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IRONY, FEMININITY, AND HEIRARCHY: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
HECKERLING'S *CLUELESS* AND AUSTEN'S *EMMA*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between Jane Austen's novel *Emma* and Amy Heckerling's film adaptation of the novel, *Clueless*. Through the exploration of these two works, the conversation between Austen's text and Heckerling's text is dissected in order to identify the consonant elements of irony and femininity between the two. These elements are analyzed within the cultural context of both 19th century England and 20th century America, specifically through nineties subcultures. Though the cultures of these periods may appear disparate on the surface, the ideologies within these cultures are, in fact, related. Both cases reflect the permanence of social hierarchy, regardless of a woman's position in society. In exploring *Clueless* and the way it both correlates and departs from Austen's text, this analysis illuminates the evolution of the structure of social class, and the ways in which contemporary culture correlates and departs from 19th century behaviors, fashions, and relationships.

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Chapter 1

Hollywood's Obsession With Austen

Though Jane Austen's writing career may have started in the small, secluded town of Chawton, Hampshire, it was certainly not where it ended. Though Jane Austen's fame has risen exponentially since the 20th century, her popularity can be traced to the second decade of the 19th century. Though Austen's popularity declined after her death, her literary reputation was revived by her niece, J.E. Austen-Leigh, who published *A Memoir of Jane Austen* in 1870 ("Jane Austen Biography"). Since the publication of her memoir, Austen's stories have continued to be printed and now, nearly 200 years after the publication of her first novel, Jane Austen is adored with notable intensity, and has become one of the most esteemed authors of all time, her novels admired and circulated on a global scale. Much of Austen's widespread popularity was due to television and film adaptations of her novels. Though Austen-esque movies have achieved noticeable success in recent years with films such as *Becoming Jane* (2007), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007) and *Austenland* (2013), no other generation contributed to Austen-mania more than the nineties.

Between 1995 and 1999 six of Jane Austen's novels were transformed into on-screen adaptations. In 1995, BBC released a *Pride and Prejudice* mini-series for television which was met with great success. In the same year *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, and the standout film, *Clueless*, were released and met with equal popularity amongst viewers. The following year saw two versions of *Emma*: one for the big screen and one for television. Finally, in 1999, *Mansfield Park* was released in theatres (Warren). This stream of Austen adaptations caused a number of cultural commentators and academics to take a second look at Austen, for what was once seen as

charming Victorian prose had now become a cultural phenomenon. What about these novels was so attractive to audiences of the nineties generation, and why were Austen's stories so adaptable to Hollywood film?

Critics have speculated many reasons for Austen's appeal to this generation ranging from nostalgia and escapism, to the desire for a traditional, old-fashioned love story. Though Austen's era was not without its pitfalls, her world was a peaceful getaway from the complications of the modern world. Critics who oppose this view argue that despite the happy endings in Austen's stories, nostalgia and romance are present in countless Victorian novels, and are not sufficient to justify 200 years of remarkable popularity. Regardless of the innumerable theories about Austen's work, one aspect of her novels that cannot be ignored is that they focus on themes of marriage, class, money, social pressure, and generational conflicts that resonate with modern audiences (Mattix).

While the Austen adaptations of the nineties strive to transfer her novels to film, in the same instance, these films communicate through voluminous distinctions between the film and the text. Though there are a number of parallelisms between the film adaptations and the novels, understanding the interweaving elements of femininity and hierarchy is integral to understanding Austen. One of the aspects of Austen's texts that is incredibly difficult for filmmakers to bring to life on the big screen is Austen's use of irony and social commentary, for these components are often dovetailed with the elements of femininity and hierarchy.

Though the majority of Austen adaptations attempt to stay as close to the text as possible, one nineties film which deliberately strays from the period genre is Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*. Though there instances of Austen's annotations which are the result of the similarities between the text and the film, what is noticeable about *Clueless* is that it purposefully departs from Austen's *Emma* in order to establish an entirely disparate text. Analyzing and exploring this film adaptation and the way it correlates with, and more significantly, departs from Austen's novels,

illuminates our changing perceptions of femininity and irony as they are presented in both Austen's and Heckerling's texts.

Though the hierarchical structures contained in these texts may appear disparate on the surface they are, in fact, inherently similar. Though the fast-paced, consumerist oriented, technologically advanced world of the nineties is a far cry from Austen's era, the general view on behavior, fashion, and relationships, specifically regarding women, is essentially the same. These like elements subsequently reveal that, just as women of Austen's time, women of nineties are limited in their movability within the gender hierarchy. In order to examine the restrictiveness of this hierarchy, I will analyze the prescribed elements of femininity that are presented in Austen's *Emma*, Heckerling's *Clueless*, and another Austen film adaptation of the nineties, one that attempts to directly mirror Austen's text, Douglas McGrath's *Emma*.

Chapter 2

Clueless and Nineties Film Culture

The nineties, though abounding with Austen film adaptations, were the golden years for kitschy, high school comedies, with films like *She's All That*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*, and *Drive Me Crazy* featuring plotlines of an underdog overcoming angst-filled, teenage dilemmas and falling in love. However, Heckerling's *Clueless* was a film of the nineties which united both of these genres, pleasing teenagers and Austen-lovers alike. Though *Clueless* deviates from traditional high school and period film genres, it has withstood the test of time and remained one of the most acclaimed and notorious comedies, its popularity continuing into the new millennium.

Critics' Response to *Clueless*

The hybridity of this film is possibly one of the greatest contributors to its success, and yet there are a number of film critics who find this deviation from Austen's text as a sort of blasphemy. Anthony Lane, author of "The Dumbing of Emma" compares, "the daffy shape of *Clueless*, a variation on the theme of *Emma*," to what he references as "the real thing—*Emma*, adapted and directed by Douglas McGrath" (76). Janet Maslin, writer for the *New York Times* states, "Despite its literary quasi-pedigree, *Clueless* doesn't have much more than scattered gags to keep it going" (1).

However, scholars tend to disagree with Lane and Maslin. Esther Sonnet, author of "From Emma to Clueless: Taste, Pleasure and the Scene of History" argues that,

Instead of effacing the 'difference' between the two texts, as a 'modern-day *Emma*' *Clueless* does not collapse high/low culture binaries, but invokes them in

an increasingly complex circulation of meanings around distinctions of contemporary taste and aesthetic value. (52)

Not only do scholars argue for the heightened aesthetic significance of *Clueless*, they also assert that the integral irony and social commentary of Austen's *Emma* is highlighted in the film as well. As Genilda Azeredo, author of "From *Emma* to *Clueless*: Ironic Representations of Jane Austen" states,

Differently from the so-called period film adaptations, *Clueless* takes place in Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, in twentieth-century times. This aspect immediately makes the viewer wonder how Jane Austen can 'fit' (or has the director's intention been to make her 'dissonant with?') such a context. (237)

Though McGrath and Lawrence's films claim to be "faithful" to Austen's *Emma* by celebrating Austen's greatness and reproducing her ironic and observant commentary, those adaptations that attempt to directly mirror Austen's text often lose this aspect when shrouded in the highly romanticized environments of these films. These environments include picturesque landscapes, large, ornate houses, and intricate costuming. The story-telling aspect of the film is often a sidebar to these landscapes and the actors, props, and dialogues which constitute them, and therefore Austen's voice blends into the background of these elaborate sets.

