant creation and collaboration, even if the details remain hazy.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LETTER 1

Aunt Fay begins a letter to her eighteen-year-old niece, Alice, who has asked for advice. The letter is dated October and sent from Cairns, Australia. Fay notes that she is far from home and hopes that she knows enough to be helpful to Alice. She has not seen Alice since the girl was two, and now hears from Alice's mother—Fay's sister, later revealed as Enid—that Alice dyes her hair black and green and is in conflict with her mother. Fay wonders if Alice's letter to her might somehow play a role in helping reduce conflict between mother and daughter.

From the first paragraph of Fay's first letter, Fay draws a connection between the written word and solutions to real-world problems. Even though she barely knows Alice, she still speculates that the power of the letters between them may be strong enough to bring Alice and Enid back together. By noting that Alice's unconventional hair is also part of the trouble between the two, Fay also brings the notion of how respectable women should behave into the conversation from the start.

Alice has asked in particular for advice about Jane Austen, whose works she is reading for her college courses in English literature. Alice does not see the point of studying Austen, which Fay attributes to a childhood spent watching television instead of reading. Fay reflects on the copy of Austen's novel *Emma* that she finds in her hotel room, noting that the book is not as worn as the thrillers and romances also present. Fay suggests that although these often-read genre novels are more popular, they are ultimately "interchangeable" and lack *Emma*'s depth of meaning.

Fay immediately addresses Alice's reservations about Jane Austen, indicating how strongly she feels that high-quality literature is among the most meaningful things in life. By noting that Emma has been read less frequently than the popular genre novels, Fay introduces the idea that literature can be challenging and requires genuine effort and engagement from readers.

Fay admits to Alice that she herself sometimes feels "a nervous dread" of reading serious literature, but that she nonetheless wishes to convince Alice of "the pleasures of a good book." Fay is skeptical of Alice's college's ability to teach her these pleasures and notes that even though she is herself a novelist, she may also fall short. Nonetheless, she asks Alice to read her letters carefully and at least consider her advice.

Again, Fay acknowledges that creating meaning from her letters will be in part Alice's responsibility, highlighting the idea that the reader contributes to literature's power as much as the author does.

Fay implores Alice to read good literature, noting that she defines literature "by what it does, not by what it is." To illustrate this point, Fay explains what she calls the **City of Invention**. In this glorious city, Fay writes, authors build Houses of the Imagination and readers visit to explore and learn from the houses.

Fay's magnificent City of Invention serves as an especially pointed argument for the way that literature leads readers toward a multitude of intriguing truths, all of which exist simultaneously like the various houses throughout the city. By using a geographical metaphor, Fay also hints at the importance of physical and historical location in the analysis to come.

Describing the **City of Invention** in great detail, Fay introduces Alice to its various neighborhoods and landmarks. She also digresses into a short discussion of a poem by Francis Thompson, betting Alice 500 pounds that she has not read the poem. Fay then goes on to celebrate the shared experience that readers find in visiting the City together, noting that this endless discussion and debate forms "the *real* history" of civilization.

Emphasizing the importance of the visitors to the City, Fay again insists on the reader as a key component of literature's power. She elevates the rich dialogues of readers over the idea of one literal history, introducing the reciprocal link between literature and historical context that she goes on to develop in subsequent chapters.

Fay points out the house that Jane Austen built in the **City of Invention** and suggests that Austen's works constitute a second life for the novelist, one that extends far past her actual lifetime. Fay also expresses her opinion that it was not necessarily Austen's lack of a husband and children that allowed her to write so successfully, noting that domestic duties can provide their own "surging energy" to a writer.

Again, Fay discusses literature as if it were its own form of history, providing a new way of being for Austen that both conflicted with and enlivened her life outside of writing. Fay notes that Austen's role as an author was not to shut out the world around her, but to use it to inform her fiction and imagine an improved world that might shape the years to come. Fay also introduces a complication to the image of the feminist writer, noting how the traditionally feminine burdens of husband and children could actually be assets to creativity under some circumstances.

Fay pauses to consider her own childhood with her sister, Alice's mother (Enid). She tells Alice that their parents separated when the sisters were young, and that Fay went away with their father while her sister stayed home with their mother. Fay suggests that part of Alice's lack of interest in reading stems from her mother, who is not interested in literature.

Here, Fay suggests that one task of the reader of literature is to pass on an appreciation for reading to others. Again, literature cannot function with an author alone; it requires a reader in order to gain its full power.

Fay continues to give examples of the kinds of houses and neighborhoods that Alice might find in the **City of Invention**. She notes that some districts are more respectable, some more dangerous, some more popular with tourists. Readers, in Fay's model of literature, can be demanding and unappreciative visitors, but authors nonetheless continue to build house and invite those visitors in. She continues to explore the neighborhoods of the city, telling Alice about the unique features of each, from the suburb of Sci-Fi to Romance Alley.

Fay's tour through the City of Invention is perhaps the book's most vivid example of the multiple realities that literature creates. Fay describes an incredible array of worlds, all of which are equally real. For Fay, truth is not absolute but rather varied and constantly changing, and the City provides a vision of how reading allows one a unique path through this complex idea of truth.

Returning to the subject of Jane Austen, Fay comments that Austen's works tend to reflect real-life gender dynamics rather than challenge them, and wonders if this particular conformity is one of the reasons that Austen's books continue to be popular in all corners of modern society. Fay concludes by addressing Alice's claim that she plans to write a **novel** soon. She tells Alice that she should not write a novel until she has gained more life experience and thoroughly explored the **City of Invention**.

By noting that Austen's books' tendency to uphold traditional gender values may be a key to their continued success, Fay wryly hints at the pervasive nature of gender roles in the present day. Her discouragement of Alice's ambitions also clarifies Fay's belief that only readers can truly be writers, again privileging the act of reading as crucial to any exploration of humanity.

LETTER 2

Fay writes Alice another letter from Cairns, this time in November. She begins by extolling the miracle of fiction writing, noting with excitement that she has just finished a novel of her own. She states that she longs to return home to England and may see Alice there soon. She also thanks Alice for her letter and commends her for having read the Francis Thompson poem mentioned in the previous chapter, saying that the 500 pounds should reach her soon.

Fay's excitement upon completing her novel exemplifies the way that fictional worlds can reflect and add value to the real world. Her desire to return to England also underscores the importance of place in the creation of literature; Australia was the appropriate place for Fay to write this latest novel, but now that the novel is complete, she no longer feels attached to its landscape.

Returning to the idea of the **novel** that Alice wishes to write, Fay discusses the idea of the Muse and how oppressive the idea of it can be to the writer. She also mentions a related term, The Angel of the House, coined by Virginia Woolf to describe the presence that lurks behind female writers and warns them to be sweet and charming instead of expressing their own ideas. Fay describes abstract concepts such as Truth and Beauty as being similarly antagonistic to authors, all competing for attention as the writer tries to work.

