Emma by another name? “As if!”: Narrative Modes in *Emma* and *Clueless*

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“Well, the book is always better than the movie.” A tale as old as time. People aren’t shy about throwing the comment around, but I am curious as to whether or not they truly understand the claim they support. Jane Austen meticulously crafts Emma Woodhouse, the title character of her novel *Emma*, through witty and charming prose. She assigns the voice to an all-knowing outside persona, and the reader develops a relationship to the characters in the novel as this narrator sees fit. Though we as readers are well acquainted with Emma’s voice, we understand Emma is dependent on an outside force to cross the bounds between her world and ours. Film director, Amy Heckerling, revived Emma in her character Cher in the 1995 movie, *Clueless*. Heckerling does not have the tradition of written word to follow. She plays with an entirely different tool box and, consequently, creates a unique and new piece of art. Emma’s modern day counterpart exhibits a great deal of power over the telling of her story which Emma does not claim herself. Heckerling’s protagonist, though she is inspired by Austen’s words and engaged in Austen’s plot structure, is not a carbon copy of Austen’s heroine. Cher shares many of the character traits attributed to Emma, yet it is clear Heckerling participated in her own creative process to craft our clueless, modern day Emma. What Austen did with brilliant written wit, Amy Heckerling did with dynamic visuals.

Austen is known for her brilliant opening lines and *Emma* is no exception. However, before we discuss these opening lines, we must acknowledge that the first words of chapter 1 of

Emma are not the first words with which the reader engaged. Before reading even a word of prose, the reader sees the title on the cover: *Emma*. Before Austen even begins her novel, she ensures that the reader cannot mistake some other aspect of the novel as the focus. Her title is simple but direct and to the point. The reader does not need to wait long for a description of Emma, but her name on the cover is in and of itself an introduction. From the symmetrical nature of the word to its function as the focus of the novel, Emma Woodhouse is already quite the character.

Fulfilling the expectation she's established, Austen introduces Emma in the opening words of the novel: "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." Straightforward and transparent, Austen uses her narrator's voice to quickly acquaint the reader with Emma's appearance, mind, social situation, and history. This opening sentence is particularly significant not because it starts and ends with Emma Woodhouse, but because it is merely about Emma Woodhouse— not her current actions or whereabouts, just her. Austen could have easily started her novel by giving the author a glimpse into what Emma Woodhouse was doing at the moment, or what she was thinking. Instead, she decides to give a description of how Emma exists objectively in a grander sense. Austen sets an important precedent in this opening sentence: it doesn't matter what Emma is doing so much as it matters *that* Emma is doing it.

Heckerling crafts her interpretation of Austen's opening line in the opening montage of *Clueless.* The beat of the song "Kids of America" infiltrates the classic, recognizable image of stars circling over a mountain to frame the word "Paramount." An IM-esque binging sound

accompanies a bright colored screen with a colored word bubble acting as a background to the words “Paramount Pictures Presents.” Each change to the screen is accompanied by the IM sound effect and it bings again as the bubble flips, now the background to the youthful and fun bubble letter font on the word “Clueless.” A crescendo in the music escalates to a musical climax and a brief moment of silence, which starts the true action of the movie. An extreme low angle shot shows a white car full of young people cruising by. This is the first of a series of scattered and fast paced shots. The car rolls under the camera and passes it by. Next we see an attractive young blonde woman, wearing the same outfit as the driver in the last clip (a black casual suit with a white collared shirt), confidently strut forward to the beat of her own heels hitting the pavement. The blonde woman, clearly the focal point of the next shot as well, laughs with other young adults. Her consistent black and white color scheme is continued in this shot, making her all the more recognizable. This shot is brief, dirty, and shaky, as will be the case with many other subsequent shoots in the montage. The shots thereafter become significantly more inconsistent. Heckerling sporadically and rapidly cuts from one setting to a drastically different setting and, within the shots, employs extreme zoom, constant movement, and unfocused vision. Heckerling compliments the inconsistencies of switching from one shot to the next with the integrity of shots themselves-- that is, with lack of focus and shaky camera movement.

