

Clueless: Emma Woodhouse Becomes Cher Horowitz

Clueless. Released July 19, (US), October 20, 1995 (UK).
(Paramount motion picture, Color, 113 minutes)

In an interview for the *Orange County Register*, writer-director Amy Heckerling describes how she was inspired to make the 1995 film *Clueless*:

I wanted to do a happy movie about a very optimistic young girl...I really had her attitude in my head, and what I thought I needed was a strong structure in the style of comedy of manners. (20 July 1995, 30 March 2002.)

Remembering that she loved reading *Emma* in college, Heckerling decided that the Jane Austen novel was an ideal choice to use as a template for *Clueless* because “[t]he plot is perfect for any time” (*Rolling Stone*, August 22, 1996). In writing *Clueless*, Heckerling drew upon Austen’s “sense of class and social dynamic” for inspiration and used *Emma* as the “structural tree” for *Clueless*, making a modern-day coming-of-age story from a domestic Bildungsroman narrative from 1816.¹

By lifting Austen’s story out of the Regency period in which it was conceived and setting it in (what was then) present-day California, Heckerling crafted *Clueless* as an analogy adaptation of *Emma* that modernized the tale, shifting the action “forward to the present...mak[ing] a duplicate story” (226).² In the process of updating the narrative, Heckerling recast the British, 21-year-old Emma Woodhouse as American high school student Cher Horowitz, and turned most members of the novel’s supporting cast into Cher’s classmates, giving them California-style names and more racially and ethnically

diverse backgrounds.³ Consequently, the film's Mr. Knightley remains older and wiser than Emma/Cher, but by a narrower margin since he is a college undergraduate.⁴

Writing in *Jane Austen on Film and Television*, Sue Parrill observes that:

[a] significant difference which Heckerling has made in updating the novel to the last decade of the twentieth century is the changing of the main character's age from twenty-one to sixteen. She probably felt that an American high school student is more likely to experience the kind of idleness that Emma experienced as an unmarried female than an American woman at any other stage of her existence. At the age of twenty-one, a young woman of the upper middle class in the United States is likely to be preparing to graduate from college and to embark on a career. Also, a college is a more egalitarian environment than a high school. (121)

All of the film's events take place in Los Angeles, an environment that, despite its vast size and urbane sophistication, seems like a world unto itself that mirrors Highbury's provincialism. Additionally, since most of the action of the story takes place at Cher's high school or in her father's impressive home, the scale of the narrative is ultimately more domestic and intimate than a Los Angeles locale might initially suggest.

For readers of Austen, a lot of the film's humor comes from the peculiar effect created by the placement of Austen characters and themes in a context as alien as modern-day L.A. David Monaghan, for example, writes that "The novel...provides Heckerling with the opportunity for some intertextual jokes based on the incongruities between scenes set in contemporary Beverly Hills and parallels from Austen's depiction of Regency England. The substitution of a rowdy teenage party held in a suburban bungalow in balmy Los Angeles for the snowy evening when the Woodhouses and Knightleys visit Randalls for a grand Christmas Eve dinner is a particularly effective example of Heckerling's comic method" (214). And yet, despite the possibly jarring juxtaposition created by considering the original settings of scenes from the novel alongside the contemporary settings in *Clueless*, Austen scholars such as Gabrielle Finnane, Lesley Stern, and Suzanne Ferriss have praised the film for so effectively transplanting the story in time. Finnane even goes as far as to say that, like the *Mansfield-Park*-inspired *Metropolitan*, *Clueless* successfully demon-

strates that “any small affluent universe of taste and opinion can be anatomized as a series of Jane Austen characters” (Carroll 174).