Azeredo asserts that the irony of *Emma* shines through in *Clueless* more so than the "traditional" film adaptations:

Clueless creates irony by intersecting past and present, by alluding to *Emma*, and at the same time by disguising, or denying, the allusion so as to concentrate on contemporary issues. Therefore, two readings of irony might result from *Clueless*: viewers who are not familiar with Austen's text will still enjoy the ironies in Heckerling's film; but the identification of *Emma* in *Clueless* (that is,

the possibility of voicing out the unsaid) certainly adds to another level of irony in the film, one resulting from the dialogic rubbing of both texts. (245)

Azeredo's evaluation of the effects of the converging time periods of *Clueless* and *Emma* is certainly effective in examining the ironies of both *Emma* and *Clueless*. However, Azeredo's shortcoming in this evaluation is her assertion that *Clueless* focuses solely on contemporary issues. In fact, what the intersecting of these two texts demonstrates is that these "contemporary issues" are not so much contemporary as they are archaic. A number of the so-called "contemporary" issues of the nineties generation, specifically concerning the female position within a prescribed social hierarchy, are directly correlative with issues of Austen's time period.

These issues range from manners of speech and behavior, to fashion, to relationships with men. Through examining these multiple categories through the context of both *Emma* and *Clueless* it is clear that a majority of the issues concerning femininity continued on into the twentieth century. Analyzing these common aspects in the novel and the film reveal that, though centuries have passed, women continue to be limited within their social strata, regardless of the privileges they may possess.

Emma: An Analysis of Austen's Heroine

At the age of 36 Austen published her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. Though the publication of her novel cost her a considerable sum, she redeemed the cost tenfold after the novel's immediate success. The novel's triumph encouraged Austen to continue her writing career, and the novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma* soon followed, all achieving equal, if not heightened notoriety amongst her readers ("Jane Austen Biography"). Among these four novels *Emma* is perhaps the most notable for, unlike the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, Austen's Emma is portrayed as profoundly and inherently flawed. However, it is Emma's imperfections which make her one of Austen's most beloved heroines.

Since the publication of *Emma* in 1815, the novel's protagonist has had her share of friends and foes in the literary world. In the early stages of Emma's creation, a number of Austen's protégés confessed to her that, though the setting was charming and laden with Austen's usual style and energy, the story was lackluster and uneventful as compared to her prior novels. Austen's publisher, John Murray, expressed that the plot was deficient in Austen's characteristic romantic prose while Maria Edgeworth, a contemporary author whose opinion Austen greatly respected, told her that she could not read past the first chapter (Sabor). Ironically, what these two literary aficionados pinpointed as Emma's greatest faults were, in reality, her greatest strengths as a literary heroine.

The complexities of Emma are perhaps defined most adequately by Reginald Farrer, one of Austen's most famous critics. He states,

Only when the story has been thoroughly assimilated, can the infinite delights and subtleties of [Emma's] workmanship begin to be appreciated, as you realize the manifold complexity of the book's web, and find that every sentence, almost every epithet, has its definite reference to equally emphasized points before and after in the development of the plot. (65)

Farrer suggests that only after reflecting on the novel's subtleties is the true nature of the narrative, and Emma's character, revealed. However, it is not simply the novel as a whole which requires scrutiny, it is Emma's character as well. Though Emma's character may at first appear transparent, there are strengths beneath her exterior that can only be found if one delves beneath the shell of Austen's depictions and explores the subtle complexities which make Austen's heroines so enduring and sympathetic.

If studied close enough, Emma's character reveals a complex narrative which emphasizes the concise social examination and criticism which is characteristic of Austen's writing. Though Emma Woodhouse may not be as sympathetic as other Austen heroines, the quick-witted

Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice* for example, her character is multifaceted and, ultimately, becomes the sympathetic heroine iconic of Austen's works. This in itself is ironic for, while Austen was writing the character of Emma, she stated outright that she wanted to create "a heroine whom no one but myself will like" (Jane Austen Society UK). Indeed, Austen's intention for Emma to be an antithesis for her previous heroines is revealed within the first paragraphs of the novel.

At first her character is presented in a similar vein to that of other Austen heroines: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and 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" (1). However, Austen almost immediately dispels any preferential opinion the reader may be forming for the heroine by adding that,

The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her. (1)

In the last two sentences one learns a great deal regarding Emma's character: she has every possible advantage a young woman could want during this time period, and yet she is exorbitant, indulgent, and most importantly, clueless.

By creating a character which is "unlikeable," Austen challenges both herself and her readers. One of the principle disparities between Emma and other Austen heroines is that she is, for all intents and purposes, independent. Emma has no financial trouble, belongs to the highest of social circles, and is not under any immense pressure to find a husband. Herein lies the problem that more than likely disenchanted Murray and Edgeworth. It is almost impossible for one to sympathize with a heroine who has everything her heart desires. She is wealthy, beautiful,

proud and possesses not a trace of humility, it seems. Throughout the length of the novel we witness Emma manipulate the emotions of those around her, utilizing her “superior” notions about match-making which ultimately end in calamitous results.

Therefore, while Austen’s challenge was to construct a fallible character, it is our challenge as readers to endure this character and her numerous blunders. It is perhaps the reader’s endurance of Emma’s mistakes which ultimately makes her one of Austen’s most likeable and relatable characters in that she is presented as unmistakably human. Other Austen heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice* or Fanny Price from *Mansfield Park*, are truly fictional characters in the sense that their mannerisms and temperaments are essentially unbelievable.

For one to possess Elizabeth Bennett’s sparkling wit or Fanny Price’s overwhelming obedience is essentially an impossibility, so much so that their characters, when analyzed closely, lack relevance with the average reader. Emma’s character, on the other hand, presents the reader with the concept that, beneath a supposedly flawless exterior there is an imperfect being underneath. An imperfect heroine who, when finally aware of her mistakes, attempts to correct them to the best of her ability. This transformation of Emma from insufferable and spoiled into a mature and sympathetic young woman is what makes her character so relatable.

Therefore, when Emma’s revelations finally and inevitably occur, it is not simply Emma who is surprised at her indiscretions. Emma’s realization of her own fallibility potentially mirrors our own misreading, not simply about the novel but about life itself. In this way, Austen emphasizes our own vulnerability to misperception and error. In initially thinking ourselves superior to Emma, we, too, reveal that at times we tend to think rather highly of ourselves. It is through this emphasis on self-recognition that Austen’s archetypical social commentary arises, a commentary which focuses on our ingrained social hierarchies and the female role within these hierarchies.

Chapter 3

Clueless as an Austen Film Adaptation

Like Austen, Heckerling poses the question: what are the concerns, language, relationship rituals, and fashion values of a wealthy and privileged group of young people? These aspects of social structure are examined at a distance through relevant cultural frameworks, and yet they are also examined specifically through the female protagonists of both texts: Cher and Emma.

Cher and Emma: A Comparison

In relation to the re-plotting of the text, Heckerling successfully substitutes the manners, formal conversation, and importance of self-image of *Emma* into the world of social interactions, popularity, and materialism of *Clueless*. Through the representation of values that is characterized by the protagonist, Cher, Heckerling portrays a significant visual image to emphasize Austen's commentary on social hierarchy, and the ways in which this hierarchy restricts females through their connoted criteria of femininity. In essence, though both Cher and Emma enjoy privileged lifestyles, they continue to be limited by prescribed notions of how they should appear or how they should behave.

