

A comparative analysis of jane austen' s novel emma and the movie clueless

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Printed below is the beginning of an essay on the novel Emma and the film Clueless. Finish the essay in your own words and thoughts to explain how the ideas in the original text (Emma) have been changed, in the appropriated text (Clueless), to suit a new, more modern context and audience.

Emma and Clueless

The 1993 hit film Clueless, written and directed by Amy Heckerling, exemplifies how popular culture re-appropriates Austen's novels to serve updated agendas. As a novel of manners, Emma creates a space between competing ideological extremes of the late eighteenth century. During this period of traditional " aristocratic ideology," based on the hierarchy of social birthright, began to clash with a " progressive ideology" emerging from burgeoning notions of individualism and capitalism. Emma exists as a text enmeshed in this debate and presents a tenuous equilibrium upholding social stability. Correspondingly, Clueless creates a guideline for proper sexual relations in a society both obsessed with sex and terrified by the ramifications of sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS.

As a character, Emma embodies her unsettled social environment. While she aggressively asserts her individuality and follows her free will, she is also the most eligible woman in Highbury. She may act like a product of " progressive ideology," but her social position embeds her in a " traditional ideology," that assumes marriage for social benefit. While Emma appears to reject the explanations inherent in this position, declaring never to marry and eventually marrying for love, it is both convenient and contrived that

Knightley is not only her choice, but her social equal. The message is clear: follow your heart as long as it is appropriate.

Similarly, Cher's actions belie her appearance. She embodies a sexual stereotype that a modern audience will immediately recognize. A blond teenager dressed consistently in short skirts, tight tops, and thigh-high stockings appears promiscuous, yet Cher forsakes expectations and remains a virgin until she finds an ideal match. Clueless flips the message espoused in Emma to one that states: follow your desires as long as it is appropriate. Cher's virginity equates with Emma's heart. Both characters manipulate the expectations of their audience and do not act in accordance with their specific social environment.

Jane Austen's novel Emma, written in the 19th Century and set in the township of Highbury, seems far removed from the fast paced life of late 20th century Beverly Hills. Yet the teen pic Clueless reflects many of the values and much of the social stratification found in the 19th century classic Emma. While Heckerling's Clueless does not present an exact duplication of Austen's classic, there are enough similarities in both theme and cultural identification to link both texts. Emma was written in the Realist period of English history and this is reflected in the representation of the characters and themes. Austen presents an historical picture of life at this time, with Highbury accurately reflecting English society and culture, with great attention to detail and political correctness.

The film *Clueless* is a post-modern text that constantly blurs the boundaries between truth and perception. The film is built on the plots inherent in the novel *Emma*; however, it does not follow the chronological order of *Emma*. Heckerling creates a pastiche, cleverly integrating music, a montage of images and flash backs to create a fast paced and relevant insight into life in downtown Beverley Hills.

The context of both texts has enormous bearing on the social structures, ideologies and conventions of the cultures represented. *Emma* is set in the 19th century English town of Highbury and its main character is a member of the English upper class. She moves within the strict social hierarchy of the period and there is clear acknowledgment of class structure and the value placed on birthright. Within Highbury, Emma and her father are recognised as social superiors and therefore are very much looked up to. In this society, women such as Emma had very little power, with their sole purpose in life being to make a good marriage and take their place as part of the gentrified classes. Marriage was seen as a vital tool in preserving society as it was known as it maintained the social status quo and it located people within the various social strata's.

Emma was very modern woman for her time, running the household and seeing little reason to rush into marriage. As a woman of independent wealth, she saw no reason to marry, as she was happy without a husband. By her very attitude, she challenges the social constructs of the time and did what many women of her time had little opportunity to do, she married for love rather than personal gain.

The film *Clueless* follows a similar story line, however, the 19th century English village of Highbury is far removed from Cher Horowitz's life in Beverly Hills, USA. *Clueless* is set in the late 20th century in an affluent area of Beverley Hills, characterised by mansions, designer outfits and sports cars. The film challenges many of the values proudly held and stated by American society. The egalitarian world spoken of so often by American politicians is satirised in this film, where privilege, excess and greed are the new religion of the nouveau riche. In the same way that class structure and recognising one's place is so strongly identified in *Emma*, so too such social stratification is readily evident in *Clueless*.

