

# Emma and clueless



Oftentimes, modern adaptation of a classic work loses many elements of the original. This is not the case with Jane Austen's *Emma* and Amy Heckerling's film adaptation, *Clueless*. The adaptation closely parallels the original text, from themes to characterization and even to cultural context. Both works explore the relationship between fathers and daughters, men and women, and successfully illustrate how the treatment of women has changed over time. When one reads *Emma* then watches its modern counterpart, *Clueless*, it is very easy to observe that even though the stories have an almost two-hundred year gap between them, society has changed very little. While the story appears superficially to be about a spoiled young woman who has nothing more beneficial to do than play matchmaker, the stories are much more complex. Both Emma Woodhouse and Cher Horowitz experience a metamorphosis from self-absorbed young woman to mature and empathetic one. *Emma* is set in the Regency Period, a time of rapid change that saw the Napoleonic wars, the first glimmerings of democracy and feminism and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Intro. To Austen). *Clueless* takes place in the U. S. in the 1990s, another time and place with much opportunity for change. Emma lives in the affluent, "large and populous" town of Highbury; Cher – Emma's equivalent in *Clueless* – lives in similar Beverly Hills. Both women come from a long, wealthy lineage; as Austen writes, Emma "had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with little to distress or vex her" (Austen 1), as had Cher. Both women have been spoiled by the absence of their mothers, as both their fathers try to compensate and keep the peace by giving them anything they want. Emma has beaucoup opportunity and freedom when compared to other girls of her time period; Cher has a brand new Jeep (but no license), a computerized closet, and access to money

whenever she wants it. To their credit, the young women are concerned about their widower fathers. Mr. Woodhouse is preoccupied with his digestion, making Emma worry about his health (Ferriss), while in Clueless Mr. Horowitz constantly obsesses about his cholesterol and prompts Cher to restrict him to a strict diet. Both the Woodhouses and the Horowitzes are members of upper-class society. Emma's father is well-known and everyone holds the Woodhouse family in high esteem. Cher's father is a renowned litigation attorney. In today's society, a profession such as this is looked upon with a lot of respect. It is obvious that Emma thinks very highly of herself, and does not think too fondly of the idea of intermingling with people of a lesser social rank than her. The same goes for Cher. These feelings of superiority are exemplified when the girls take on the task of becoming friends with someone who isn't on their level socially. Emma befriends Harriet Smith, the character that corresponds with Tai Frazier. While Emma thinks she is taking Harriet under her wing in order to help her out, it can be argued that this is simply to fill the void that was left when Miss Taylor left. Neither Harriet nor Tai is as refined as Emma or Cher. Harriet Smith is described as pretty but with no outstanding features, and. Tai is a transfer student from New York who does not fit in with the other, preppy girls. Emma sets out to refine Harriet, much as Cher decides to revamp Tai so that she will fit in with her uppity clique. Emma pushes Harriet around in the same way that Cher treats Tai. Both Harriet and Tai lack self-confidence and independence, and allow Emma and Cher to influence them. Harriet wants to marry Robert Martin, a wonderful man who happens to be a farmer, but declines his proposal because Emma says he isn't high enough on the social ladder for Harriet. In Clueless, Tai has a crush on " skater boy" Travis that

Cher does not approve. The pressure to fit in is so great upon Harriet and Tai that they allowed themselves to be manipulated by their class-conscious friends. Both Emma and Cher play matchmaker, with unintended consequences. Emma encourages a relationship between Harriet and Mr. Elton, but Mr. Elton misunderstands her intentions and thinks she wants him for herself. This offends Emma because while she considers Mr. Elton good enough for Harriet, she does not see him as wealthy or good enough for her: “[Mr. Elton] must know that in fortune and consequence [Emma] was greatly his superior” (Austen 100). Likewise, Cher tries to set Tai up with Elton. She is offended when she learns that Elton actually likes her, as in her snobbery Cher believes Elton is good enough for Tai but not for herself. Another similarity between Emma and Cher is that they have little regard for education. Emma makes lists upon lists of books she plans to read, but never quite gets around to reading them. Cher receives more than a few papers handed back with failing grades on them and is obviously ignorant about world affairs. A news segment about Bosnia comes on and Cher has a truly puzzled expression when she says, “ But I thought they declared peace in the Middle East!” Both women are very attractive and charming, which suggests that in both societies it is all right for a woman to be less than bright if she is pretty. One distinction between Emma and Clueless is society’s expectations for women. In Jane Austen’s time, women were expected to be dainty, obedient, and non-intellectual. As writer Monica Veiga states, “ Due to their inability to do anything else, women’s time was dedicated to reading and practicing music, drawing, and dancing, the accomplishments that men thought they ought to have” (Veiga). Men controlled women’s lives to a great extent, and had more freedom to come

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and go as they pleased. Austen writes: “ A young woman, if she falls into bad hands, may be teased, and kept at a distance from those she wants to be with; but one cannot comprehend a young man’s being under such restraint” (Austen 143). Clueless, by contrast, takes place in a society in which women can do anything men can, and there are few – if any – restrictions on what is socially acceptable. Girls know they can have high aspirations, and that it’s not a crisis if they do not marry. Jane Austen’s Emma and Amy Heckerling’s Clueless deliver the same messages: don’t interfere with other people’s relationships, learn to accept that you are not always right, and don’t be quick to judge (Rich to Ditz). Through these lessons, Emma and Cher become more complete individuals. At the end of the novel Emma is truly sorry for the way she has meddled in the lives of others. She is repentant and realizes that she doesn’t always know what’s best for everyone. Cher comes to a similar realization near the end of Clueless. It is remarkable to witness how the morals of this story transcend two hundred years and remain applicable in today’s society. Works Cited Ashford, Viola. “ A Short Introduction to Jane Austen.” 9 Feb. 2004. Suite 101. 19 Feb. 2004. “ A Short Introduction to Jane Austen.” Suite 101. 19 Feb. 2004. Austen, Jane. Emma. 2001st ed. New York: Modern Library, 1816. Clueless. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Perf. Alicia Silverstone, Brittney Murphey, Stacey Dash. Videocassette. Paramount, 1995. Clueless Script.. Delany, Paul. Emma Lecure Notes. Oct. 2003. Department of English, Simon Fraser University. 19 Feb. 2004. Emma- Understanding Jane Austen’s World. Comp. Pamela Whalan. Jane Austen Society of Australia. 15 Jan. 2004. Ferriss, Suzanne. “ Emma Becomes Clueless.” Jane Austen in Hollywood. Comp. Linda Troost. Kentucky: The UP of Kentucky, 1998. N. pag. “ From Rich Girl to Ditz Girl : The Evolution of a Spoilt Woman.” Marie Claire.

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