Of course, not all critics agree that *Clueless* is as successful in modernizing the story of *Emma* as Finnane maintains. Those who view *Clueless* as a failed adaptation of *Emma* tend to focus on the youth and callowness of its heroine, and on the array of pop culture references that place the narrative squarely in the present. For example, John Mosier, who likes the film, nevertheless complains of the elimination of Jane Fairfax from the story, the loss of the sizable age difference between Mr. Knightley and Emma, and the transformation of Emma’s father from a sickly figure that fosters Emma’s complacency into a lovably grouchy parent who criticizes his daughter for lacking “direction.” Critic David Monaghan calls into question the excessive rudeness of the characters in the world of *Clueless*, a trait which bears little resemblance to Austen’s polite world. Also, despite its critique of the seemingly rigid class structure of the public high school, the film seems to strive to create a utopian, multicultural society where class and race differences are dissolved into a harmonious whole, and this goal seems too egalitarian for Jane Austen. These observations are all valid and intelligently framed, but most of the changes cited seem as if they arose as a natural consequence of making an analogy adaptation of *Emma*, and none of them appear thoughtless or gratuitous if one considers the demands of the contemporary setting. Also, it seems fair to say that, on balance, more Austen scholars appear to like the film, and view it as a successful adaptation of *Emma*, than dislike the film and question its relationship to the source novel.

Despite the obvious differences between the two time periods, perhaps the chief benefit of setting the story of *Emma* in a modern-day context is that it recaptures the immediacy and the relevance of the novel in a manner that has not been felt since its publication in 1816, when it was a brand new text and not yet a classic, canonical work of British literature. After all, as several critics have pointed out, *Emma* was not a “period piece” when it was written, but became one over time. To that extent, film adaptations that strive scrupulously to recreate the setting of Regency England (a.k.a. “the olden days”) are susceptible to making the story seem more conservative and nostalgic than it was ever meant to be. “Heritage” film adaptations also risk paying too much attention to issues of period detail and not enough

to giving primacy to the core themes of the text, such as education, female community, civic responsibility, provincialism, courtship rituals, and the woman artist. Therefore, by setting Austen's story of the maturation of a young, gifted woman in the present, Heckerling is able to engage the core ideas of the novel without getting lost during a trip down nostalgia lane. Addressing this issue, John Wiltshire observes that *Clueless* stands apart from other films that "modernize" Jane Austen texts, (such as *Metropolitan* and *Jane Austen in Manhattan*), which:

have an undercurrent of anxiety: how do you reconcile loyalty to Jane Austen with contemporaneity, how do you manage the transition between a writer thought to be genteel and elitist with the modernity you seek necessarily to embrace?...Such anxiety has been overcome in *Clueless*: it simply takes Austen for granted. But for this film the Austen taken for granted is not an image or model of high culture and gentility, but of creative zest and brilliance, not 'Jane Austen' the cultural image, but Jane Austen. (56–57)

Inevitably, as a contemporary American film, *Clueless* reflects the social mores of its time and addresses the issues which Austen explores in a very contemporary and American manner. For example, the gulf between 1816 England and 1995 America is readily apparent in the way in which the film deals, overtly and symbolically, with issues of sexuality, drugs, AIDS, and multiculturalism, but *Clueless* demonstrates that, as much as society may change, the essential path that a young woman must follow into maturity and adulthood remains, in many ways, constant. Indeed, despite the change in setting, and despite even some of the substantive alterations to the story that were indicated above, *Clueless* provides an intriguing reading of the *Emma* narrative as a domestic Bildungsroman.

At the start of the film, Cher seems to demonstrate great potential that she is not reaching because she, as her father puts it, lacks "direction." She has possession of a rich vocabulary, is capable of negotiating better grades from her professors, knows a lot about fashion, and has had some striking success as a matchmaker. However, she seems markedly less intelligent than the character that inspired her, and she appears to have a much longer road to travel to maturity at the start of *Clueless* than Emma does at the start of Austen's novel. Cher has some knowledge of literature, but not enough, and she seems to have

a compassionate view of Third World refugees without having enough of a grasp of the realities of international politics and global poverty. She also begins the film emotionally unready to commit to a romantic relationship and seems unable to fully understand the sex lives that her fellow students have embraced while she has chosen to remain single. By the end of the film, however, Cher has grown considerably—intellectually, emotionally, and morally—by attaining greater understanding of herself and the world around her, and by finding someone to love.