Though the heroine's preoccupation with her outer-appearance is a prominent theme in Heckerling's *Clueless*, this theme is also expressed in the opening paragraph of *Emma*, where she is described as being "handsome, clever, rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition" (1), and has experienced "very little to distress or vex her" (1). This lack of vexation includes the death of her mother, who Emma merely mentions to the reader, for she died "too long ago for [Emma] to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses" (1). Emma's father is wealthy and they live together in a beautiful estate in a "large and populous village" (2) where

they “were first in consequence ... All looked up to them” (2). In addition to the luxuries her grand house affords her, Emma’s father is “most affectionate” and “indulgent” and treats her as the “mistress of the house” (23). If there is the slightest hint of trouble in Emma’s picturesque life, it is that “[t]he real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself ...” (1). In other words, Emma’s privileged situation leads her to possess a self-indulgent attitude towards life.

Independence for a woman during this time period was rare if not unheard of. However, though Emma enjoys a degree of freedom through self-sufficiency, she continues to be constrained by the context of social hierarchy, for she only exerts her power for superficial purposes, such as the planning of a party or the plotting of a new romance.

This lifestyle echoes that of Cher, who is introduced visually by Heckerling as a stereotypical, rich and beautiful blonde living an indulgent life of shopping and parties. Similar to Emma’s privileged home life, Cher resides in the urban sprawl of Beverly Hills with her equally adoring father. In addition, Cher mentions the absence of her mother with similar nonchalance: “Wasn't my Mom a betty? She died when I was just a baby. A fluke accident during a routine liposuction. I don't remember her, but I like to pretend she still watches over me” (Heckerling, *Clueless*). Cher’s character flaws are more blatant than Emma’s in that she is outwardly manipulative and ditzy, and yet her mannerisms are not so distant from those of Emma. Perhaps the only difference is that while Emma would be ashamed to expose her flaws so candidly, Cher demonstrates her shortcomings with gusto.

One of the principle failings of Cher’s character is her shameless obsession with her appearance and materialistic items. While Austen’s presentation of Emma’s concern with appearance is subtle, a regal portrait of a demure young lady dressed in satin and lace, Heckerling presents the theme of appearance in *Clueless* in an ostentatious and powerful manner featuring makeover montages and attractive adolescents dressed in blazers and miniskirts. These elements

of the film are rampant with pop culture references that were prominent during the mid-nineties, pertaining specifically to stereotypes, consumerism, and fashion.

What is ironic about the film's focus on these concepts is that during the nineties, there were a number of global debates occurring which concerned serious topics such as drugs, ethnicity, violence, and education. However, none of these controversial subjects is discussed by the characters of the film. This is integral to the makeup of Cher's character, for it strongly relates to Austen's social commentary in *Emma*. The women of *Emma*, specifically Emma herself, rarely concern themselves with critical subjects: politics, economics, or warfare for example. This is not necessarily because they do not want to be involved with these subjects, it is simply that ingrained notions of femininity do not allow them to be involved. In this way, both Cher and Emma appear to be living in a world apart, where the only influence they maintain is within their social circle.

In both *Emma* and *Clueless*, the female protagonists are rarely presented with scenarios that are cause for distress, and therefore their lives revolve around carefree activities such as picnics in the sun or shopping for a new, designer dress. Though on the surface this may appear to be a comfortable lifestyle, the focus on these trivial aspects is what exposes the vast societal gap between the roles of men and women in both the 19th century and the 20th century.

The Third-Person Narrator of *Emma* and *Clueless*

Nowhere is Austen's ironic commentary more prominent than in the narratives present in *Emma* and *Clueless*. In both cases, the narrator exists as a regulatory device for the heroines, a voice which pinpoints the characters' flaws. However, there are subtle differences between the two. While the first-person voice-over in *Clueless* is Cher herself, the third-person narrator in *Emma* is omniscient or, some may assume, Austen herself making a commentary on her own heroine. Though both narrators are critical to a degree, their criticisms vary based on context. While Austen's text is a clear critique of her heroine, Emma, the critique of Cher is often buried

beneath her ditzy dialogue. Though *Clueless* lacks a narrator which exposes the heroine's shortcomings, the capricious and often absurd inner monologue of Cher is what creates the critique. Though disparate, the overall social commentary that is presented by these narrators is clear: social hierarchies and standards of femininity are what define the lifestyles of the female protagonists in both Austen and Heckerling's texts.

From the start of Austen's *Emma* and Heckerling's *Clueless* the audience is immediately introduced to the shortcomings of the heroines, and these observations continue throughout the length of both texts. For example, Emma often passes critiques and judgments on those around her, concluding, without much thought, who should be her close companion (Harriet), who should be the perfect match, (Miss Taylor and Mister Weston, Harriet and Mister Elton), and who she herself should be in love with (Frank Churchill). Emma views herself as an all-knowing figure, a social superior who, blessed with a rich pedigree, feels as though she may manipulate those around her without consequence. However, though Emma may appear to have the world on a string she is, in fact, limited by her societal and gender-based hierarchy. While she maintains a degree of power, this power is only applicable to aspects of the Highbury lifestyle which are unmistakably feminine: planning balls, organizing picnics, and making studies of eligible young men, for example.

Throughout the novel Emma gradually recognizes her faults, and that her attempt to create relationships that suit her personal fancy causes more harm than good. However, until Emma learns to incorporate herself into her community and appreciate her neighbors and friends or, in other words, submit to her social hierarchy, the third-person narration throughout the novel serves to mercilessly expose Emma's shortcomings and delusions through the ironic social conventions which perpetuate them.

In the same way, the narration throughout *Clueless* disillusiones the main character, Cher. In *Clueless*, the audience is granted an insider's perspective through the mind of the heroine. Her

commentaries, and often vapid or comical responses to certain situations, allow us a closer look at her emotions. Scenes or dialogue that are ironic from the outsider's perspective therefore become doubly ironic when coupled with Cher's internal monologue. One of the most prominent examples of this is Cher's famous introductory line of the film, in which she compares her life to a Noxema commercial: "So OK, you're probably thinking, 'Is this, like a Noxema commercial, or what?' But seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes" (Heckerling, *Clueless*). In this way, *Clueless* becomes one of the most effective adaptations of *Emma*, for the scenes in *Clueless* which correlate with Austen's text require the audience to reassess the presence of the commentaries contained in the text and the film in terms of current audiences and current culture.

Heckerling therefore utilizes Cher's first-person voice-over to both challenge the audience's opinion of the text and further cement Austen's social commentary. Although there have been a number of *Emma* adaptations, *Clueless* is unique for it does not attempt to imitate or stay "faithful" to the period or setting of Austen's original text. As Mazmanian states,

Adaptations attempting to be true to an original novel end up disguising updated perspectives and agendas behind costumes or accents. *Clueless* does not face this dilemma. By setting *Clueless* in Beverly Hills of the 1990's, Heckerling brings Emma to our environment and allows us to investigate the film without the same degree of second-guessing necessary for other adaptations (Mazmanian).

As a text, *Emma* produces a number of varied readings which make the reader contemplate Austen's intentions for the novel. The reader must therefore decide how to align the character of Emma, the third-person narrator, and ultimately Austen within the multifaceted elements which constitute this text. The difficulties continue as readers of Austen assess film versions of *Emma*, for much of the original text is often lost. In addition, the plot and dialogue are often influenced by the contemporary perspectives of the director and screenwriter.