Describing the Angel of the House, Fay explicitly mentions for the first time how the pressures of traditional gender roles stand in the way of female writers. She also depicts the negative aspects of the various pressures on writers more generally, beginning to show Alice that part of the author's role is to work under the constraints of a variety of external expectations.

Fay goes on to warn Alice of all the forces in the real world that will appear to distract her from her work as a writer. She mentions the hardship of managing friends, colleagues, critics, and family, but then tells Alice that all of these external forces can actually result in creative energy for the writer. Fay tells Alice that Jane Austen's work in particular seems to come from "the battle the writer wages with the real world," and that the battle created Austen's novels even as it slowly killed the author herself. Fay also recommends that Alice read Austen's little known early novel, *Lady Susan*, which Fay believes was never published because it was not considered respectable and ladylike enough.

After warning Alice of the range of pressures that might affect her writing, Fay complicates her vision of the writer's audience by introducing the idea that pressure from readers is part of what brings fiction to life. Additionally, Fay ties the constraints of gender roles to Jane Austen specifically, hinting at Austen's struggle to reconcile her respectable exterior with her rebellious inner life.

In order to fully appreciate Jane Austen's work, Fay argues, Alice must know more about the era in which she lived. Fay states that the time period writers live in may be even more influential in their fiction than their own personalities and lives. She begins by exploring the concept of unquestioned beliefs, suggesting that one's beliefs come more from the standards of their social context than from the individual's own inner motivation. Although the truths expressed in Jane Austen's work may seem obvious to the modern reader, Fay writes, their values were much less obvious in Austen's time.

Here, Fay highlights her belief in the strength of cultural and historical context in shaping works of literature. She introduces Alice to the idea that books should not be evaluated only on their content, but also on how that content relates to the circumstances of the era in which the author wrote.

Fay sets out to give Alice a detailed overview of Georgian England, so that she can better understand Jane Austen's world. She focuses particularly on the harsh consequences of every action, and of how vulnerable women were to poverty and death. Fay describes what Alice's options as a young woman would have been, from working long days on a farm to marrying and surrendering her power and identity to her husband. Because women had so few options for ensuring basic survival, Fay argues, it is only natural that Austen's heroines would have been obsessed with marriage. She also notes that writing was one of the few ways that women could respectably earn money at the time.

Delving more deeply into Austen's historical context, Fay illuminates not only the circumstances that could have shaped Austen's novels, but also the very present danger of being a woman in Georgian England. By presenting basic facts about the realities Austen and her heroines faced, Fay offers explanations for behavior that may seem silly to a modern reader like Alice, underscoring the importance of both history and feminism in Fay's analysis of Austen's work.

Fay goes on to describe the continuing hardships that a woman would face after marriage, focusing in particular on the dangers of childbirth and the constant threat of venereal disease. The works of Jane Austen, however, hide these dark realities, which Fay takes as an example of the power of the **City of Invention**. Austen would not have considered her society particularly bad, Fay argues, and so it makes sense that she would have focused instead on writing about the interpersonal matters that interested her.

Again, Fay's vivid depictions of women's lives enhance her argument for a feminist interpretation of Austen's work. She also ties these historical facts to her understanding of the City of Invention, in which Austen was able to create a happier version of her own world and perhaps provide a model for improvement in the real world.

Given the dangers of marriage and childbearing, Fay contends that it was not irrational for Jane Austen herself to remain single and celibate, and asks Alice to remember this fact while reading Austen's novels. Fay also notes that the natural world and architecture of Austen's time would have been very beautiful, even as the people living in it were frequently malnourished and diseased. She interprets Austen's works as efforts to bring out the beauty of this harsh reality and encourages Alice to suspend her disbelief as she reads.

Having established the realities of Austen's world, Fay again invokes the idea of Alice's own responsibility. Unless Alice suspends her disbelief and reads Austen's works through a lens of compassion and understanding, the novels cannot come to life. Without an active reader, Fay argues, even great fiction is incomplete.

Fay acknowledges that it's difficult to track how the world has changed since Jane Austen's time, but theorizes that perhaps more people reading better novels could have caused the broad societal change that eventually led to the modern day. She concludes by telling Alice that she has heard from Alice's mother, Enid, who is concerned that Fay is "un unsettling influence on Alice." Fay also notes that Alice's father, Edward, thinks that Fay, as a feminist, is dangerous to society. Nonetheless, Fay states that her goal is only to be "responsible and informative and helpful" and asks Alice to reassure her parents.

Here, Fay explicitly states the mechanism by which novels can create change in the real world. She immediately reiterates that point by describing the effect of her own writing on Enid, offering Alice a form of proof of the power of literature to enact new realities. Fay also points to the continued misogyny of the modern day when she paraphrases Edward's anti-feminist opinions.

LETTER 3

Fay writes Alice another letter from Cairns, this one dated December. Fay sets out to inform Alice about Jane Austen's life, beginning with her childhood. Fay relates that Austen was the youngest of eight children of a clergyman in Hampshire, England. Noting that many books about Austen paint her family as idyllic, Fay believes instead that their life together was as complex and gritty as any modern family. Still, Fay describes the Austen family as well-read, intelligent, and affectionate with one another. The family lived in a small town called Steventon, which may seem isolated by modern standards but was relatively close to London. Fay speculates that the Austens may have traveled often to the city and other nearby towns.

Expressing her suspicion that the Austen family could not have been as idyllic as some biographies would suggest, Fay hints that history is not as far-off or simple as one might imagine. Rather, it has all the nuance and reality of the present, and Fay argues that modern observers have a duty to respect that complex truth when looking at historical figures.

Fay goes on to contend that Austen probably knew a fair amount about politics and international relations, but that the Church would have instructed her to worry more about the afterlife than the ills of her society. Fay points to Austen's interest in her own definitions of morality as evidence that she was "socially aware" by the definitions of her own time, if not by the definitions of the present day.

Again, Fay points out that Austen's work should be evaluated in the context of her own time's values. Additionally, by making morality and social awareness a key part of her analysis of Austen, Fay returns to the theme of the author's moral responsibility and suggests that this kind of leadership is an essential aspect of true authorship.

Fay also tells Alice the details of Georgian parenting practices, including sending children out of the home to be nursed or even raised through childhood. Fay notes that Jane Austen's sister Cassandra was two and a half years older and known to have a temper, and then she goes on to tease Alice about Alice's own childhood attempt to drown her new baby sister. Children, Fay concludes, are the same now as they were in Austen's time, but there may have been less of an effort to save them from each other back then.

Pointing out the possible similarities between Austen's childhood and Alice's, Fay again emphasizes that history is as much a living reality as the present. This connection between literature and real life is also an example of the book's constant blending of multiple realities, in which fact and fiction overlap and reflect each other.

When Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra were children, they were sent away to be educated by an older widow, in whose care they both became very sick. They returned home with their parents soon thereafter but were then sent away to another boarding school. Fay speculates that such early trauma may have influenced the Austen girls' development, but she believes that the Austen parents would not have viewed these experiences as traumatic.

Fay's description of the Austen sisters' early separation from their family subtly mirrors the hints that she provides about her own childhood with Enid. Fay suggests that a fractured family is a form of trauma and seems to demonstrate, through her letters to Alice, how literature might be a way of healing such real-life wounds.

Fay tells Alice that most of the brothers of the Austen family remained at home while Jane and Cassandra were away at school. The sisters were said to be "happy enough" at their school and returned home a year later. Fay admits to being "distressed for the child Jane," worrying that these childhood tribulations may have driven Jane to invent the worlds of her novels in order to escape the pain of her lived reality.

By showing how gender standards affected even the most basic facts of Jane Austen's childhood, Fay provides evidence for her claims about the way that female writers are shaped by social oppression of women.

According to Fay, Jane Austen would have also needed to learn how to take care of her home and manage her household's servants. She notes that women's work is commonly viewed as worthless, but warns Alice not to look down on domestic tasks, saying that they have real value and dignity. Fay also notes that Jane and Cassandra studied the classics and other academic subjects, and were likely well-behaved, as the clergyman's daughters.

Here, Fay points out how restrictive gender roles and systemic misogyny can devalue even important, meaningful forms of work. This observation about housework is implicitly connected to Alice's criticisms of Austen's work; because her novels seems concerned with stereotypically feminine things, Alice thinks they are worthless.

Reflecting on Austen's seeming indifference to the "disease, hunger, and distress" of the world around her, Fay argues that Austen was actually trying to rise above these ills in a quintessentially English way, rather than complaining about them. She imagines the Austen household as "busy, cheerful, and self-disciplined," but guesses that Jane nonetheless likely felt stifled by living with her parents and their expectations. Reflecting on the idea that Austen's work may have been a reaction to this repression, Fay notes that this interpretation may be too simplistic. She suggests instead that a gifted writer like Austen would have felt compelled to develop her skills no matter what. "The writer's life is work, and the work is the life," Fay tells Alice.

Drawing an explicit connection between the lives of writers and the works they produce, Fay advances her argument that it is impossible to separate works of fiction from the personal and historical contexts of their authors; the author's life is part of the essential scaffolding of fiction. However, the author also holds a unique internal motivation to write, which cannot be ascribed entirely to outside circumstance. According to Fay, the personal and the historical must always join to create real literature.


Fay goes on to describe Austen's first book, a satirical novel written at age fourteen. Fay admires Austen's grasp of narrative and imagines how exhilarated she must have been to complete the novel, but also guesses that Austen's family may not have been particularly admiring of it. Fay concludes her letter by telling Alice that she plans to return home to England soon, but that Alice should not be afraid of having to meet her. Fay encloses a population breakdown of Georgian England for Alice's reference.

Imagining how the Austen family might have reacted to Jane's early work, Fay implies that their feedback must have shaped Jane's less satirical choices in her later works. Again, the audience is a key collaborator in the creation of literary work.

LETTER 4

Fay's next letter is sent in January, again from Cairns. She begins by correcting a fact she told Alice in the previous letter, having found a new historical source with different information. She muses that "fiction is much safer than non-fiction," because a fiction writer can be boring but never actually wrong.

Fay again expresses her belief in the imaginative power of fiction, while hinting at the dangers of non-fiction. Because Fay's letters are non-fiction within the world of the novel yet fiction in the real world, they carry aspects of both safety and danger, muddying the boundaries between realities and providing the reader with an example of the kind of multiplicity that Fay argues for throughout the book.

Continuing to refer to an 1813 encyclopedia, Fay relates its information about childbirth in Georgian England, focusing in particular on its dangers and the misogyny that surrounded it. She tells Alice to be "thankful that you live now," noting that the Church would prioritize saving the baby over the mother during a difficult birth. Fay also notes that neither Jane nor Cassandra Austen ever had children, suggesting that perhaps Jane avoided marriage because she was imaginative enough to think ahead to the horror of childbirth.

Fay continues to outline the dangers of life as a woman in Georgian England, continuing the discussion she began in the last chapter. This time, she links the power of imagination to the ability survive these dangers, illustrating a new aspect of the reciprocal connection between fiction and reality.

Fay returns to her discussion of Jane Austen's youth and notes that she seemed to be happy as a young adolescent. She describes Austen's work on a satirical history of England and points out how even as a teenager, Austen "raises invention above description." Around the same time, Austen also wrote an unfinished novel in letters and jokingly demanded that her brother pay her for it, which Fay takes as evidence of young Austen's awareness that writing was genuinely valuable. However, she acknowledges that the demand may have been only a joke after all, and that it is impossible to know whether interpretations of Austen's actions have any real merit.

By explicitly tying Austen's satirical attempt at historical analysis to the value of imagination, Fay advances her argument that it is the author's responsibility to invent the world anew rather than simply describe it as it is. Fay also points out the difficulty of separating fact from fiction in historical analysis, suggesting that an element of satire could be present in nearly any historical document. In detailing her own struggles to understand the past, Fay provides an especially immediate example of the constant interaction of imagined and literal realities.

Fay goes on to note that not everyone who knew Jane Austen liked her, pointing to a letter from a cousin of Austen's that describes her as "whimsical and affected" while admiring Cassandra. However, Fay also points out the difficulty of drawing conclusions about Austen from sources like these, and calls speculating about the past "in a way parasitical." Nonetheless, she goes on to speculate a bit more, wondering whether the men that Austen met may have found her too independent, as her cousin did.

Even though Fay is completely aware of the futility and even immorality of trying to draw definite conclusions about the realities of history, she nonetheless continues to engage in this practice. In doing so, she enacts the reader's role in creating meaning, bringing her own perspective into her experience of reading documents from Austen's past.

Fay informs Alice that she has to stop writing and pack for her trip back to England. She states that she will return to the rest of Jane Austen's life in detail in later letters, but summarizes it quickly for Alice in the meantime. She notes that the Austen family moved several times after Jane's father retired and then died, and that Jane herself died in 1817 of Addison's disease. Her books, Fay points out, live on in the **City of Invention**.

After focusing in such detail on Austen's childhood and early adulthood, Fay skips over the details of her later life, presenting Alice with only basic facts. The lack of emotion in this section provides a form of evidence for the idea of history as a kind of story, which requires a reader's attention to come to life. Without Fay's active engagement, Austen's life becomes a flat series of facts rather than a narrative, demonstrating the need for the reader in the creative process.