Like Douglas McGrath's *Emma*, another American adaptation of Jane Austen's novel that followed *Clueless* into movie theaters a few months later, *Clueless* dramatizes the moral, emotional, and intellectual development of the heroine by allowing the audience frequent glimpses into the heroine's mind. Both films achieve this effect primarily through employing the visual technique of the close-up and the audio technique of the voiceover. In *Clueless*, Cher's face is frequently captured in close-up, allowing lead actress Alicia Silverstone the opportunity to demonstrate, through subtle shades of expression, what Cher is thinking, and not saying. A similar effect is created using the frequent close-ups in McGrath's *Emma*. Additionally, both films relate the heroine's thoughts directly to the audience through voice-over during key moments in the story. Consequently, the films forge an intimate connection between audience and heroine which makes the heroine endearing even as it demonstrates the limits of her knowledge and her need for personal growth.⁵

The principal difference between *Clueless* and McGrath's *Emma* is that the narrator of the McGrath film is a woman whose identity remains a mystery while the narrator of *Clueless* is Cher herself. The Cher who is narrating the story in voiceover is a slightly older Cher than the Cher on screen, so she is wiser and more reflective about the actions of her younger counterpart, thereby demonstrating how much she ultimately learns from her experiences.⁶ In "'As If!' Translating Austen's Ironic Narrator to Film," Nora Nachumi writes:

Cher's moral growth and her genuinely likeable nature pose a challenge to those of us who harbor stereotypes about spoiled teenagers who live in Beverly Hills. More seriously, the film goes to great lengths to reinforce an image of Cher that it eventually dismantles. The first-person narration is extremely important to this endeavor because it makes Cher immensely appealing. It lets us know that a good heart beats within the shell of self-

involved ignorance. The fact that Cher finally understands her own heart is—importantly—signaled by a newfound harmony between what she says and what we see on the screen....Cher's new perspective is more than a realization about her feelings for Josh. She sees her old behavior as shallow, and this gives her the power to alter her world....(137).

Notably, aside from the Judy Campbell adaptation, *Clueless* is the only *Emma* adaptation that retains the discussion of the heroine's reading habits, and the quality of the books she chooses. The discussion of reading in both the Campbell adaptation and *Clueless* signals the fact that both films are interested in the moral and intellectual development of their respective heroines. By including the theme of education, both adaptations suggest that there is more at stake in the story than whether or not the heroine finds true love: the heroine's knowledge, self-awareness, and inner life are all at stake as well.

Amusingly enough, Heckerling also allows Cher a better memory of *Hamlet* via a Mel Gibson film than a serious student of literature can claim through direct exposure to the text.⁷ When Cher overhears Josh's haughty college girlfriend Heather quote Hamlet as saying, "To thine own self be true," Cher corrects her. Heather looks dismissive of Cher and says, "I think I remember *Hamlet* accurately." But she doesn't. Cher is right when she maintains "That Polonius guy said it." It is a striking moment in the film, especially since it represents one of the first times that Josh smiles in approval at Cher's upstaging of another. Later on, however, Josh teases Cher for not having a direct relationship with works of fine art and literature, but one mediated by popular culture and film adaptations. These two contrasting scenes with Josh, taken together, evoke Mr. Knightley's monologue from Chapter Five in the novel, in which he expresses disapproval with Emma's lack of drive to read more:

"Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—very well chosen, and very neatly arranged—sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen—I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit, that I preserved it some time; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding..." (Austen 47).

While Emma seems aware that she and Harriet should ideally be reading and discussing more significant literary works than the Gothic novels of the time, she does not appear to do much more serious reading for the rest of the book. In *Clueless*, Heckerling pokes fun at Cher for choosing to read diet and exercise books, and encourages laughter at Tai for reading *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, so the theme of reading is retained in the film, even if the Emma character seems less aware that she should be reading more substantive works than *Fit or Fat?* Although the film does not, ultimately, show Cher reading *Hamlet* in its original play format, or even show her actually reading *Fit or Fat?*, the trajectory of the narrative and the tone of the final reel of the film both imply that Cher has grasped the importance of education and will begin doing her English homework more thoroughly and conscientiously because she has learned the importance of watching the news and listening to advice from her teachers. Therefore, by the end of the movie, Cher may still have more growing and more learning left to do, but she can no longer fairly be called “Clueless.”