Similar to Mazmanian, Austen scholar Deborah Kaplan theorizes that the nineties film versions of Austen novels have the tendency to "harlequinize" them by focusing the audience's attention solely on the elaborate courtships and landscapes to the detriment of other aspects of the novel (Kaplan 178). One must take into account that a film adaptation of a novel does not need to be an exact replica of the book in order to be successful adaptation. However, Austen's novels are unique in that there is customarily the presence of an omniscient narrator. This presents a crucial problem when it comes to translating Austen's novels onto film: what happens to the third-person narrative voice that is a primary component to Austen's writing? It is, inevitably, lost.

Chapter 4

Scene Comparison: Introductions of McGrath's *Emma* and Heckerling's *Clueless*

In order to illuminate my argument, it is necessary to compare both Heckerling's *Clueless* and McGrath's *Emma* by dissecting the films and their various elements through the context of Austen's representations of irony, femininity, and social hierarchy. I will analyze both the opening scene from Heckerling's *Clueless* and the opening scene from McGrath's *Emma* to create a thorough and adequate comparison of their social contexts, and I will examine the ways in which the contemporary setting of *Clueless* effectively translates Austen's ironic and feminist critique.

Scene Analysis: McGrath's *Emma*

McGrath's film opens with the image of a globe spinning in an expansive universe, the background covered with twinkling stars. The shot continues with the globe quickly advancing towards the camera, eventually filling the screen. In the close up of the globe the viewer is presented with images of what seem to be the British Empire. However, upon a closer inspection it is revealed that the globe does not display a map of the world, rather, it is covered with small watercolor paintings attached to a material resembling papier-mâché. The camera then moves to the south of England, Highbury to be exact. As the camera continues to move south the viewer is presented with additional watercolor illustrations of the inhabitants of Highbury, which are ornately framed with oak leaves and doves. The globe then begins to resume its rotation as the camera pans out, revealing that it is indeed a painted, papier-mâché ball, a present Emma created for her former governess, who was recently married to the distinguished Mr. Weston.

This image of the globe immediately references both prescriptive notions of femininity and Emma's place within the social hierarchy. While men during this period have access to virtually the entire globe, Emma's sphere of influence, as a woman, is restricted to Highbury and Highbury alone. Though she may have a degree of independence within this sphere, outside of this context she is virtually powerless. The globe itself is a reminder of Emma's constraints. As stated previously, Emma's concerns are generally one-dimensional and inherently feminine: tea parties, balls, and marriages for example. Emma's creation of the globe for Mrs. Weston is a perfect example of the activities which occupy her time and constitute her life.

As the scene continues the sound of a delicate violin is heard followed by the voice of the narrator: "In a time when one's town was one's world... and the actions at a dance excited greater interest than the movement of armies, there lived a young woman, who knew how this world should be run" (McGrath, *Emma*). This is, coincidentally, the only instance in which a narrative voice is heard in this film. It is also one of the only instances in the film in which the ironic commentary of Austen's narrator is established. This ironic aspect is clear at the end of the narrator's statement, "there lives a young woman, who knew how this world should be run," which pokes light fun at the fact that Emma does not, in fact, know how the world should be run.

While McGrath's film does not contain an omniscient, third-person narrator for the length of the film's action, it does utilize a narrative voice at both the introduction and conclusion of the film in order to frame Emma's story. However, though McGrath's film adaptation is often praised for its accuracy in portraying Austen's text, the narrator in the film is vastly dissimilar to the narrator of Austen's *Emma*. The narrator of the film appears to be conscious of Emma's faults, yet does not criticize them. Instead, the narrator utilizes a sympathetic tone while describing Emma, calmly approving of her failings as though they are acceptable components of both Emma's character and the Highbury lifestyle.

However, in Austen's *Emma*, the narrator has no qualms about exposing Emma's faults. In fact, without the constant presence of the narrator, much of Emma's character is lost. The absence of the narrator also effects Austen's critique of the social hierarchy which governs Emma's world, for while the exterior view of Highbury is portrayed as tranquil and beautiful, the interior is composed of strict codes of behavior, specifically for women, which undermine its peaceful state. Without the presence of the critical narrator of Austen's text, audiences are only exposed to a singular facet of the Highbury environment, and are therefore presented with a skewed image of Emma's world.

In the novel *Emma* follows Austen's typical plotline, a heroine's journey to an eventual union with the omniscient narrator's convictions. While this omniscient narrator is present in the majority of Austen's works, this literary device is essential in the formation of Emma's character, for, unlike Austen's other heroines, Emma is deeply and inherently flawed. A character which does not require this narrative voice which can be juxtaposed with Emma is her former governess Miss Taylor, or Mrs. Weston, who is introduced in the first scene of both the novel and the film. Mrs. Weston does not require the same degree of narration as Emma, for Mrs. Weston possesses the ability to interpret her surroundings logically. As a character, she is more fully-formed than Emma; all the changes she undergoes are physical and situational, not moral (Warhol 36).

As Booth, author of "Control of Distance in Jane Austen's *Emma*," states, "in *Emma* there are many breaks in the point of view, because Emma's beclouded mind cannot do the whole job" (107). Mrs. Weston's character is generally insightful and aware of the connotations of her social environment and interactions, and therefore it is unnecessary for Austen to utilize an ironic narrator in the formation of her character, for she is naturally sympathetic to the reader. However Emma, who, among her many faults, believes that she is just as clear sighted as Mrs. Weston, is in need of additional narration in order for the reader to gain a complete illustration of her character and her position within her social hierarchy.

With the number of flaws in Emma's character, it is possible that readers may disregard her as an Austen heroine without the presence of the narrator. This is due to the fact that, unlike Austen's previously published novels, the story of Emma relies extensively on her various internal conflicts, which range from questions about social etiquette to her relationships with parallel characters. As Booth states, the presence of the narrator is necessary to "reinforce...our inside view of Emma's worth and our objective view of her great faults," as well as to "direct our intellectual, moral, and emotional progress" through the novel (111).

The view of the narrator therefore allows the reader a certain degree of intimacy with Emma's character, or an up close and personal view of her faults. This intimacy is ultimately what makes Emma's character sympathetic, for once Emma recognizes these flaws in herself she begins the slow process of attempting to correct them. Her desire to better herself is what makes her one of the most relatable and realistic Austen heroines. However, without the presence of the narrator, particularly in film adaptations such as McGrath's *Emma*, the sympathy for the heroine is often lost for it is buried beneath blatant pretensions, rigid manners, and elaborate costuming. The loss of the third-person narration also amplifies these aspects of the film, in that Emma becomes a stereotypical romantic heroine.

It could be argued that Emma's character can generate the sympathy from the audience without the help of the omniscient narrator, specifically when referencing a film adaptation. When viewers are presented with a literal image of Emma's charismatic manner rather than having to conjure a representation of her in their minds, her character may be able to carry the story without the aid of a narrative voice. Sarah Morrison, author of "*Emma* Minus Its Narrator: Decorum And Class Consciousness In Film Versions Of The Novel," explores the possibilities of a narrator-less *Emma*, by suggesting that films, like McGrath's, which do not include this omniscient voice, must "compensate for the absence of the witty and intrusive narrator who

negotiates the space between the heroine's subjective experience, other characters' perspectives, and something that may be called 'objective' reality" (2).