LETTER 5

Fay's next letter to Alice comes from Canberra in January. Fay admits that the additional stop in Australia makes her trip back to England much longer, but tells Alice that she needs the time before transitioning to being at home. Fay relates this process to the delays that she creates for herself before starting a new writing project, saying that an "uneasy mixture of terror, idleness and a paralysing reverence for the Muse" always keeps her from beginning right away.

Detailing the anxiety of her own writing process, Fay provides an especially potent example of the pressures and responsibility that, Fay argues, all writers of fiction face.

Fay goes on to describe the differences between North Queensland and Canberra, remarking in particular that Canberra has a robust reading community whom she met at a book presentation the previous evening. She tells Alice that she used to hate public speaking, but that now she understands the value of using her voice. Fay encourages Alice to speak up as much as possible, even though so many women feel they have to be quiet "when they would do better to be noisy."

Describing the differences between different regions of Australia, Fay demonstrates how cultural context can interact with the work of the author, in the present day just as it did in Jane Austen's time. With her fear of public speaking, Fay also gives Alice an example of one of the many ways that gender stereotypes still affect women in the present day.


Fay relates how valuable it is for audiences to connect with an author in order to discover new viewpoints and to gain the comforting knowledge that "we are not alone in the oddity of our beliefs." She notes that this enthusiasm from readers also puts a burden on writers that Jane Austen and her contemporaries never experienced. While writers like Austen focused on writing rather than promotion and book sales, writers like Fay are duty-bound to make public appearances and answer directly to readers. Accordingly, Fay tells Alice that if her goal is to be a writer, she should give up, but that if her goal is to *write*, nothing will stand in her way.

Here, Fay provides a deeper look at the way that authorial responsibility affects present-day fiction writers. While the audience still plays a crucial role in creating meaning from fiction, the author's work remains grueling and sometimes thankless. Still, Fay indicates that a true drive to create will overcome all of these challenges.

Thinking of the differences between her writing life and Jane Austen's, Fay wonders what made Austen believe that people beyond her family would want to read her novels. She notes that Austen would have read aloud to her family and friends, and that the presence of a literal audience would have helped her learn the dramatic techniques that characterize her novels. Fay instructs Alice to pay similar attention to audience in her own writing, and to remember that the **City of Invention** should both change and comfort its visitors.

Again, Fay illustrates how the reader—or in Austen's case, listener—of a work of literature affects the shape of the work as much as the author does.

Fay then details the modern tendency of academics and journalists to try to pick apart the mysteries of novels and their writers. She bemoans the misguided belief that understanding a writer can lead to understanding her work, relating stories of her own readers trying to get her to reveal the secrets of her work. Fay feels that such attempts to pull apart the meaning of literature lead to misguided conclusions. She points to an anecdote of Jane Austen writing in a room where she was often interrupted, which is often interpreted by other critics to have been an impediment to her writing. In contrast, Fay believes that such interruptions would have kept Austen connected to the life of her household and the emotions that powered her work. For Fay, writing is an activity rather than a profession, one that is closely connected to life rather than separate from it.

By framing the interruptions from Austen's household as an asset to her writing rather than a burden, Fay again shows how literature exists in conversation with the outside world rather than in isolation from it. For Fay, the job of literature is to reflect reality while also expanding it, an interpretation that gives crucial roles to both readers and to social context more broadly. Additionally, imagining a traditionally feminine setting such as the household as a literary asset furthers Fay's feminist interpretation of Austen's life and work.

Fay turns to the subject of Alice's **novel**, about which Alice has asked for advice. Fay advises her to offer her reader "moral guidance," meaning a useful example that readers can use to better understand themselves. She says that readers "want and need to be told how to live," noting that in the **City of Invention**, events are never due to chance but instead depend on the good and evil actions of the characters who live there. Fay admiringly describes the moral directives of the Russian novelist Nicolai Chernyshevsky and tells Alice that Jane Austen is, in her own quieter way, just as instructive to her readers.

Here more explicitly than anywhere else in the book, Fay calls on authors to act as moral instructors who have a responsibility to provide guidance to their readers. With this call, she further develops the theme of the respective roles of reader and writer and makes it clear that understanding these roles is crucial to writing good fiction.

LETTER 6

Fay writes another letter from Canberra in January, this time to her sister Enid instead of Alice. She notes that she will be leaving for London the next day and assures Enid that she is not encouraging Alice to write a **novel** but only helping her understand Jane Austen.

By including one letter to her sister Enid, with whom she has a fraught relationship, Fay gives readers a living example of the way that a writer's personal context can interact with and affect her work.

Fay asks Enid if she remembers when their mother found a copy of a novel Fay wrote and burned it because it seemed "indecent and likely to corrupt." She then tells her sister that she hopes they can reconcile, despite Enid's fears that Alice will begin writing fiction, in particular about Enid and her husband, Edward.

By expressing her hope that her correspondence with Alice may lead to a reconciliation with Enid, Fay reinforces the idea that the written word can have profoundly positive effects on real-life. At the same time, Enid's fear of Alice's fiction shows how crucial a receptive reader is to this process of creation.

Fay insists that Enid is not the model for a character in one of her own novels, even though the character's habit of making **bread rolls** for her husband mirrors what Enid does for Edward. Fay draws a distinction between the real-life incident and the fictional character, telling Enid that she cannot claim the character even if the incident is hers.

Here, the overlap of fiction and reality that develops over the course of the book is depicted with particular clarity. Even in trying to separate her fiction from Enid's reality, Fay admits to commonalities between the two, making it difficult to clearly define where reality ends and fiction begins. Though Enid finds it difficult to accept this, Fay implies again that creating this kind of blurred truth is a core function of fiction.

Using an example from Jane Austen's *Emma*, Fay argues that fictional characters drawn directly from real life tend to be less interesting and portrayed less kindly than "properly invented characters." Fay claims that she would never be comfortable borrowing a character from real life, although she worries about the fact that Enid nonetheless sees herself in Fay's work.

Describing her discomfort with characters that seem to be drawn directly from life, Fay indicates that in order to interact productively with the real world, fiction cannot simply recreate reality. Rather, it must incorporate some aspects of reality while altering and inventing others. Only in this way, Fay implies, can literature produce change in its readers and in the world more generally.

Fay concludes by asking Enid to send love to Edward, whom Fay hopes will forgive her for using the couple's **bread rolls** in her fiction. She also notes that when she sent Alice 500 pounds, she only wanted to pay her gambling debts, not upset the couple's marriage.

At the letter's conclusion, Fay again acknowledges the relationship between fiction and reality, while still maintaining that it is necessary and appropriate. The specter of Edward's disapproval also hangs over Fay and Enid's relationship, a reminder of the patriarchal pressures that continue to judge women's writing.