Heckerling introduces us to the character who we will soon learn is called Cher with youthful, fun, and carefree music. The opening paramount logo is accompanied by a fun and youthful soundtrack. This music, which clearly emanates from the youthfulness of the characters, penetrates the logo, which is not generally considered to belong to the world of the film. The music penetrating the logo parallels the influence Cher has on everything around her. Despite the

shaky camera and the number of other people present in the shots, the focus always finds its way back to the pretty girl with the white collar, the flawless blonde hair, and the unwavering confidence. She drives a nice car, in which every seat is taken. This shows the viewer that people like Cher and trust her. Cher's situation--her car, the shopping, the extravagant double level pool--exhibits a level of affluence, which will prove to be an important aspect of Cher's character. From this montage, the viewer expects to follow the blonde girl through the film and does so willingly. She entices the camera with her confidence and the soft focus quality of the cinematography suggests her carefree sense of fun. Towards the end of the montage, a voice takes over the soundscape: "I know what you're thinking…." The camera pans over to the blonde girl once more as the voiceover continues and eventually the montage cuts out into a steady shot initiated by a blonde hair flip. Cher takes the audience out of the exposition montage when she is ready to move forward and speaks directly to an off-camera presence which the audience recognizes as themselves. Heckerling instantly asserts Cher's power by employing interpellation as a tactic aimed the viewer. When she says "I know what you're thinking…" and the shot cuts to her in real time, the audience implicitly recognizes that they have responded to her comment. She says she knows what the audience is thinking and, because Heckerling throws the focus to Cher at the right moment, we believe. From the very beginning, the audience has not only recognized Cher's authority, but has been subject to it. Before even meeting the other characters, the audience can assume Cher's status surpasses everyone as she has asserted her superiority over the audience themselves. She in is control of the telling of this story.

The viewer of *Clueless* sees what Cher sees. She serves as the narrator in that we follow her point of view for the majority of the story. Her voiceovers consistently cue shots and her

opinion is often offered readily before the situation has been fully articulated to the audience. The same is not true for Austen's Emma. As previously noted, Austen used the tool of the omniscient narrator when writing *Emma*, and though Emma's status is still substantial, it is impossible to ignore the fact that we, as readers, know more than she does. By contrast, Cher is introduced to us with a sense of intimate closeness. She is in control of the interaction-- a factor which survives into her relationship with other characters-- and so the role of the viewer is passive. The narrator, however, can share with the reader information which Emma has yet to discover.

Only a few lines after her concise introduction of Emma, the narrator discloses the following: "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." The reader cannot ignore such a straightforward warning, especially with such charged diction as "danger" and "evil." Already Austen has created a clear distinction between the voice of the narrator and that of Emma. The narrator is the voice with which we are granted a direct relation and so, by comparison, the reader senses a sort of distance from Emma. In contrast, we follow Cher's story through her eyes. She holds a significant amount of power over the camera and the direction evokes a sense of loyalty on our behalf, as our attention toward her via the camera lense does not stray. What is perhaps most interesting about Heckerling's interpretation is the way in which she manipulates the modern mindset. Heckerling has chosen to give the voiceover narrator to Cher and so cannot use the tactic of a forward-thinking narrator as Austen did; however, this does not

mean she didn't tell the reader straight away what would be Cher's fatal flaw. In fact, she told the viewer that fact before she shared any other piece of information with them, and she did it with huge bubble letters to the tune of "Kids of America." If you'll recall, the music at the beginning of the film accompanied the title of the movie, "Clueless," in bold font and bright colors. Previously, we discussed how Austen's title served a purpose in the whole of her piece, and Heckerling did not neglect the power of the title either. Just as the first thing you see before you open the novel is "Emma," the first thing you see before the action of the movie commences is "Clueless."

The title of the work is meant to be the summarizing culmination of the entire piece; so, that Austen decided on "Emma," and Heckerling on "Clueless," is possibly the most apparent evidence that these two women were not after the same goal. What is even more curious about these titles is the entirely different functions they serve. We discussed earlier that seeing "Emma" on the cover of the book, and then as the first word in the novel, serves to clarify to the reader without any doubt that Emma would be their focus for the entirety of the novel. The title "Clueless" does not clarify anything; it does quite the opposite. The fast paced montage doesn't give the viewer time to dwell on the title they've just seen, and this is no mistake. Heckerling's audience has been trained by their media-centric society to ignore the pairing of unrelated content. They watch a movie interspersed with commercials or view a series of unrelated scenes; however, their minds don't detect the sudden shift of topic, time, and space as odd because they have been conditioned to store information, isolate it, and move forward with their new knowledge on a mental backburner. Though they know the title is "Clueless" and they know Cher is operating as the "title character" of sorts, it is likely that they fail to make the

connection--they remain clueless to it. They are now in a perfect state to go on this journey with Cher. As Cher realizes she's "so totally clueless" the audience has a moment of realization with her. In doing this, Heckerling grants her protagonist an even closer personal relationship with the viewer.