The removal of the third-person voice in McGrath's *Emma* therefore results in invented dialogue and large plot gaps, spaces which were previously filled with insightful, comical, and often ironic observations of the narrator. Because the formation of Emma's character is so closely shaped by this narrative voice, film adaptations must restructure the text in order to effectively depict Emma's internal conflicts; filmmakers often attempt to remedy this by inserting narrative remarks outside the narrative sphere and inside the context of public conversation.

This alteration of the text consequently alters Emma's character, creating a personality which audiences are hard-pressed to sympathize with (Morrison 2-4). A basic image of Emma's character on film, without the presence of the narrator, presents her as elitist, selfish, and arrogant. She retains these characteristics in Austen's novel, however, with the help of the narrator readers are able to realize that, though she possesses these faults, her judgment is simply clouded. However, in the case of McGrath's film adaptation of the novel, this side of Emma's character is quite difficult to see, for as previously stated, any trace of sympathetic character is lost behind elaborate dialogue and extravagant costuming.

As the narrator completes her brief introduction, the camera further recedes to display the rest of the scene. The audience is presented with Emma, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, spinning the globe as it dangles from her hand. She wears a long gown, jewelry, and has her hair pulled up into an elegant knot at the top of her head. The costuming of Emma, in this instance, is clearly meant to demonstrate her prominent femininity through her outward beauty. This image of Emma is coupled with numerous lines of dialogue in which she praises virtually all of the individuals in her company to some extent.

After Mrs. Weston compliments her on her painting, Emma responds with "You are very kind, but it would be all the better if I had practiced my drawing more, as you urged me"

(McGrath, *Emma*). When Mr. Elton seconds Mrs. Weston's statement, Emma continues to disregard the compliment by replying, "The job well done, Mr. Elton was yours in performing the ceremony" (McGrath, *Emma*). This is a primary example of McGrath's attempt to sidestep the narrative dialogue of Austen's original text, which constitutes the entirety of the novel's introduction. The dialogue in this scene not only seems forced, it portrays Emma's character as disingenuous. During Emma's following embrace with Mrs. Weston, the audience sees her facial expression change drastically from blissful happiness to pensive sadness. Though in Austen's text the narrator explains that this emotion is felt at the loss of her friend to married life, McGrath's text gives no such context. The audience is then left to wonder at Emma's sincerity, not simply in this introductory scene but throughout the rest of the film as well.

Scene Analysis: Heckerling's *Clueless*

Heckerling's film adaptation of the novel, *Clueless*, is the virtual opposite of McGrath's *Emma*. While much of Emma's character is lost with the absence of the third-person voice, the narrator, Cher, plays a prominent role throughout the film, specifically in the first scene. At the start of this scene the title is presented in colors of bright blue, green, and purple, resonant with loud colors in the character's clothing throughout the film. Cher's extravagant way of life is demonstrated through a montage of clips used in the introductory scene as well. Cher is seen in a variety of situations: driving around with friends, carrying shopping bags, giggling poolside in a bikini. The mood of these scenes is fast-paced and exciting. The characters are young, attractive, fashionably dressed, and the setting is a wealthy residential area of Los Angeles. The lighting is bright, and the actors' expressions and gestures display enthusiasm and energy.

Further analysis of this introductory scene reveals that beneath this montage of images there is a continued emphasis on superficiality similar to that of Austen's *Emma*. However, at the same time, this significance of the trivial establishes voluminous distinctions. As previously mentioned, throughout *Emma*, a woman's station within the social hierarchy is ascertained

through traditional elements of femininity: respect, manners, gentility, propriety, and elegance. However, in *Clueless* this station is determined through self-image, fashion-consciousness, and consumerism. The first time the character of Cher clearly appears to the audience is when she is walking out of a department store, arms loaded with shopping bags, a large, satisfied smile on her face.

Cher is stylishly dressed in a clean black blazer and white blouse, her blonde hair flowing behind her. The subsequent images display Cher with her equally fashionable and attractive companions. In a similar way, Austen's social and cultural context is visible through *Highbury's* social environment. The characters codes of etiquette and demeanor are prominently displayed with a clear focus on discourse and manner. Emma, within the peaceful grounds of *Highbury*, goes on excursions with packed lunches, holds dinner parties for her elderly neighbors, and is required, by hierarchical constraints, to always place the concerns of others at the forefront of her mind. However, Emma often engages in these activities in order to present a calculated version of herself in society. Underneath her reserved exterior, Emma is chiefly concerned with the way that she appears to those around her.

Therefore, while in McGrath's *Emma* true intentions and emotions are often concealed, these same aspects of Austen's text in *Clueless* are presented blatantly in the context of nineties culture. Cher is, like Emma, elitist, selfish, arrogant, and undeniably beautiful, and she wears these aspects of her characters proudly, like badges of honor. Audience members know this because Cher tells us so, her narrative dialogue describing her overly-privileged world. Though some may argue that this makes Cher's character immediately unlikeable, the insertion of her narrative throughout the film is more sincere than it is domineering. Rather than having to dissect the metaphor of the spinning globe in the introductory scene of McGrath's *Emma*, *Clueless* brings Cher's queen bee status to the forefront of the film, in no way presenting her as better or worse than she actually is.

Though Cher's character may be ditzy and overindulgent, her truth telling, however vapid, is refreshing and, ultimately, makes her character sympathetic to audiences. She is a young girl who is comfortable being exactly who she is, which is one of Cher's main attractions as a heroine. The character of Emma, as she is presented in Austen's novel, is directly correlative with the character of Cher: self-assured, charming, and good-hearted. However, Emma's character, as she is portrayed in McGrath's film adaptation, does not reflect these characteristics, not for lack of trying.

Though McGrath's Emma and Heckerling's Cher demonstrate certain differences in temperament, they do in fact share common ground: their position in their individualized social hierarchies. Though centuries apart these women occupy a similar station, one which is ruled by prescribed concepts of femininity and, consequently, privileges superficiality over sensibility. While both heroines possess considerable privilege, they remain constrained by society's preconceived notions of the ways they should appear and behave. Though there is an expansive gap between the 19th and 20th centuries, Heckerling demonstrates, through Cher, that there is still evidence of Austen's world in contemporary society, specifically through her focus on social behavior, material items, and relationships.

Chapter 5

Austen and Nineties Pop Culture

It is not simply Cher's character which reflects the relative female position within the social hierarchy of the 20th century. A number of the pop culture references throughout *Clueless* establish this context as well. These references range from musical artists, to clothing trends, to gender movements. Though on the surface they may appear to be minor components in the backdrop of Cher's world, the reality is that a number of these pop culture aspects are what shape her life and, in some cases, determine her position within her social hierarchy.

Riot Grrrl, Girl Power, and *Clueless*

One of the first significant pop culture references is presented during the opening scene of *Clueless* in which The Muff's cover of "Kids In America" plays in the background. The group, The Muff's, were a pop-rock band from California who were signed by Warner Bros. Records in the mid-nineties, around the same time period of the setting of *Clueless* ("The Muffs Biography"). The lead singer of The Muffs, Kim Shattuck, was considered a pop-rock heroine of the time. Previously a member of the all-girl group, The Pandoras, Shattuck's over-the-top style personified the mid-nineties fashion of *Clueless*, short skirts, chunky heels, bubblegum colors and all.