LETTER 7

Fay writes to Alice from Singapore in February, having stopped there for a long layover in the middle of her trip from Australia to England. She notes that she has been in touch with Enid and Edward and may reconcile with them, which causes her to wonder briefly "why any of us read novels, life being so novelettish." Fay also describes her unease in Singapore, where "the concept of the group soul" feels so prominent and threatening to her individualistic Western sensibilities.

Fay's apparent excitement at the idea of reconciling with Alice's parents brings immediacy to her argument that literature can shape reality. Here again, writing has introduced a new possible reality, in this case one in which Fay and Enid are on good terms again. Though Fay's letters to Alice are ostensibly nonfiction, they nonetheless seem to hold the same capacity for shaping real-life events that Fay ascribes to novels. Fay's remarks about the very different feeling of being in a new place—in this case, Singapore—also add depth to the theme of external context's influence on an individual's writing.

Fay then turns to telling Alice what books she should read in order to understand Jane Austen better, listing several of the authors that Austen herself read and musing on the difficulty of knowing how Austen truly felt about them. She digresses into wondering whether Alice is politically minded, quickly concluding that she is probably too privileged to think about the ills of her society. She also imagines that Alice has not read widely enough to be truly empathetic.

Again, Fay explicitly argues for reading fiction as a prerequisite for empathetic thought. She also seems to draw a parallel between Alice and Jane Austen herself, ascribing Alice's lack of political awareness to her privileged upbringing—which is similar to the way in which Fay explains Austen's relative unconcern with the ills of her own society.

Describing the societal conditions under which Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice*, Fay paints a picture of the desperate poverty and famine that struck England. She contrasts this with the light-hearted images of the Bennet sisters' romances and predicts that Alice will call *Pride and Prejudice* nonsense because of this disparity between reality and fiction. However, Fay then argues that the value of Austen's work lies in the need for the ruling classes to read fiction and so gain the empathy to understand the rest of society.

Fay expands on her idea that fiction can still play a role in shaping society even when its content is not outwardly political. Rather than discounting Pride and Prejudice for its emphasis on emotions and relationships, Fay argues that it is these very qualities that make it useful within oppressive societal contexts. Again, fiction's power lies in its ability to imagine a different reality, rather than its ability to recreate the existing one.

Fay pauses to reflect further on her stay in Singapore, in particular the idea that she deserves whatever happens to her as a result of her choice to travel alone as woman. She acknowledges the danger she may face but tells Alice that she feels responsible for accepting it, even though it may not be fair that traveling is harder for her than for a man.

Fay expresses a somewhat harsh perspective on the responsibilities of women to protect themselves within a dangerous society. She seems here to enact some of the same tension between being a "good woman" and a "bad woman" that she imagines Jane Austen struggled with, in that she blames herself for dangers that are not her fault. This moment hints at the way writing helps Fay resolve this tension around her role as a woman, much as it may have helped Austen.

Fay returns to discussing Jane Austen's work, in particular *Emma*, which Alice claims is too boring to continue reading. Fay summarizes the plot, in particular admiring the way the opening sentences draw the reader immediately into the **City of Invention**. She likens *Emma* to an inviting, welcoming house full of touches that make the reader feel at home. However, Fay also acknowledges that Austen's personal challenges and frustrations may have affected her writing of the book, making parts of the middle harder for the reader—in this case, Alice—to connect with.

Speculating about how Austen's personal life may have impacted her creative work, Fay reiterates that fiction is always constrained by the outside world. However, she also celebrates the undiminished power of the City of Invention, in which Austen was able to turn difficult personal circumstances into a novel that still rewards—and challenges—readers.

Concluding her analysis of *Emma*, Fay acknowledges how the novel reinforces some objectionable social norms. She still finds joy, however, in watching Jane Austen judge her characters over and over again, rewarding and punishing them accordingly. She concludes by suddenly reversing her position on Alice's desire to write a **novel**, telling her at last: "By all means, try."

Here, Fay expresses delight in fiction's endless moral judgments and logical developments, which she values even when their content goes against her ideas of how society should be. For Fay, the joy of acting as an instructive author or engaged reader seems to outweigh even the need for fiction to push society forward. This somewhat irrational turn in Fay's thinking is reflected in her sudden encouragement to Alice, whom she has previously told not to work on her novel.

LETTER 8

Fay writes to Alice from London in February, noting how shocking it is for her to be back in a "real city" after so long in the idyllic landscape of Australia. She suggests that being in Australia hints at the existence of a "slow, blank, powerful unconscious within" the country, filling the surface world with a sense of intrigue.

Fay's descriptions of the differences between Australia and England again reiterate how much impact external settings can have on a writer's inner life and, consequently, her creative work.

Fay returns to her discussion of Jane Austen by recounting the infamous story of a London publisher, Cadell, who turned down Austen's father's request to read *Pride and Prejudice*. Fay says that she doesn't blame Cadell for turning down a book that must have sounded boring, and notes that reading novels of any kind was, at the time, "a highly suspect activity." Educated women often wrote them, but were only expected to encourage virtuous, moral behavior in their readers.

Relating how reading fiction was viewed in Austen's time, Fay provides a new illustration of the idea that there is something inherently threatening or dangerous in fiction, as it can offer readers new ideas of reality instead of simply reproducing existing social structures. In particular, the ingrained gender roles of women in Georgian England meant that even when they did write novels, there were clear limits on what those stories could represent. Fay seems here to categorize these genteel, inoffensive works as just books, rather than real literature as she defines it.

On the subject of Alice's **novel**, Fay warns Alice that she might find it hard to finish it, because on a subconscious level she might not want it published after all. Fay predicts that Alice might come up with extravagant ways to delay finishing, due to the terrifying responsibility of building a house in the **City of Invention**. The presence of the house, Fay says, will change Alice's life in unpredictable ways, no matter how the novel is received. She also notes that success, for a woman, means giving up the need to rely on men, a change that may be difficult.

By exploring the hesitation that Alice may feel in completing her novel, Fay further develops the themes of both the responsibility of the author and the interaction between authorship and female identity. Ceasing to depend on men, Fay argues, is a form of hardship for women as well as a form of freedom, and the risk involved may keep some women from pursuing their creative ambitions.

Fay goes on to quote a 1515 letter by Thomas More, author of *Utopia*, about his hesitation to publish his book. More worries that he will never be able to satisfy his picky, irrational readers, and that even those who do enjoy the book may never show their gratitude. Fay concurs with More, adding that writing novels also makes friends and family suspicious of the author, as they constantly worry that their lives will be turned in to fiction. Fay concludes by bemoaning Enid's continued belief that the **bread rolls** in one of Fay's novels indicate that the story is based on Enid and Edward.

Here, Fay again emphasizes the importance of reading as an act of collaboration with the author, rather than an act of criticism or consumption. Fay also betrays her ongoing preoccupation with the persistent effect of her novels on her real-life relationship, demonstrating how fiction's influence on the shape of personal and societal histories can be negative as well as positive.

