

ENGLISH ADVANCED

Clueless is a way of “seeing” Jane Austen’s Emma that affirms its core values despite changing contexts. To what extent does your reading of both texts support this view?

In literature, a transformation is the process of taking a story from the past, usually a high culture text, and retelling it in another context centred on different cultural discourses. Amy Heckerling’s post-modern teen pic film, *Clueless*, is an appropriation in the form of a transformation of Jane Austen’s canonical bildungsroman novel, *Emma*, and while it affirms the essence of the novel’s core values, it also updates the story by engaging different cultural discourses. While Austen had written *Emma* for leisured aristocratic readers, Heckerling is concerned with the American teenage audience. In *Emma*, two key issues represented in the text are social responsibility, and marriage, relationships and finding the right partner; these issues are also prevalent and relevant in *Clueless*, albeit they are adapted to an American teenage audience and updated with a new agenda. The transformation of *Emma* to *Clueless* shows that the novel’s core values are recurring issues of interest to audiences in different historical periods and while *Clueless* is presented in a different form and medium, with a different setting, both composers’ purposes were to allow and prompt the audience to question the values of society and patterns of behaviour and raising social judgements of certain characters.

Jane Austen’s *Emma* is set in the Regency period in England and predominantly deals with the value of being a lady through the exploration of social responsibility. The character of Emma Woodhouse is first introduced to the reader as “handsome, clever, and rich” and with being the mistress of Hartfield, she is consequently part of the upper class and at the top of the social hierarchy of Highbury. Due to the social status of her family, Emma is regarded and expected to be a lady, however, it is not until the end of the novel that she learns to balance power and propriety to better fulfil the behavioural ideals of a “lady”. One such behavioural ideal would be the concept of charity; while Emma would pay “a charitable visit” to a poor sick family, she does this as a part of a sense of duty to those of lower class and despite being described as “compassionate” and feeling as if she could “think of nothing but these poor creatures all the rest of the day”, these thoughts vanish completely with the appearance of Mr Elton. Furthermore, in the paragraph describing Emma’s visit, the focus is purely on Emma as she gives the benefit of her superior wisdom and wealth to “those, whom education had done so little” and it’s suspected that she does not understand the poor family and their needs as well as she thinks. In comparison, Mr Knightley is used as a model of upper class gentry, representing the epitome of wealth, class and charity in society, as Emma herself said, “You will not see one in a hundred, with gentleman so plainly written as in Mr. Knightley.” His acts of charity are performed much more thoughtfully than Emma’s and he acts as Emma’s moral role model; arriving at the Cole’s dinner party, Emma is surprised at the sight of Mr Knightley stepping out of the carriage “for Mr. Knightley keeping no horses... to get about as he could, and not use his carriage so often as he became the owner of Donwell Abbey.” Mr Knightley’s use of his carriage is solely because he knows of Jane Fairfax poor health and wished to provide her a mode of transport and in order to spare her the awkwardness of an obvious act of charity, takes care to maintain the pretence of using it for his own benefit, even when faced with teasing from Emma. Additionally, when Emma behaves rudely and uncharitably towards Miss Bates during their visit to Box Hill, Mr Knightley reprimands Emma, “Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner... Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!” and forces her to readdress her own values and what it truly means to be a ‘lady’ of her social standing.

Similarly, Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* is concerned with the idea of wealth, social status and charity, despite being set in the entirely different context of Beverly Hills in the 1990s. The society in *Clueless* is evidently superficial and materialistic, valuing fashion trends and being ‘cool’. Right from the beginning of the film, the audience perceives Cher as being popular as she is fashion-conscious and surrounded by friends – effectively placing her at the top of the high school hierarchy. However, social status is something that can be attained and lost in *Clueless*, as opposed to being inherited

like in Emma. This is demonstrated when Tai suddenly and temporarily gains popularity and overshadows Cher. The audience also understands that she is extremely privileged and wealthy as she lives in a mansion and selects her daily outfit using a computerised wardrobe full of designer clothes. However, it is a clear example of the cultural disparity between Emma and Clueless that Clueless is essentially a capitalist society with earned wealth being valued rather than inherited wealth. Josh is Cher's socially conscious ex-stepbrother and like Mr Knightley is critical of her character and acts as the trigger for Cher's reinvention of herself where she gives her soul a "make-over". The parallel drawn from Mr Knightley's chastising of Emma at Box Hill would be when Emma thoughtlessly addresses Lucy as being Mexican, when she is actually from El Salvador. This highlights the same naivety and carelessness of Emma for the feelings of people around her as despite Josh's obvious disapproval, Cher lashes out and twists the situation to make herself a victim and throws a tantrum, "Everything is all my fault, I'm always wrong", and as Josh says, she is a brat. Like in Emma, Cher's reaction to Josh's disapproval, together with Tai's admittance of how she fancies Josh, forces her to readdress herself and improve to be more 'worthy' of Josh. Cher's major charitable act is her organisation of the Pismo Beach Disaster Relief where she also makes a significant effort to consider the situations of those affected, as shown when her justification to donating her ski gear is "Some people lost all their belongings. Don't you think that includes athletic equipment?" While her actions are silly, she is serious about her purpose; her initiative and effort in self-improvement are straightforward and undeniable, especially as prior to this event, the extent of Cher's charitable acts were donating "many Italian outfits to Lucy" and deciding that when she receives her licence, to "fully intend to brake for animals." While Cher does not aspire to be a lady, discovering her social conscience allows her to break free from the shallow, materialistic world in Beverly Hills and improves her personality as she becomes more tolerant and accepting as shown when she isn't judgemental and is truly grateful for Travis' contribution to the Pismo Beach Disaster Relief.