Unlike *Emma*, *Clueless* emphasises the importance of earned wealth or 'new money' and does so in a crass and vulgar manner. Any whim will and can be catered for and the corrupt power of the dollar is constantly revealed. This contrasts strongly with the genteel values identified in *Emma*. In 19th century England, gentrification was not earned or bought, it was something that one was born into and could take several generations for total acceptance to occur. In the capitalist world of Cher, changes in status can occur quickly, and money from any source gives power and status. In this new reality, material possessions are the new currency, with little importance placed on lineage or family history. This is poignantly illustrated with Cher's reference to her 1972 mansion, contrasting sharply with *Emma* whose family was an institution over many generations at Hartfield.

In the film *Clueless*, Heckerling identifies and presents the very worst aspects of American life. She reflects current values that emphasise issues

such as; greed is good, more is best, and a persons worth is dictated in terms of a dollar value. She rightly emphasises capitalism and consumerism as being the values that dominate the lives of Cher and her friend's. In this film, popularity is not determined by race, wealth has no racial boundaries and if you have the dollars you are one of the gang. This is highlighted in the characters of Dionne and Murray, two wealthy African Americans and Lucy, the poor maid from El Salvador. The two rich kids are immensely popular and the maid has little social status, further highlighting the relationship between wealth and popularity.

The anomaly in relation to acceptance is represented in the character of Christian, a wealthy young man who happens to be gay. Although Christian is quite popular he is left out of the final scenes when the many complex issues contained in the plot are resolved. Homosexuality is still very much a dark issue for contemporary America and while society has accepted people of all races and socio economic groups, they are yet to fully accept homosexuality as part of mainstream life.

In the opening of both the novel and the film the characters are introduced and the lifestyle and settings are shown. In Emma it is a description of Emma's character through third person narration. In the opening statement of the novel, we are given a very clear picture of the central character Emma. " Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her." In commencing her novel in this manner, Austen's

views on Emma are clearly presented to the reader and force the reader to take a very coloured view of the character.

The introduction of Emma to the reader is quite prolonged and is followed by a brief synopsis of class structure, the society of the time and Emma's place in this rather complex world. The portrayal of Emma's companion Harriet, clearly lays the ground rules for social mores of the time. "The humble, grateful little girl went off with highly gratified feelings' delighted with the affability with which Miss Woodhouse had treated her all evening and actually shaken hands with her at last!" Harriet is obviously of inferior station, with the use of degrading phrases such as "little girl", an authoritarian intrusion showing Austen's use of satire and the even more revealing line that further describes the relationship with Emma, "actually shaking hands with her." This would suggest that Austen supported the class system of the time and did not approve of people freely moving between classes.

The opening scene of Clueless is a montage of Cher's life. It is a collage of fun, shopping, great looking people and total extravagance. In the opening scenes, Cher admits that her life looks like a high priced commercial and she appears very aware of her advantage and her power as a consumer in modern America. The music used to introduce the main characters is the song "Kids of America." Cher uses her computer to choose her clothes for the day; this is followed by Cher's narration of her life as she states, "I have a way normal life for a teenage girl." While the lyrics of the opening song

and the message Cher presents attempt to illustrate an average teen-age life what we see on the screen totally contradicts this image.

What we see in the very early stages of the film is that Cher's life is anything but normal. Cher's life is trivialised because of her background, for example, Cher does not need an education as daddy will provide. She does not need a social conscience as she doesn't know any poor people. All of her problems are solved using her credit card or her ability to talk her way out of difficulty. Heckerling uses many different techniques to focus on Cher's lifestyle; they include dynamic and varied camera angles, composition shots including a spinning overhead shot to open the film and a visual montage. These techniques reveal Cher's fast paced, capricious existence and nature. Heckerling paints the character of Cher as busy, exciting at times, a little unpredictable, but always glamorous. The character positioning of Cher as the central figure in most of the opening frames or the sole figure, identifies her as a character of high status within the microcosm that is L. A., her school, her social grouping and her family. It also highlights the self-centred nature of Cher and her perspectives in the beginning of the film.

While Emma is a classic piece of literature that fits comfortably into the cannon of literature, Clueless is very much a parody of modern American life. Clueless is set in a time where women are independent, with no compulsion for them to marry as they are very capable of independent fulfilling lives. If women choose to marry, they do so for love and not for wealth, social privilege or societal expectation. Educational opportunities are freely available to all and the expectation is very much that girls as well as boys

will move into tertiary education. This is made very clear in the following conversation from the film:

(Dad) “ I’d like to see you have a little more direction”.

(Cher) “ I have direction”.

(Josh) “ Yeah to the mall.”