LETTER 9

The next letter that Fay writes to Alice comes from Somerset in March. Fay begins by wondering how she can possibly give Alice life advice, and after listing a few rules, she tells Alice that it is better for Alice to fill in the rest of the rules herself and revise them often. Fay states that "the real Secret of Life lies in Constant Revision."

By advocating for constant revision of life's rules, Fay denies the existence of any one absolute truth, providing further support for her point that the multiple truths of fiction are as valid as reality. She also underscores the importance of the reader's role again by calling on Alice to fill in the blanks in Fay's own writing.

Fay goes on to offer Alice advice about writing instead. In particular, she tells Alice not to share her work with others before it is finished and to remember that, when others do criticize her, it is actually her seeming weaknesses as writer that may become unique strengths. Then, she tells Alice that the plot of Alice's **novel** sounds "perfectly dreadful," but reminds her that the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* sounds dreadful as well. She advises Alice against writing about her own love life or those of her friends, saying that doing so is "the main fault of young writers." Nonetheless, she encourages Alice to continue her work writing and in school, admitting that she, Fay, is wrong half the time anyway.

Fay seems here to deny the importance of fiction's link to reality by telling Alice to avoid writing about her own life. However, her immediate denial of her own expertise foreshadows the eventual success of Alice's novel, which proves that readers find her life very interesting after all and reiterates the idea that fiction draws on reality for its success.

Fay summarizes Alice's **novel**, which is about a young woman who falls in love with her English professor. Fay notes that the book must be based on Alice's own life and suggests that maybe Alice has only fallen in love as a way to distract herself from writing. She cautions Alice against rewriting constantly to update the novel as her life changes, remarking that "novels are not meant to be diaries."

Fay's analysis of Alice's novel demonstrates her belief that even though life is a crucial ingredient of fiction, a novel must do more than simply reflect the real world; it must create its own reality, which can then act as a complement to the real world.

Returning to the subject of Jane Austen, Fay expresses her wish to discuss *Northanger Abbey*. However, she then discovers that her own copy is missing and tells Alice about getting upset and having to go buy a new one. While in the car on the way home from the bookstore, Fay listens to a radio adaptation of *Emma* and ponders Emma's unkindness to the character Miss Bates. She notes how persistent the pain of such embarrassments can be in real life, with one's mind often lingering for decades on what she calls "small, scraping memories." Thinking of all the other listeners hearing that same version of *Emma* on the radio at the same time, Fay tells Alice that this kind of "shared fantasy" in the **City of Invention** is one of the most extraordinary forms of human connection.

Fay's experience of listening to the adaptation of Emma is one of the novel's most vivid depictions of the connections that novels can create between people in the real world. Imagining all the different people across England listening at the same time, Fay creates a vibrant image of how the City of Invention manifests in readers' lived experiences. This small-scale example also hints at Fay's idea that fiction can quite literally shape the course of real-world history.

Fay examines her new copy of *Northanger Abbey* and notices that the editor's note likens Jane Austen to Robert Browning. She finds the comparison odd and warns Alice to be careful deciding what to believe when reading nonfiction and to rely on her own feelings about literature. Fay's own letters, she points out, are also nonfiction, and she expresses the hope that Alice will only use what she needs from the letters, as if Fay's words were "a sack of rather dusty brown rice." She concludes by saying that *Northanger Abbey* will have to wait until the next letter.

This moment is one of the few times that Fay addresses the differences between fiction and nonfiction. It seems in previous passages that Fay includes nonfiction works among the houses of the City of Invention, but here she seems to undercut their importance, emphasizing that readers bear an especially large share of the responsibility for creating meaning from nonfiction. By calling her letters nonfiction and implying that that makes them suspect, Fay calls her own credibility into question and further blurs the lines between the novel's multiple, overlapping fictions.

LETTER 10

Fay writes to Alice from London in April. She begins with a story, which she warns Alice will seem unbelievable, about getting a ride home from an art dealer and touching a paper package in the car. The package feels hot to the touch, and when Fay points this out to the art dealer, he says that it's because the painting inside is by a famous artist. Fay concludes that even though she does not admire the painter, the combined intensity of other people's admiration must alter the physical properties of the painting.

With this anecdote, Fay claims that the presence of an engaged, appreciative audience actually has the power to change the material form of an object. This claim is her strongest yet about the importance of a reader's perspective in making meaning out of fiction.

Fay goes on to claim that though it seems incredible, publishing professionals often report being able to tell just from touching a manuscript whether or not it will be good. Fay speculates that something like this may have happened to the publisher who bought Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* but did not immediately publish it. She wonders if he enjoyed the book while sensing something perhaps too powerful within it, "something capable of taking the world by its heels, and shaking it." Fay draws a parallel to her own work, which readers often accuse of being "horrible about men," when all Fay means to do is report the actions of men as she witnesses.

Fay acknowledges that Alice might not believe her claims about the near-magical power of enthusiastic readers, but she remains devoted to the idea nonetheless. Additionally, she gives an example of how the capacity to change the world is not always an asset for a novel, because that very power may frighten readers who do not welcome the change. With the mention of her own novel, Fay implies that those frightened readers may often have been men, and that their reluctance has historically stood in the way of women's writing.

From there, Fay argues for the importance of *Northanger Abbey*. She sees in it a satirical rejection of the expectations placed on women of Jane Austen's time, noting especially how the protagonist, Catherine, unabashedly spends lots of time reading novels with her friend. Fay includes a quote from the book about women's tendency to be ashamed of reading novels, in which Austen asks: "If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?" Fay takes the passage as evidence of Austen's regard for the magic of the **City of Invention**.

The discussion of the importance of novels within the plot of Northanger Abbey adds a new dimension to the idea of a multilayered reality, in which different fictions coexist and inform each other. Quoting Austen, Fay also reveals the underlying feminism of this idea, showing how connection through fiction can empower women and strengthen their bonds with each other and their creative work. Notably, Fay, Alice, Austen, and perhaps even Weldon herself all inform each other through their literary pursuits, giving the reader a detailed example of this very phenomenon.

Noting that Alice must be busy continuing her own **novel**, Fay summarizes the plot of *Northanger Abbey* for her, detailing Catherine's success in marrying her suitor even though his father disapproves. She emphasizes how Jane Austen addresses the reader directly throughout, and recommends that Alice keep her audience in mind as well when she writes. Fay concludes that this generosity toward readers is what turns the craft of writing into an art.

Fay uses the example of Northanger Abbey's success as yet another piece of evidence to convince Alice of the author's responsibility to consider the needs of their real, living readers.