However, The Pandoras, in addition to a number of other female rock groups from the nineties including Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, The Butchies, Calamity Jane, and Emily's Sassy Lime, comprised a nineties phenomenon often referred to as the "Riot Grrrl" movement. As Rebecca Hains, author of "The Significance of Chronology in Commodity Feminism: Audience Interpretations of Girl Power Music" states:

Taking an anti-capitalistic bent, the riotgrrrls argued that girls' empowerment was a DIY project—something achievable through girls' own production of subcultural texts, such as zines, music, and so on. This subcultural form of girl power positioned girls as producers of their own culture—independent, creative, and free from the trappings of normative femininity and compulsory heterosexuality. (1)

The fact that the introductory song is associated with a member of the “Riot Grrrl” movement is ironic for, with the film's prominent female stereotypes and consumerist backdrop, it is practically an antithesis for everything the “Riot Grrrl” movement stands for. However, the “Riot Grrrl” movement was not completely absent from the commodity culture which it ridiculed.

To start, the title of the movement itself became a commodity. As Alison Jacques, author of “The Incorporation of Riot Grrrl” states, “For the mass media, an industry that thrives on sound bites and buzz words, ‘grrrl’ was a commercial dream come true” (49). After a number of reluctant appearances by the riot grrrls in mainstream media, the term ‘grrrl’ was coined to describe popular female rockers such as Courtney Love and Kim Gordon. From there the term was taken out of its musical context and used to describe athletes (“Biker Grrrl”), academics (“Modern Grrrl”), and a number of other commercial labels within the umbrella of the mass media (49).

The most blatant commodification of “Riot Grrrl” culture came in the form of a t-shirt. Particularly dedicated members of the movement used to write controversial statements on their bodies using black markers, the words “rape,” “shame,” and “slut” being the popular terms. Essentially, the riot grrrls attempted to be the antithesis of traditional feminine concepts (Jacques). However, the initially contentious statement of the riot grrrl rebelling against popular culture norms and ideologies backfired when commodity culture began to incorporate their idea into a product that was both fashionable and profitable. As Jacques states, “I believe a line can be

drawn from the words that riot grrrls wrote on their bodies in the early 1990s to popular girl-themed slogans printed on t-shirts in the mid-to late '90s" (49). Soon after these riot grrrl statements became popular, shops flooded with tight fitting t-shirts with the words "tasty," "tart," and "maneater" emblazoned in large, bubblegum letters across the chest (Jacques).

In this way, the Riot Grrrl movement demonstrates the inability for females to escape the trappings of the imposed social hierarchy of the 20th century. In order for these women to escape, they attempted to create distinct clothing and music which would allow them a lifestyle which was entirely independent of the societal constraints imposed on women. However, just as Emma and Cher remain trapped by the restrictions of their social environments, the riot grrrls were also limited by these constraints. Even the most extreme attempt to evade this hierarchy (the "marker rebellion") ended in failure, for after the stunt was commodified the riot grrrls were once again lumped in with mainstream culture, a mainstream culture which dictated the ways in which women should appear and behave in society.

The commodification of the riot grrrl "marker rebellion" also coincided with one of the biggest musical phenomenons of the nineties: The Spice Girls. As Hains states,

Whereas the riot grrrls rejected normative femininity, the Spice Girls embraced it; and, whereas the riot grrrls positioned girls as producers, the Spice Girls positioned girls as consumers. The band encouraged its fans to purchase a glut of Spice Girls merchandise as a purported means to empowerment: CDs, t-shirts, key chains, dolls, and so on. (1)

The Spice Girls promoted a "Girl Power" similar to that of *Clueless*. This idea of "Girl Power" assured women that by exercising their freedom of choice to purchase specific products they can assert their empowerment. In other words, all that girls needed to do to have "Girl Power" was purchase "Girl Power" merchandise. In Cher's case, this merchandise includes designer shoes, clothes, cars, and other materialistic items which give her power within her social sphere.

Not only is it relevant that a prominent member of the “Riot Grrr!” movement sings the song for the introductory scene of the film, the lyrics of song itself, “Kids in America”, are significant as well. The first stanzas of the song are as follows:

Looking out a dirty old window.

Down below the cars in the city go rushing by.

I sit here alone and I wonder why.

Friday night and everyone's moving.

I can feel the heat but it's soothing.

Heading down, I search for the beat in this dirty town. (“Kids In America Lyrics”)

Clearly, the song is not referencing the privileged teenagers of Cher’s world. The “kids” in the song are ordinary, if not underprivileged American teenagers. While the “Kids in America” lament their lonesome, disadvantaged existence, the “kids” in the introductory scene are displayed as living a life of luxury. This song choice was effective for the introduction of this scene, for the image provides the audience with a view of “America” and its “kids” through a lens slanted by the consumerist culture which shapes Cher’s life.

The Consumerism of *Clueless*

The fact that Heckerling’s *Clueless*, made in 1995, was so closely associated with consumerism is notable for during this time consumerism, specifically for young people, was at an all-time high. By the mid-nineties, teenagers had become a major target audience for advertisers, and were estimated to be worth 125 billion dollars (Leiss 478). In “Social Communication in Advertising: Consumption in the Mediated Marketplace” William Leiss and others explored the generational dissimilarities between nineties youth and their predecessors,

“Rather than being rejecters of consumerism, millennials were purchasing and spending on things that increased their sense of esteem and belongingness” (478).

This emphasis on consumerism, specifically in Cher’s case, demonstrates her limited abilities within her social hierarchy as well. In order for Cher, or any woman for that matter, to establish a stable position within the social context of *Clueless*, it was necessary for them to participate in this consumerist culture. The more expensive the commodities, the higher the position in the social hierarchy. Therefore, nineties teens subsequently became a profitable target for advertisers in that, just as the teenagers in Cher’s world, this demographic was easily manipulated by consumerist ideologies.

Another author who has examined the consumerist culture of the nineties generation, Naomi Klein, describes in her book, *No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, the mindset of the youth culture during the nineties and the ways in which they conformed to popular culture in order to create individual, consumerist-oriented identities. She states, “Their parents might have gone bargain basement, but kids, it turned out, were still willing to pay up to fit in” (68).

In the chapter “Alt. Everything” of Klein’s book, she also focuses on the need for brands to reevaluate the methods of targeting nineties youth and their need “to fashion brand identities that would resonate with this new culture” (68). This required marketers to uncover what was considered “cool” by this generation. This need for advertisers to uncover what constituted “cool” resulted in a number of marketing strategies. One of the most popular strategies for marketing the concept of “cool” was hiring business men and women who were dubbed by the industry as “cool hunters”.

Cool hunters “would search out pockets of cutting edge lifestyle, capture them on videotape and return to clients” (Klein 72). The lifestyle of Cher and her attractive companions is undoubtedly what these “cool hunters” were scouting for. However, this concept in itself is

ironic, for once these trends are discovered, marketed, and released into mainstream culture, they are subsequently made “uncool” within the same culture. A perfect example of this is when, in the second half of the film, Cher goes to a party in The Valley and she sees her nemesis, Amber, wearing the same outfit she had worn to school the day before.

Tai: Cher, ain't that the same dress that you was wearin' yesterday?

Cher: Say, Ambular?

Amber: Hi.

Cher: Was that you going through my laundry?

Aamber: As if. Like I would really wear something from Judy's.