That having been said, many critics have debated the exact meaning of the mock-condemnatory title, and the exact way in which Cher might be considered “clueless” at the start of the picture. The title is, at least, a striking declaration that the film’s dramatic focus will be on the personality of the heroine and her need to “get a clue,” earmarking it as a domestic Bildungsroman reading of the novel rather than as a social critique. But how might she be considered clueless? One possibility is that she is clueless because she doesn’t see how foolish her attempts at matchmaking are. Certainly many post-World-War-II domestic Bildungsroman critics make similar claims about the need for Emma to shed her matchmaking endeavors, both for her own good and for the good of those whose lives she meddles with. However, Claudia Johnson has presented a compelling case that Emma’s matchmaking efforts are not trivial, but potentially very beneficial to the lower-class women whose social status Emma seeks to elevate. Indeed, rather than chasten Cher for her attempts at matchmaking, *Clueless* appears to be in sympathy with them (and, by extension, with Claudia Johnson’s reading of the novel).

Although *Clueless* treats humorously Cher’s failed attempts to match up Tai (read: Harriet) with Elton, it dramatically demonstrates

the concrete good that arises from Cher's matchmaking as well. For readers of the novel, one of the most intriguing segments of *Clueless* comes at the beginning of the film, when it depicts Cher successfully orchestrating a love-match between Miss Geist, an activist-minded social studies teacher, and Mr. Hall, a lovably grumpy debate teacher. Since Geist and Hall are characters inspired by the Westons, the film argues, by extension, that the Emma in the novel may have had more of a role in bringing Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston together than Mr. Knightley would allow.

In the opening scene of the novel, Emma claims that she facilitated the Weston-Taylor romance and observes that, if not for her interference, there might not have been a wedding. The debate from Chapter One is essentially dropped and left unresolved and unaddressed until several hundred pages later when, in a moment of controlled anger directed at Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill asks Emma to find him the perfect wife since she did so superb a job matching his father with Miss Taylor. The compliment seems to grant Emma the lion's share of the responsibility for the match, or at least as much credit as Emma at first grants herself. Did Frank deduce this himself, or did he get this notion from his father or the former Miss Taylor? Although Frank is a deceiver and a gossip, his line rings true as an opinion genuinely held by the Weston family and appears to be a brief moment of forthrightness on Frank's part.⁸

In *Clueless*, Cher's efforts to bring her two lonely teachers together are motivated, at least initially, by a selfish desire to make them "blissfully happy" enough to give their students higher grades. However, she soon surprises herself by how good it makes her feel to bring happiness to others, and the success inspires her to continue doing good deeds. The "selfish" motivation aside, the film seems largely approving of Cher's matchmaking efforts and presents her as well-intentioned. In fact, while Josh is essentially a likeable character who makes many accurate criticisms of Cher's matchmaking, he is *just* superior enough in his manner that many viewers might well want Cher to continue to challenge his authority by ignoring his advice. Consequently, the film presents a sympathetic view of Cher's matchmaking endeavors that is not unlike William Galperin's view of Emma's matchmaking in the novel:

Like Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, Emma is engaged in what may be described as an insurrection. Seeking to wrest power from those men, including her...father, who exercise it most strenuously and capriciously in the world of Highbury, Emma contrives, through the lives she either arranges or hopes to arrange, to effect change in an otherwise stratified society. That these “revolutionary” efforts, specifically the wedding of less advantaged women to more advantaged men, are simultaneously contradicted by Emma’s own sense of entitlement and, later, by the appeals made to it by Mr. Knightley (with whose encouragement Emma eventually assumes her rightful place), is less surprising than it is inevitable. (67)

On the other hand, Emma’s efforts to elevate Harriet’s social position through marriage to Rev. Elton doubly wound Harriet, first by preventing Harriet from marrying her true love, Robert Martin, and, secondly, by raising false hopes that Harriet will be accepted by someone who is uninterested in wedding her. Her actions also wound Mr. Martin, whose feelings she is less mindful of since he is a member of the yeomanry, a class with which she does not associate. Therefore, Emma’s earlier, successful effort to promote the Weston-Taylor union led her into a kind of *hubris*, an elevated opinion of her own ability to uncover the secrets of the human heart. In this regard, Cher makes the same mistake as Emma, and needs to learn the limits of her own knowledge.