LETTER 11

Again writing from London, this time in May, Fay tells Alice about her travels to Denmark for a publishing tour. Her description takes the form of the beginning of a short story that she composed on the trip. The story is presented as a guide for authors to the etiquette of publishing tours, and she promises to give Alice 50 pounds if she can guess why Fay did not finish the story.

By presenting information about her trip as a guide for female authors, Fay points again to the way that writing can serve as a means of bonding and communication for women. Additionally, she highlights how global the reach of contemporary authors is, hinting again at writers' power to shape large-scale historical trends.

The protagonist of Fay's story is a woman named Grace D'Albier, who has written a popular first novel about incest. Grace is frustrated by constantly having to explain that her novel is not autobiographical but rather completely fictional. Grace's parents understand that the story isn't true, "but their friends can't," which strains the relationship between Grace and her parents. Even Grace's own children view her skeptically because of the book.

Grace's story serves as an exaggerated version of Fay's own experience with Enid and the bread rolls. Where Fay's trouble with Enid is more annoying than destructive, Grace's novel intrudes on her life to an almost comedic extent, providing a dramatization of both the blurry lines between fact and fiction and the outsize power of novels to change things in the real-world.

Grace also wonders how she ended up becoming a performer when she only wanted to be a writer. Although she recognizes that she is lucky to travel the world in comfort, she is uncomfortable addressing large crowds and being constantly surrounded by people. Grace describes the oppressive need to be polite in all circumstances, and finally admits that her own husband left her when her book was published.

Grace's story is also an extreme illustration of the burdens that being an author places on writers, which Fay has previously discussed in less immediate terms. For Grace, these burdens seem to be exacerbated by the expectations placed on her as a woman, which leave her uncomfortable addressing crowds and unable to meet even her own husband's harsh expectations.

Fay tells Alice that she stopped the story at that point and again challenges her to figure out why. She refers to a comment in a letter from Alice about feeling smothered by literature classes and tells Alice how apt her description is. Fay acknowledges the frequent inanity of literary criticism, noting that finding fault with literature is often pointless because "a writer writes opaquely to keep some readers out, let others in." Any given book is not, Fay argues, designed for every reader.

Here, Fay acknowledges the author's prerogative to tailor her writing to some readers more than others. In doing so, she adds nuance to her ideas about the reader's role as well, suggesting that it is in part the reader's job to understand and accept when a book is not suited for them.

Fay concludes by telling Alice to continue with her classes anyway, noting that her studies may become more interesting even if they bore her today. She also recommends that Alice continue with her own **novel**, "to counteract the danger of too much analysis." Finally, Fay tells Alice that many people say Jane Austen made only 700 pounds during her lifetime from writing, though Fay's own calculations indicate that the correct number might actually be 860.

By urging Alice to continue her own novel as a way to make her studies more interesting, Fay again casts reading and writing as reciprocal processes that work together to make a meaningful whole. She does not analyze the meaning behind, Jane Austen's relatively low income, but with it she seems to suggest that Alice should focus on the creative and intellectual rewards of writing rather than expecting to make money from it.

LETTER 12

Fay's next letter is also from London in May. Fay immediately begins with a description of Miss Crawford, a character in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. The character "behaves very badly" and makes the righteous protagonist, Fanny, very angry. Fay suggests that the opposing personalities of Miss Crawford and Fanny might illuminate "the split between good and bad" that Austen was never quite able to reconcile within herself.

In her discussion of Mansfield Park, Fay provides an example of how the many realities of fiction offer a particularly useful opportunity for women living in oppressive societies. For Austen, the creation of fiction provided a way to resolve the impossible contradictions of being an intelligent, imaginative woman; writing gave her the chance to experience life as a "good woman" and a "bad woman" at the same time, which she could never have done in her lived reality alone.

Fay goes on to note that *Mansfield Park* was the first novel that Jane Austen wrote after the death of her father, and that perhaps she was trying especially hard to be good without his guiding moral presence. In the book, the sweet Fanny wins the loving husband who will always protect her, showing what Fay calls the "wishful thinking" that behaving well leads to happiness.

The example of the virtuous Fanny demonstrates how fiction like Austen's can reinforce oppressive social norms as much as it can challenge them. This adds nuance to Fay's claims about the relationship between literature and society and demonstrates that that relationship is neither inherently good nor bad.

Reflecting on the moral instruction that Jane Austen seems to have attempted in *Mansfield Park*, Fay reflects that maybe writers of fiction should consider their work a "sacred charge" and strive to teach their readers. She notes that in some countries, fiction is commonly viewed as an instrument of morality, and she sympathizes with that idea.

In this conclusion, Fay reiterates her view of authors' immense responsibility, elevating it to something "sacred" and thus emphasizing the author's importance to a degree she has not previously.

LETTER 13

Writing again from London, this time in June, Fay tells Alice that she views literary critics as bus drivers and tour guides within the **City of Invention**. They have their role but should not dictate everything within the City. Fay recommends that Alice pay attention to the responses of her readers without being controlled by them.

In this chapter, Fay takes a more measured view of the role of readers, arguing that authors should not be intimidated by the power that readers hold as co-creators of fiction. Though readers are essential, thinking of them too much can inhibit an author's ability to create.

Fay tells Alice that Jane Austen was wisely considerate of the opinions of her readers, listening to them without letting them decide what she should write. She shares with Alice some statements that Austen collected from her friends and family in 1814, noting what they did and did not like about *Mansfield Park*. Because the responses are all so different, Fay concludes that they are ultimately unhelpful. She notes that Alice's boyfriend has called Alice's novel juvenile, but that she should not worry about this criticism and avoid "waiting for approval" from others.

The conflicting statements of Austen's friends and family provide additional evidence for Fay's claim that authors should not let readers' opinions shape their work too strongly. Although it conflicts somewhat with Fay's earlier statements about the immense power of readers, it also seems to come from Fay's feminist perspective, as the core of her recommendation is that Alice should speak up when she feels she is ready, without waiting for permission from the men in her life.

Fay goes on to acknowledge the pressure that writers, especially women, feel to get things "right," but she points out that novelists cannot actually be wrong in depicting an imagined world. She encourages Alice to listen carefully to her readers and understand their responses to her writing, but to follow her own instincts as she builds her house in the **City of Invention**.

Again, Fay makes it clear that the purpose of fiction is to create a complex and multilayered set of realities, rather than worrying about what is or is not correct.

To emphasize her point, Fay quotes at length from a letter written by the novelist Walter Scott in 1816. Scott's letter notes how fiction usually provides an escape from reality, which Fay points out is a contrast with the idea of fiction as moral instruction. Then, Scott notes the difficulty of representing true reality in fiction and compliments Jane Austen's *Emma* as an admirable example of a new style of fiction, in which realistic stories give readers examples of how to live.