Cher: Do you prefer fashion victim or ensemble challenged? (Heckerling, *Clueless*)

When a materialistic item that was once deemed “cool” by nineties youth, such as Cher’s designer dress, is inserted into a mainstream context, the item loses its consumer appeal. This revolution of cool is similar to the dilemma of the riot grrrls. Once a trend is introduced into mainstream culture, the individual is no longer an “individual”. The idea that “everyone” has “it”, whatever “it” may be, is therefore a major turnoff for the consumerist youth of the nineties. This mission to own the “coolest” or “trendiest” items in turn promotes insecurities in its target buyers, specifically females in the case of *Clueless*.

The importance of “cool” within nineties culture is also reiterated through the scene in which Cher attempts to find her outfit for school. However, Cher is not sifting through jeans and t-shirts; rather she sorts through blouses and miniskirts in vibrant colors and patterns. The exaggerated costuming within *Clueless* confirms the importance of the consumerist culture and the ways in which it defines femininity, for Cher’s life revolves around and is restricted by decisions of fashion. Cher’s wardrobe in itself is significant, for during the nineties minimalist fashion was the widely accepted trend. Designers began to turn away from the exaggerated colors

and volume, exhausted of the excess of the eighties, and began to focus on clothing which emphasized minimalism.

Designers created business and casual wear which accentuated clean, sleek lines and simple structures in understated colors such as black, grey, white and nude (Nicholls). From the audience's first glimpse of Cher it is obvious that she strays from this prescribed fashion trend, at least in terms of the color pallet. Take for example, her first outfit of the film: a plaid, mustard yellow mini skirt and blazer. Dionne's matching black, white, and red ensemble appears doubly outrageous with the addition of her flamboyant top hat. In a sense, Cher's flashy wardrobe serves as her attempt to remove herself from the "mainstream" world and assert her independence. However, Cher's attempt to be fashion forward ultimately backfires, for it is the fashion world which ultimately restricts her. As Anna Despotopoulou, author of "Girls on Film: Postmodern Renderings of Jane Austen and Henry James" states:

Clueless suggests that commodity culture has consumed the consciousness of teens, and especially teen girls, reifying their experience and eventually transforming them into women with little imagination and with tastes dictated by the idols of the fashion and music industries. Likewise, Jane Austen's novels satirized the superficiality with which some women approached those media of culture (music, reading, languages, etc.) which had only one purpose: to ensure their marketability. (117)

This need to be "marketable" or to be in possession of a "cool" appearance or identity presents an opportunity for brands to capitalize off of the insecurities that the brand themselves perpetuates in their target market (Despotopoulou). Cher is, undoubtedly, a member of this target market.

Though in Cher's mind she is attempting to assert her independence by wearing unique and expensive clothing, she is, in fact, "buying" into another sort of hierarchy, a consumerist hierarchy, which further restricts her freedom as a female within her social context.

Brand Recognition in *Clueless*

The restrictive consumerist culture is also displayed through the constant namedropping of popular and often luxury brands throughout the film. Cher mentions a number of designers, including Calvin Klein, Fred Segal, and Azzedine Alaïa. She is also seen carrying bags from expensive stores such as Tiffany & Co. and Boulmiche. It is not simply clothing and jewelry brands that are showcased in *Clueless*. Following the introductory film montage, Cher herself compares her lavish lifestyle to that of a popular brand of the time: Noxzema. She quips, “So okay, you’re probably thinking, like, is this a Noxzema commercial or what?!” (Heckerling, *Clueless*). To Cher’s credit, there could not have been a more fitting comparison.

One of the most popular Noxzema commercials, starring the beautiful Rebecca Gayheart, directly mirrors the introductory scene of *Clueless*. The commercial begins with a shot of Gayheart fixing her hair as she listens to a voicemail from her friend: “Hi, it’s me! We’re meeting at 10:30. Guess what? Kevin’s going to be there” (“Rebecca Gayheart Noxzema Commercial 1991”). What follows is a montage glaringly similar to introductory montage of *Clueless*: attractive, well dressed teenagers laughing and teasing one another in the animated environment of a boardwalk fair.

The fact that Cher chose to compare her life to a Noxzema commercial is pertinent for a number of reasons, in addition to the commercials stark similarity to her own life. The commercial was a highly marketed one, and was mainly showcased on television stations that were popular with nineties youth, such as MTV. This is one reason for the commercials popularity; however, the main reason for the commercials fame was its star, Rebecca Gayheart. She was slender, with a mane of curly brown hair, bright blue eyes, and a sweet smile. After the release of the commercial she became a teen idol. Girls wanted to be her and boys wanted to date her. In essence, she became the standard of femininity, a model of what a “nineties girl” was supposed to be (“Rebecca Gayheart Noxzema Commercial 1991”).

This stereotype serves to further establish Cher's limited movability within her social hierarchy. For Cher, being beautiful and charming are perhaps two of the integral traits for a woman to possess. However, it is this disposition which limits her. To Cher's credit, this frame of mind was almost impossible to escape, considering that nineties youth were bombarded with these commercials on a daily basis. However, Cher's disposition combined with the barrage of suggestive advertisements produces calamitous results, for the result is a girl who is ruled entirely by the consumerist culture which surrounds her.

The "Cluelessness" of Commodity Culture

Both *Clueless* and *Emma* utilize aspects of consumer or "commodity culture," which consequently makes them both unaware of the absurdities of this culture and the ways in which this culture restricts their movability within their social hierarchies. This issue is a prominent one in *Clueless*, for as the film progresses, the emphasis on consumerism becomes continuously apparent. As Azeredo states,

The attention given to fashion and consumerism is such that the school where part of the action of *Clueless* takes place reminds the viewer, many times, of a fashion show walkway or parade. People are distinguished and identified in terms of their dressing. (247)

One of the best examples of this identification through consumerism and fashion is Tai, the new girl who Cher and Dionne decide to take under their wing. Before any of her classmates converse with her, they instantly judge her based on her fashion sense. Take, for instance, the scene in which Tai is first introduced to her peers:

Principal: Miss Stoeger? Got another one. Ladies, we have a new student with us. This is Tai Frasier.

Miss Stoeger: Tai, you don't have time to change, but you could hit a few balls in those clothes.

Amber: She could be a farmer in those clothes.

Cher: Dee, my mission is clear. Would you look at that girl? She is so adorably clueless. We have got to adopt her. (Heckerling, *Clueless*)

Cher, Dionne, and Amber know little to nothing about Tai at this point, and yet they are making assumptions about her based on the fact that she is wearing baggy jeans and a flannel. The mention of the title in this scene is noteworthy for, in the vocabulary of Beverly Hills teenagers in the mid-nineties, the term “clueless” meant “uncool, lost, or confused”. In essence, the term “clueless” marks Tai as a social outcast.

However, according to the consumerist ideology of the time, Tai is, in fact, the opposite, for her clothing choices dictate she is a distinct member of a social group and a follower of one of the most popular trends of the nineties: grunge fashion. Grunge fashion was at its heyday in the mid-nineties, around the same time *Clueless* was released. It is thought to have originated in Seattle, Washington, and was made popular by bands like Pearl Jam and Nirvana. The style combined elements of punk and rock mixed with inexpensive or secondhand working class clothing, like the jeans and plaid fabrics Tai often wore before she is made over by Cher and Dionne (Mey).