Cher's relationships with the audience supports her status and influence, but, perhaps even more so, this is accomplished through her relationship to other characters. One of the first moments of the movie, just after we've received a fair amount of exposition from Cher's voiceover, involves Cher and her father sharing (oddly) a wife/husband type argument. Cher prompts her father to drink his juice and hands him his missing car keys as the camera pans around the kitchen island to keep up with their chase. Just before leaving, Cher's dad informs her, "Josh is in town, he's coming over for dinner," to which Cher does not hesitate to shoot back an appalled "Why?!" The conversation continues thereafter to inform the viewer of exactly *who* Josh is, but it is significant to note that the viewer receives the information in the following order: Josh's name, Cher's opinion of Josh, how Josh relates to Cher. Her opinion is the first real piece of information the viewer receives about Josh. This highlights the viewer's dependence on Cher. Though she is not holding the camera, Heckerling crafts the film so it follows Cher's whims and fancies. The remainder of the film will follow this precedent, as the camera focuses on Cher's interests and rarely gives the viewer information Cher does not have herself.

Mr. Knightley, the Austen equivalent to Josh, is not subject to Emma's opinion in the same manner Josh is to that of Cher. Mr. Knightley is introduced by the narrator in the beginning of the first chapter just after Austen gives the reader a glimpse into Emma's relationship with her father. The narrator first uses one word to describe Mr. Knightley's personality then discloses his

age followed by his relation to the family. “Mr. Knightley, a sensible man about seven or eight-and-thirty, was not only a very old and intimate friend of the family, but particularly connected with it, as the elder brother of Isabella's husband.” The order in which Austen chooses to disclose information is significant, but it is of equal significance to consider the information that Austen chooses to withhold; she introduces Mr. Knightly rather objectively through the narrator and, in doing so, omits Emma’s opinion of him.

After reading a conversation between Emma and Mr. Knightley (and it is important to note the reader has, at this point, likely developed an opinion of Mr. Knightley independent of that held by Emma), we finally receive a hint of Emma’s opinion on the new character:

> “Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them: and though this was not particularly agreeable to Emma herself, she knew it would be so much less so to her father, that she would not have him really suspect such a circumstance as her not being thought perfect by everybody.”

The narrator, in this case, is able to provide the reader with significantly more information than Cher did with her exclamatory “Why?” Furthermore, the narrator is able to offer a justification for Emma’s opinion on the matter. Emma has more social coyness than Cher, which is likely a product of her society. Austen does not need to disrupt Emma’s grace to expose her opinion because she can deliver this information to the reader via the narrator. Though Austen reveals the information in an order which does not grant Emma the same power as Cher, she uses the structure to develop Emma as a layered, dynamic character. Emma’s character has a complexity

in relation to the delicate society which acts as the setting of her story. Similarly, the character around which the the story revolves, Emma or Cher respectively, is a product of her time.

Emma's world exists with much higher stakes: behavior is almost directly correlated to eligibility for marriage and consequently the level of comfort for the rest of your life. A high school boyfriend will hardly have the same impact. For instance, the word "everything" coming from Cher or Dionne might be understood as hyperbolic, but from Austen's the narrator, the comment would be interpreted as genuine and valid. Heckerling was aware of the vast difference in situation between her protagonist and that of Austen. Cher and Josh share a kiss for the first time as the camera cuts away to a wide shot with romantic symmetry, courtesy of the double staircase. Cher's intimate monologue commands the audience's attention saying, "Well… you can guess what happens next…" in a relatively suggestive tone of voice to cut a wide shot of a large outdoor white wedding. The assumption, based on the view of the back of the bride and groom at the end of the Cher-esque pink aisle, is that this next shot is the "next" to which Cher was referring; yet, she quickly scoffs at the viewers assumption saying, "Ugh! As if! I'm only 16!" Heckerling includes this nod to the distinct difference between her work and her inspiration at the end of the film and, in doing so, acknowledges her respect for Austen's work and justifies her own.

Heckerling does not simply transplant Emma Woodhouse into a 1990s yellow plaid suit. She understood she had to *create* a modern day Emma. Any story is timeless if the appropriate details are altered; almost no story is completely original. No one is arguing Cher and Emma are related by pure happenstance, but they simply do not exist on the same plane: they share similarities relative to their own respective worlds. Emma is to the Regency period as Cher is to

the 1990s. Cher is neither an accurate nor an inaccurate adaptation of Emma; Cher is Heckerling's creative expression of Austen's ideals as they relate to a modern world.