Marriage is another central issue in Austen's female bildungsroman and it is explored throughout the novel as Emma matures into a proper lady. During the regency period, it was expected of women to marry and marriage was essentially a business matter as men and women generally strived to connect themselves with others of acceptable families, mainly on the basis of ones breeding. Finding the right partner was the key for Emma's marriage as throughout a large part of the novel, Emma had been incredibly firm in not marrying. Emma is able to defy the preconception of 'needing' to marry, however, as she was the mistress of Hartfield and received an annual income of £1500 pounds, meaning she did not have to worry about relying on a husband to provide for her to have a comfortable life. With Emma's breeding and considerable wealth, she was an extremely eligible marriage prospect and while Mr Elton endeavoured to court her, she considered the very thought of it an insult because of his breeding – though she was more than happy to match make him with Harriet as Mr Elton was "quite the gentleman himself, and without low connections; at the same time not of any family that could fairly object to the doubtful birth of Harriet". The long awaited arrival of Frank Churchill in Highbury begins to sway Emma's stance on marriage however, as she begins to entertain the notion that "she must be a little in love with him, despite every previous determination against it." Frank however, while his breeding and wealth are acceptable, his character is questioned when readers learn that he attempted to hide his attachments to Jane Fairfax, who was of lower social standing, by flirting shamelessly with a woman he had no intention of marrying; his flirting also effectively humiliated Emma in public. Mr Knightley had disapproved of him even before his return to Highbury, discerning him "to care very little for anything but his own pleasure", which is ultimately true as his illicit relationship with Jane Fairfax takes a considerable toll on her health. Mr Knightley however, is as Emma says, "the most eligible bachelor" and is Emma's 'match' in every aspect, especially socially. He is gently bred, her intellectual equal and has genuine concern and care for her. Emma holds Mr Knightley in especially high esteem and is aware of the requirements to be well matched with him, as shown during Harriet's confession, wherein her internal monologue, she realises that "Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" because she is his equal in both temperament and social standing. Austen adds a simple yet crucial twist to the conventional marriage however, as Knightley abdicates his own place of authority to live in Emma's home, for the sake of Mr Woodhouse and Emma's relationship, reinforcing the idea that Emma is not marrying for her social benefit and for pure love.

In comparison, while *Clueless* is also concerned with relationships, not marriage however, as Cher is still relatively young, Amy Heckerling also updates the agenda and raises the issue of promiscuity and virginity in her film. Cher embodies a sexual stereotype native to the modern audience, a blonde teenager dressed consistently in short skirts, tight tops and thigh high stockings appear promiscuous. Yet Cher forsakes expectations and is in fact a virgin, and wishes to remain so until she finds “the right person”, challenging the audience’s opinion. Heckerling centres the film around these issues as the sexual revolution in the sixties raised concerns over promiscuity, AIDs and virginity. Heckerling obviously values virginity over promiscuity as shown by her portrayal of the character Tai who is open with her promiscuity and as a consequence, essentially an outcast until her temporary popularity. Like Emma, Cher also misinterprets Elton’s advances on her and is shocked when he attempts to kiss her while taking her home. And with a similar reaction to that of Mr Elton’s of Emma, he asks incredulously, “Don’t you even know who my father is?” when she asks him why he wouldn’t get together with Tai. However, rather than her upbringing, he is adverse to her open promiscuity and Harriet’s lack of kinship alliances is replaced by Tai’s mistake of multiple sexual alliances, reflecting on the changed context and setting. When Cher meets Christian, who is a combination of the characters Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill in Emma, she becomes infatuated with him. However, rather than fancying herself in love with him, she feels that she can lose her virginity to him. While Frank was hiding an illicit affair, it is strongly suggested that Christian was hiding his preference for men. As a result, Cher is rejected and again like Emma, humiliated by her social ignorance as the people around her had already hinted at his homosexuality. Josh, like Mr Knightley to Emma, is Cher’s perfect match as with his guidance, she becomes a better person, being politically and socially aware, and by the end of the film, Cher has become the right person ready for the right sex.

In conclusion, Amy Heckerling’s teen pic satire, *Clueless*, is a transformation of Jane Austen’s canonical didactic novel, *Emma*, with updated agendas and issues to reflect contemporary society. Both composers explored the key issues of social responsibility and relationships of wealthy young women, and both attempted to challenge the social expectations of their time, by raising social judgements of certain characters.