The grunge trend, much like the riot grrrl trend, was initially intended as a protest against prominent consumer ideologies. Though grunge was a rejection of the consumerist excesses which were so common in the nineties, as all styles recognized as “cool” during this period, it was quickly picked up by designers such as Mark Jacobs and Anna Sui and transformed into a well-known fashion trend (Mey). Grunge morphed from inexpensive, thrift-store finds to glamorous, expensive clothing which was showcased on the runway or in fashionable boutiques. The fabrics were finer than the traditional cottons, but the tights, distressed denim, and especially the plaid, remained. So, in essence, Cher and Dionne’s plaid skirts and blazers were a result of the grunge movement, and therefore criticizing Tai’s fashion sense is like criticizing their own.

Therefore, Cher's dubbing of Tai as "clueless" is in complete opposition with the consumerist ideology of the time period. In this particular context, Cher is the one who is "clueless". This scene serves to demonstrate that, though Cher considers herself to be fashion savvy, she is out of touch with current trends which do not extend from her social circle. Therefore, this aspect of Cher's character not only demonstrates her "cluelessness" regarding the consumerist culture which surrounds her, it also demonstrates the ways in which this culture, and the social hierarchy encapsulated in this culture, manipulates and shapes her character.

Conclusion

Heckerling's Conversation With Austen

Throughout Heckerling's *Clueless* and Austen's *Emma* there are a number of correlative elements, specifically regarding the concept of femininity, which consequently cement the heroines' stations within their individual social hierarchies. Both Cher and Emma's characters demonstrate their acceptance of these concepts through their transparent superficiality, their lives preoccupied with thoughts of parties and clothing. Though both Cher and Emma parallel one another in this respect, the aspect of their characters that most effectively demonstrates the texts' components of irony and femininity is their ultimate surrender to their male counterparts. This is particularly significant, for both heroines, from the start of their texts, insist that they are content with their lives without the presence of a male figure. Therefore, the conversation between Heckerling's *Clueless* and Austen's *Emma* is perhaps best illustrated through the final scenes of the film and the novel in which, inevitably, the heroines discover their true loves.

Final Scene Analysis: Heckerling's *Clueless* Versus Austen's *Emma*

Throughout the length of the novel, Emma engages in a single romantic endeavor with the character Frank Churchill. However, in the final pages of Emma's story it is revealed that she possesses an affection which she herself is unconscious of, specifically her romantic attraction to her long-time friend, Mr. Knightley. This realization is caused by two events at the closing of the novel—Frank Churchill's engagement and Harriet's confession of her love for Mr. Knightley. Both events come as a rapid shocks to Emma, for though she prides herself on being well-informed, she is completely unaware of the emotions of those around her. Ironically, in order for Emma to fully recognize her own feelings, it is necessary for her to be entirely unromantic and compare the pedigrees of the two gentlemen. She states,

When had [Mr. Knightley] succeeded to that place in her affection, which Frank Churchill had once, for a short period, occupied?—She looked back; she compared the two—compared them, as they had always stood in her estimation, from the time of the latter’s becoming known to her... She saw that there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr. Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear. She saw, that in persuading herself, in fancying, in acting to the contrary, she had been entirely under a delusion, totally ignorant of her own heart—and, in short, that she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all! (412)

Emma’s confession is a perfect example of the blended components of irony and femininity which constitute Austen’s text. The irony of this scene results from a comparison of Emma’s headstrong character at the start of the novel. In one of Emma’s initial dialogues on marriage, she proclaims to Harriet, ““I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature”” (84). While further explaining her views on the subject, Emma also states that her affection for her nieces and nephews ““suits my ideas of comfort better than what is warmer and blinder”” (86).

However, by the end of the novel, Emma contradicts both of these statements. Not only does she fall in love, she becomes engaged, two events which she once asserted as unnecessary for her life. Emma’s entrance into married life is also a direct result of the pressures of her social hierarchy. Though Emma is respected among the inhabitants of Highbury, she is nevertheless scrutinized due to her unmarried status. Therefore, it is not simply Emma’s realization of love that leads her to wed Mr. Knightley; it is society’s preconceptions about femininity and her knowledge of her role within her social hierarchy which influences her decision as well.

The scene in which Cher realizes her love for her male counterpart, Josh, is correlative with Austen’s *Emma* in that both heroines are affected by societal undertones. While in Austen’s world femininity is shaped by gentility, manners, and, ultimately, marriage, femininity in Cher’s

world is shaped by fashion and consumerism. Though Cher's revelation about her feelings for Josh are the result of equally as jarring shocks (she discovers that her single romantic interest, Christian, is homosexual and that her best friend, Tai, is in love with Josh), her epiphany does not result from a calculated examination of her emotions, rather, ironically, it is the result of a shopping excursion. In Cher's comical narrative dialogue during this scene she states, "I felt impotent and out of control, which I really hate. I needed to find sanctuary in a place where I could gather my thoughts and regain my strength" (Heckerling, *Clueless*).

The image of the mall is recurring throughout the film, and acts as a central factor of Cher's character, consequently securing her place within her social hierarchy. There are a number of instances in which others in the film define Cher's character through fashion and consumerism by suggesting that, instead of worrying over potentially critical issues, she "Just go back to the mall or something;" or "go out and have fun, go shopping" (Heckerling, *Clueless*). Cher, demonstrating her limited movement within her social hierarchy, often takes this advice. During the scene in which Cher realizes her feelings for Josh, she is seen wandering the streets admiring the items in the boutique windows. Her ironic monologue during this scene further defines Cher's character within the constraints of prescribed femininity:

Everything I think and everything I do is wrong... I was wrong about Christian, and now Josh hated me. It all boiled down to one inevitable conclusion, I was just totally clueless. Oh, and this Josh and Tai thing was wiggling me more than anything. I mean, what was my problem? Tai is my pal, I don't begrudge her a boyfriend, I really... Ooh, I wonder if they have that in my size. (Heckerling, *Clueless*)

Though this scene is considered to be Cher's "epiphany," or the single serious moment in the film, it is undercut by her abrupt fascination with an article of clothing. In this way, Cher's self-realization demonstrates the interlocking elements of irony and femininity contained within

Austen's *Emma* and the ways in which these elements translate to contemporary culture. Though Austen, or the third-person narrator, is the primary critic throughout the story of *Emma*, in this instance Heckerling becomes the critic of Austen.

This critique is illuminated through the ending of *Clueless*, in which Heckerling illustrates that finding love is not the only thought to occupy a woman's mind. Granted, shopping may be considered a rather trivial alternative. But it is Cher's abrupt transition from love to fashion which illustrates Heckerling's ironic critique. The irony results from the juxtaposition of Cher's contemplative dialogue and her uncontrollable urge to shop, while the 20th century concept of femininity is demonstrated through the focus on consumerism throughout the length of the scene. In essence, romantic love becomes comparable to finding the right size designer dress. Therefore love itself, as it is portrayed by Heckerling, becomes akin to a commodity.

It is through this comparison that the conversation between Heckerling and Austen shines through. While Cher, like Emma, has the potential to be an independent woman in thought and action, her social hierarchy, and the views of femininity contained within it, ultimately serve to define her character throughout the film. In this way, both Austen's *Emma* and Heckerling's *Clueless* demonstrate the evolution, or stagnation, of the structure of social hierarchy, and the ways in which components of contemporary culture, such as irony and femininity contained in these texts, correlate and depart from 19th century culture.

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