While it is possible that Cher’s cluelessness has to do with her matchmaking efforts, it is equally possible that her real cluelessness is an insensitivity to white Americans from a lower class than herself, such as Travis Birkenstock (a.k.a. Robert Martin), and to immigrant domestic workers such as Lucy, the Horowitz-family maid (who is ever-so-loosely inspired by Miss Bates). Like previous adaptations of *Emma* that cut down the size of Jane Fairfax’s role (or eliminate it altogether), *Clueless* makes up for the loss of Jane by granting greater dramatic attention to the scenes in which Cher mistreats the Robert Martin character (Travis) and the Miss Bates character (Lucy). Cher claims to dislike Travis primarily because he smokes too much marijuana, although it is possible that he also proves himself unworthy of her good graces by eating at McDonald’s, riding public transportation, and accidentally ruining her good shoes. However, Cher grows to accept him by the end of the film after he goes cold turkey and proves himself “motivated” by winning a skateboarding competition.

Since Travis emerges as less of a “loser” than Cher first thought, she does not regret her failure to keep him and Tai apart.

Meanwhile, in the film’s closest equivalent to the moment in which Emma publicly slights Miss Bates on Box Hill, Cher insults Lucy, the family maid from El Salvador, by mistakenly calling her a Mexican in front of Josh. Cher’s *faux pas* demonstrates that Cher’s “cluelessness” might not only constitute a lack of sympathy for members of “the lower classes,” such as Travis, but a lack of proper understanding of other countries and cultures, and of the political dynamic between the First and the Third World. Post-colonial literary critic Gayle Wald writes:

As this remark about Lucy implies...the film’s narrative of a ‘multicultural’ and class-transcendent American nation (a narrative that co-exists with its portrayal of distinctions in wealth and status) is repeatedly undermined by references to ‘Third World’ subjects or locales that are not easily assimilable to it....For example, Cher’s reference to Lucy, an immigrant domestic worker, not only complicates the film’s narrative of the United States as a welcoming ‘domestic’ space for all those who seek to establish themselves within its borders, but it is also instrumental in situating Cher as a gendered subject who occupies a position of national, racial and class privilege relative to other gendered subjects within the patriarchal ‘private sphere.’ Even as her remark displays her ignorance and a national obtuseness that viewers can laugh at, it also points to the fact that, within the confines of her home, she enjoys a comfort and freedom that are contingent on Lucy’s labour...(227–228).

Wald seems correct in asserting that Cher’s ignorance of international politics is central to her “cluelessness.” However, it is possible that Cher has more sympathy for the downtrodden and a greater understanding of civic responsibility and global politics than her insensitive remark to Lucy might suggest. The film presents Cher early on as someone who feels abstract sympathy for the plight of Third World peoples, even if she does not have much of an understanding of international politics or foreign cultures, as she argues in favor of the United States granting asylum to Haitian refugees.

Given Cher’s confused feelings about the poor and civic responsibility, (which seem to speak as much in her favor as against her,) it is not immediately clear to what extent Cher needs to cultivate more liberal and sophisticated political views under the tutelage of Josh and her social studies teachers or to what extent her heart is already in the right place. For some critics, several of Cher’s domestic meta-

phors for large scale conflict, and even some of her “girlish” means of “finding order in a world filled with chaos,” are not fundamentally worthless; rather they are legitimate and are undervalued by the same dominant masculine culture that underestimated Catherine Morland’s “feminine” perceptions of the world in *Northanger Abbey*. After all, as silly as Cher can be in the film, Josh’s criticisms can be a *little* too frequent and a *little* too sarcastic. For Deidre Lynch, who discusses the film in “Clueless: About History,” Cher does not get quite enough credit from Mr. Hall for her Haiti debate.

Subsequent to what [Cher] calls a “makeover of the soul,” she still conceptualizes change in those troublingly individualistic, private, and commodified terms, terms that could easily function to obscure large-scale struggles for social transformation. Yet there are ways in which Cher’s clueless debates might nonetheless be taken seriously as models of the thinking woman’s response to public policy in “the real world”....When required to weigh in on the plight of the Haitian boat people, Cher recalls the story of how she surmounted an etiquette disaster. She points out that she did not turn away the guests who showed up at her father’s birthday dinner after failing to R.S.V.P., and she wonders why “the government” cannot likewise rise to the occasion. If it would just “get to the kitchen, rearrange some things, we could certainly party with the Haitians”; “it doesn’t say R.S.V.P. on the Statue of Liberty.” Her analogy is trivializing, but it would be churlish to deny that the political message it delivers reframes the responsibilities of the state in ways that appeal. (78)

Certainly Cher begins the film with her heart in the right place, expressing liberal sentiments without boasting any real knowledge of social and political issues. She does, however, learn the importance of supporting sentiment with knowledge, and surprises Josh by taking up watching the nightly news to fill the gaps in her understanding.