Through her analysis of Scott's letter, Fay provides evidence of the revolutionary place that Jane Austen's fiction occupied in her own time and connects this historical document to her own broader notion that novels like Austen's have the power to influence reality by connecting the real world with an imagined, improved world.

Scott's letter also mentions the benefits of even painful experiences like unrequited love, which can shape individuals in unexpectedly positive ways. Using this idea, Fay urges Alice to look for the upsides of her tumultuous relationship with her professor, and to not let the pain of it interfere with her work. However, she also suggests, seemingly sarcastically, that Alice could try behaving like Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, in the hope that being virtuous will help her win over the professor. In postscript, she adds that Alice does not win 50 pounds, because Alice guessed that Fay stopped her story about Grace D'Albier simply because it was boring. In reality, Fay says, she stopped the story because it had no real point.

Fay's suggestion that there may be benefits in Alice's painful relationship foreshadows the success of Alice's novel based on that relationship. Again, fiction offers the hope of transforming the world through the vehicle of the author's imagination. Explaining her reason for ending the Grace D'Albier story, Fay implies that having no point makes a story meaningless, and yet Grace's story nevertheless serves a purpose by reflecting and amplifying the themes that Fay discusses throughout. This transformation from pointless into meaningful, which seems to occur without even Fay's knowledge, again reinforces the essential value of adding stories to the City of Invention.


LETTER 14

Fay writes Alice another letter from London in June. She begins immediately with a description of Jane Austen's death from Addison's disease, saying that she wants "get it over" because it is so upsetting. Addison's disease, an adrenal deficiency, had not yet been identified in Austen's time and had no cure, which would have made the disease seem completely mysterious to Austen and her family. Fay writes that Austen would have slowly wasted away, eventually going into shock and cardiac arrest. Though she says that "the dying should be accorded some privacy," Fay nevertheless imagines the painful details of Austen's death.

In deciding whether or not to go into the details of Austen's death, Fay appears to be conflicted about how much of this historical detail is relevant or appropriate to discuss. Fay seems certain that the manner of Fay's death is significant but is not sure how to make meaning out of it. Her confusion here hints at the limits of trying to trace the connections between history and literature; they are certainly connected, but the mechanisms by which they influence each other remain mysterious.

Fay goes on to speculate that perhaps Jane Austen preferred her fictional worlds to her real life, and that she might have welcomed an earlier death in order to live fully in the **City of Invention**. She tells Alice that while thinking of Austen's death is unpleasant, death should be viewed as only a part of life, in proportion with everything else. Accordingly, she urges Alice to make a lasting impression while she is alive, and to send her **novel** out for publication even though she fears rejection.

By wondering whether Austen might have preferred it to real life, Fay underscores the unique beauty of the City of Invention and again reiterates her belief in its value. Her final analysis of Austen's death also emphasizes the need for a balanced interpretation of history, in which the events of history inform one's understanding of literature but do not wholly define it.

Fay concludes by asking how Alice's exams went. Fay also says that she will soon be having tea with Enid and Edward. She worries that the tea will be unpleasant, but says, "you never know." However, she adds a postscript saying that tea has been cancelled and she is sorry to hear about Alice's exams. She wonders if the exams are her own fault and offers to pay Alice's way at an American university.

This moment of uncertainty for both Fay and Alice is an especially potent example of the many simultaneous realities that can exist in fiction. Fay's relationship with Enid may be strong or weak; Alice's academic future may be secure or not. Here, the lives of both characters illustrate the themes for which Fay has argued throughout the novel.

LETTER 15

Fay's next letter comes from London in July. She congratulates Alice on her "wonderful, astonishing and gratifying news" and gives her advice about how to negotiate the terms of her **novel** with her new publisher. She expresses how excited to she is to hear about Alice's book deal and wonders what Enid and Edward have to say about the news.

The happy news of Alice's publication deal and its immediate effects on Alice's life reinforce Fay's argument that fiction gives women a means to define their own realities. However, Fay also acknowledges that Alice's parents, who represent a form of societal oppression in this case, still remain significant, showing how context constantly affects any writer, regardless of her success.

Fay asks Alice whether she will settle down to "be a writer" or go to UCLA as she had planned. Although paying for UCLA will be expensive, Fay nonetheless urges Alice to go so that she can continue analyzing literature while writing her own. She also tells Alice that she is wise to have abandoned both her professor and her boyfriend and to have befriended the professor's wife instead. Finally, Fay notes that Alice never did read *Persuasion*, but quotes the first paragraph and tells Alice: "The rest is up to you."

Fay returns here to the theme of the roles of the reader and writer, recommending that Alice continue both roles in order to better understand the collaborative relationship between them. She illustrates this connection by placing full responsibility on Alice for the first time, stepping back from her role as instructor now that Alice has the capacity to act as both reader and writer in her own life.

LETTER 16

Fay's final letter comes from London in August. She tells Alice that she is planning to start a new novel herself. She reveals that writing to Alice has been itself a diversion from writing a futuristic novel called *Amygdala*, referring to "the part of the brain where rage is centered."

Admitting to Alice that her letters have themselves been a step in her own process toward writing a new novel, Fay illustrates again how crucial literary connection to other women can be in fostering female authors' creativity.

Fay tells Alice that she plans to send her a reading list, even though Alice's **novel** *The Wife's Revenge* has proved to be a bestseller. Fay says that she is glad to have been wrong about Alice's writing, but that she still hopes Alice will read more broadly as she continues to write.

Even now that Alice has proven her writing ability, Fay continues to insist that reading must be a part of her role as an author. Acknowledging how wrong her predictions about Alice's novel were, Fay also provides a final, especially powerful piece of evidence for her claim that no one—no matter how well-read—has access to absolute truth.

Reflecting on all that is left for both her and Alice to read and write, Fay wonders if "the exhilaration of all this" might even make them immortal. She celebrates the longevity of works like Jane Austen's *Emma* and states her belief that the **City of Invention** will exist even if the rest of the world is destroyed.

Fay's delight at the infinite intermingling of conflicting realities in the City of Imagination serves as her final argument for the power of fiction. While Fay still expresses a belief in the power of fiction to shape history, here she reveals that its ability to transcend history is even more important.

In conclusion, Fay tells Alice to think nonetheless of "here and now" more than the future. She notes that Alice has stopped dying her hair, and that Enid has invited Fay to tea again. Fay tells Alice that, in order to placate Edward, she will avoid talking about subjects like writing and feminism at tea, and so will "be very happy."

While telling Alice to focus on "here and now," Fay herself nonetheless looks forward to the future, wondering how Alice's new literary success has—or hasn't—altered the two women's family context. The ultimate effects of the correspondence between Alice and Fay remain uncertain, and even Fay's claim of happiness with Enid and Edward feels as if it may not be sincere. Thus, even the novel's conclusion provides an illustration of the blurred boundaries between fact, fiction, and the many realities that fiction creates.

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