Both Emma and Clueless oscillate between genres. Emma is a comedy of manners as Austen gently satirises the society of the time. She does so by using Emma’s prejudices and social education as a way of highlighting her dissatisfaction with society. On many occasions, Emma is the target of Austen’s use of irony, as she illustrates a thorough self-awareness not commonly spoken of or acknowledged in ladies of the time. The novel Emma is also a Bildungsroman as Austen identifies Emma’s social education while highlighting the comedy of manners evident at this time. Clueless comfortably fits both identified genres; as well as being a prime example of its primary genre, that of teen pic. This genre gives Clueless textual integrity and allows Heckerling to humorously transform the iconic novel Emma into a parody of her own genre. Clueless is a representation of popular culture, although it does contain snippets of high culture, with various references to cultural purities. The conversation between Cher and Tai gives us a little insight into this phenomenon.

Tai: Do you think she’s pretty?

Cher: No, she’s a full-on Monet.

Tai: What's a Monet?

Cher: It's like a painting, see? From far away, it's OK, but up close, it's a big old mess.

Both *Clueless* and *Emma* are meta-narratives because both Austen and Heckerling seem to challenge the class structure of the time. In *Clueless*, the protagonist Cher befriends Tai and in *Emma*, we find a friendship developing with Harriet. In the final couplings of both *Clueless* and *Emma*, the characters all couple with someone of the same intelligence, social class and in the case of *Clueless*, race. This reinscribes the 19th century idea of maintenance of class and appropriate social and political boundaries. Heckerling is more superficial in her treatment of characters and story line, while Austen intrudes much more detail and complexity; however, the central themes and messages are surprisingly similar.

The theme of sexuality, so strongly emphasised in *Clueless* is simply an updated version of the same themes that run throughout *Emma*. The issue of virginity is assumed in 19th century England and the pursuit of "lady hood" is seen as an essential quality for any prospective match. Conversely, in the film *Clueless*, Cher does not strive to be a lady, however, preserving her virginity is important to her and singles her out as a young woman who still holds strong moral values regardless of status or social expectation.

Heckerling challenges the very fabric of teenage sexuality as she presents Cher as the embodiment of a sexual stereotype. Cher is blond, beautiful, seemingly promiscuous in dress and action, yet at heart she is just a sweet

and sensitive young girl. It is only through the growing relationship with Josh that we begin to see Cher as the person she will become, someone who has strong morals and a true sense of herself

The process of transformation in *Clueless* begins with the realisation by Cher that she loves Josh. In this scene Cher is walking down the centre of a city street and for the first time she is not the central focus of the camera. She appears insignificant in the landscape of the scene and the music playing in the background is the non-diegetic song "All by Myself". It shows Cher alone and emotionally down for the first time in the film. Up until this stage, Cher had been the centre of attention and continually surrounded by her adoring friends. We are shown an element of black comedy in this scene, as we see Cher walk past a shop window while at her lowest point. She picks herself up for a second to check a dress and buys it. Cher continues her journey past a fairy tale like house that is out of place in up-market Beverley Hills. This scene casts Cher as the princess of this story who eventually recognises that her "prince charming" is Josh. At the moment of this revelation the fountains inside Cher's home spray into the air creating a beautiful backdrop for this starry eyed revelation. This is a parody of Emma and downplays the seriousness of this event.

The parallel scene in Austen's novel finds Emma repentant after realising that that she has disrupted the social structure by encouraging Harriet to aspire to marriage to a person who is her social superior. We find Emma thinking about her future and recognising that she should have listened to Knightly. At this juncture, Emma regrets that Harriet appears to have taken

Knightly's affection from her. " Emma had never known how much of her happiness depended on being first with Mr Knightly, first in interest and affection." This is a key characteristic of the meta narrative, as Austen reinforces the social stratification of the time and the role of men and women. Emma is forced to admit, perhaps for the first time, that she is wrong. In a blinding flash, Emma realises that she would like companionship and a husband. There is, however, a conflict between Emma's individual desires and society's prescribed role for her. It is expected that she will sacrifice herself for her father's happiness, however, the strength of Emma's character and one of Austen's more important social comments emerges with the resolution of this internal conflict.

Emma and Clueless tell a very similar story, that of society's expectations and the moral imperatives of the individual. Both Emma and Cher are counter cultural as they move away from societal norms and follow their hearts desire. Strangely they do so within very safe boundaries, as in their attempt to be true to themselves they fit very neatly into their social roles. The journey for both characters is both complex and self-revealing and in the process they reinforce the messages around social stratification, wealth and conservative social values. While they may not act in accordance with their specific social environment, they do very much reflect the conservative values held by the establishment in their various cultural settings.