As a coming-of-age story that emphasizes the importance of the heroine’s intellectual and emotional development, the film certainly lauds Cher’s decision to learn more about contemporary political issues. It is also clear from early in the film that Cher does not know as much about men, and romance, as she thinks she does, and the movie humorously sets up an audience expectation that her pledge never to date would be broken by the end of the film. Therefore, the awakening of Cher’s romantic feelings and sexual desires are also important themes in the story of her emotional journey. In fact, for John Mosier, Cher’s ignorance of her own sexuality is at the core of her “cluelessness” and is the central concern of the film.

According to Mosier, Cher is “clueless” in the same way that Emma is, since both women have a “deficiency which relates to things sexual” and “a blind spot with respect to an awareness of how men perceive women sexually, how they respond to them, and what they expect from them” (243). Mosier posits that the blind spot is not “gender-specific for [Emma/Cher] is also clueless about the sexual drives of Harriet/Tai” (243). Because of the similarity between Emma and Cher in this regard, Mosier suggests that Heckerling’s concept of sexual cluelessness “has a rather profound impact on any understanding of the novel” (243). He explains:

What makes the density more intriguing is that it goes hand in hand with a certain narcissistic surety as to what male (and female) sexuality really involves. Cher has complete confidence in her ability to seduce Christian, and goes through all the necessary steps, and yet she has missed the most obvious fact about him, which is that his sexual preferences disincline him to any carnal interests in women.

Therefore, although in theory cluelessness could well be ascribed to almost anything (a knowledge of computers, sewing machines, or cooking, for example), Heckerling restricts it fairly rigidly to this one area, leaving just enough spillover to prevent the definition from becoming schematic (interestingly enough, the one spillover is driving, where Cher is not simply clueless, but helpless; driving, particularly on the freeway system, apparently is used to represent an exclusively male activity). Now, of course this somewhat restricted definition is not at all a bad characterization of Emma Woodhouse. Although, like Cher, she has no experience with the opposite sex at all, this inexperience does not keep her from telling Harriet precisely what men expect and want in their relations with women. The humor in both film and novel is essentially the same, as it depends on an ironic and aware audience who see the situation much more clearly than does the heroine (243).

For Mosier, cluelessness appears to be a trait most commonly found in British and American novels, as opposed to in French or other European novels in which most characters seem to have a greater intuitive grasp of the nature of human sexuality and of courtship rituals. “But is cluelessness some great defect? Austen apparently does not think so. Based on what happens to her heroines, and to Emma in particular, it would seem that she sees this as a normal part of the growth process of young women” (Mosier 245).

Of course, Mosier confesses that he finds it unlikely that a teenage girl living in a society as sex-obsessed as contemporary America

would demonstrate the same ignorance about sex that a twenty-one-year-old woman from Regency England would. While he is essentially correct, there is another way of looking at Cher's innocence that makes it more understandable and realistic. As sexually liberated and progressive as many American teenagers generally seem to be, there are those teens that are so afraid of contracting a sexually transmitted disease that they consider abstinence or serial monogamy the safest possible sex life. In fact, while fear of AIDS is often not enough to prevent teenagers from being sexually active, it is reasonable to suggest that Cher is afraid of sex, and her sexual ignorance/innocence is a natural outgrowth of her decision "to save herself for Luke Perry," an idealized television star who symbolizes white masculinity at its purest and least sexually threatening.

For Melissa Mazmanian, it is the fear of sexually transmitted disease that keeps Cher a virgin and fuels her fear of commitment to a sexual relationship. In "Reviving *Emma* in a Clueless World: The Current Attraction to a Classic Structure," Mazmanian interprets many of the alterations that Heckerling made to the original story—including exaggerating Harriet/Tai's fickleness into an active promiscuity and transforming Frank's suave, effete manners into homosexuality—as signs that Heckerling is interested in using the novel as a means of exploring the ramifications of the AIDS virus on youth culture:

[*Clueless*] 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 the traditional 'aristocratic ideology,' based on a 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 represents 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....In both cases, the newfound space is extremely narrow and precarious. (1, 7)

After describing *Clueless*' AIDS subtext in detail, Mazmanian explains how the domestic Bildungsroman-style story of Cher's personal growth reflects the film's exploration of issues of "safe sex":

Essentially, Christian and Tai are subconscious challenges to Cher's virginity. Constructed as the protagonist of a novel of manners, Cher is set up as an ideal character. And in the modern context that prototype denotes

virginity. Tai and Christian are subtle projections of the real issue; one has sex and the other implicitly suggests what sexuality can lead to....(6-7)

William Phillips and Louise Heal also suggest that the supporting characters in *Clueless* represent a more dangerous, or less socially desirable, form of human sexuality than Cher, and posit that the resultant moral gulf that is created between Cher and the supporting characters serves as a contemporary equivalent of the novel's interest in class and status distinctions. As convincing as these views are, the fact that the film seems to want the audience to love these characters presents a challenge to the view that their chief function is to symbolically represent sexual deviance. Admittedly, there is a grotesque quality to Tai (the film's Harriet) that seems deliberately built into the character to help audience members excuse Cher's manipulation of her. However, while Dionne and Murray are intended to be funny in the ways that they conform (and *don't* conform) to racial stereotypes, they are charismatic and interesting characters in and of themselves, and can hardly be seen in a purely symbolic light as representative of dangerous sexuality. Christian in particular is a sympathetically presented character, and any reading of the film that views him purely as a warning sign about AIDS robs him of his complexity. As Sue Parrill observes, although "Cher's shock at realizing that Christian is gay" parallels "Emma's shock at Frank Churchill's irresponsibility in coming into the society of young ladies with the appearance of being unattached...the film attaches no blame to Christian; rather, Cher appears naïve for assuming that he is heterosexual" (121).

In many ways, it is difficult to watch any teenage "sex" comedy without thinking of all of the potential perils of sex that are essentially glossed over by the film, ranging from teen pregnancy to AIDS.⁹ The experience of watching *Clueless* is no exception, especially since its handling of sexuality seems to idealistically suggest that lovemaking can be consequence-free if the partners involved love one another enough. However, it is possible to push the AIDS subtext argument too far. Reading the film more literally, it seems feasible to take Cher at her word. She is single, she says, because boys her age are too immature and she has too little in common with them. For Cher, finding someone to date who is intelligent, well-groomed, and sexy is a truly difficult task, especially since the man whose personality is most compatible with hers is gay. However, she learns that sometimes love

can come from places where you least expect to find it, and the one she had previously ignored altogether as a possible romantic interest, a former step-brother with whom she engages in comic insult contests, is the very one who can make her most happy.

To one degree or another, all of the critical interpretations of *Clueless* as a domestic Bildungsroman reading of *Emma* are accurate. Cher gradually learns the importance of doing her homework more conscientiously, which signals the possibility that she will learn to elevate the quality of her recreational reading as well. After befriending Christian and becoming romantically involved with Josh, Cher ultimately learns enough about men to accurately boast understanding their wants and needs, thereby shedding the sexual cluelessness that John Mosier sees in her. And Gayle Wald is correct to point out that there are sizable gaps in Cher's knowledge of local and world affairs, which she takes the first steps towards rectifying when she begins watching CNN and finally joining one of Miss Geist's community activist projects. While each of the critics named above emphasizes different thematic strands in the film, their writings on *Clueless* finally complement one another by bringing to light the various ways in which the film dramatizes the maturation of its heroine, Cher Horowitz.

For scholars who see *Clueless* as a successful adaptation of *Emma*, the film finds fascinating contemporary parallels for Austen's ironic narrative tone. Even with its wide array of "high culture" and "popular culture" references, which seem to date *Clueless* as a product of the 1990s (the *Twin Peaks* reference, for example, has not stood the test of time), the film reflects Austen's own interest in critiquing culturally undervalued works of art such as the gothic novels and romance novels of her time. In addition, *Clueless* echoes Austen's concern with the shifting social mores of a turbulent socio-political era, and recreates the novel's ambivalent depiction of provincial life. Perhaps most significantly, if one were to treat the film in the same manner that one might treat a transposition or commentary adaptation of *Emma*, as a reading of the novel, then it may easily be regarded as a domestic Bildungsroman version of the story in which the Emma character learns to grow in understanding of herself and her place in society, and to finally reach her potential as she grows into womanhood.