**Emma and Clueless:** Trinity Grammar 2001 Trial Question

In the process of transformation, the values of the original text are inevitably changed, as they are adapted to the needs and interests of a different social context. To what extent has this been your experience in your study of transformations?

Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* can be appreciated on its own, as an original work of art, but when it is viewed as a transformation of Jane Austen’s English classic *Emma*, meaning becomes deeper and more layered than what can be extracted superficially. Heckerling has not only transformed the plot of the original text, but she has related the themes and values present in *Emma* to the fast-paced materialistic world of the twentieth century, to which a modern audience can relate and empathise. On closer reading, Heckerling’s film becomes a social commentary that not only creates its own milieu, but also arouses the question of similarities and differences between two worlds separated by almost two centuries.

These differences are the most apparent in the consideration of the vast array of human relationships examined, including the reasons for marriage and partnership. *Emma*, which is a satirisation of Jane Austen’s nineteenth century England, is a case study in human interactions, including marriage and romance. On the other hand, *Clueless* captures similar themes in a world dominated by teenagers, a world in which marriage is only a distant prospect. Evidently, it is most likely that this alteration by Heckerling from married couples to unmarried couples in the film is intentional to demonstrate the change in today’s society – people are simply marrying later in life. In *Clueless*, Murray says, “Oh, my God. They’re planning our weddings already,” and the expressions on the three men’s faces show the incredulity that they perceive of the girls talking about all the ridiculous things they want at their wedding. In contrast, in *Emma*, the reader is presented with marriage as a sacred solemn ritual, done more out of necessity than outpourings of love, for Emma’s bland wedding “was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade.” Thus, in terms of marriage, Heckerling has accurately depicted the shift towards an emphasis on love in a relationship, and a society where even the act of marriage needs to be elaborate, challenging set rituals.

Segregation of society artificially into social classes (or in *Clueless*, social groups at school) is a common thread that runs through both texts. This is because, fundamentally, the protagonists’ (that is Emma and Cher’s) initial views on the world are biased through their assumption of their natural superiority. For example, Emma’s disdain for the yeomanry, the class scoffed by the gentry, underlines her recommendation to Harriet that she decline the offer of marriage from Robert Martin, even though all of the available evidence (even from Mr Knightley, who Emma dotes on) shows him to be a sensible young man. In addition, in *Emma*, Jane Austen has written only about the class she knows best, the gentry, although there are people of other social positions (such as the new wealth in the Coles obtained by trade), their position always presented in a negative light. Naturally, when dealing with others, Cher follows a similar chain of thought. When Cher and Dionne ‘adopt’ Tai, who could have been a low-rank “farmer” had they not adopt her. They walk down the visual focus of the school, the walkway, taking up the middle and looking nonchalantly around, immediately raising Tai’s self-confidence. The video camera, through which the audience must see the film, is placed from the point of view of Cher, as she looks around – the camera swings from shot to shot, enhancing the stereotypes said by the book *Emma* by pausing for a brief moment on each one to let the audience take in these images. Each individual group is certainly unique as with the society in *Emma* – both Cher and Emma distinguish others by stereotypes as well as by their attire, although the fundamental concept of divisions within society remains.

Furthermore, the lower classes are seen through acts of charity by Cher and Emma’s elite group. For example, in *Emma*, the Bates, “whose circumstances should be so confined”, are...
received graciously and it is not uncommon for them to receive gifts from the likes of Emma, who as the daughter of the wealthiest family in Highbury, is expected to provide. However, it is also possible that most likely that the Bates are received charitably only because of their sweet personalities and their willingness to please their superiors. For example, at Box Hill, Emma’s cheeky behaviour towards Miss Bates shows that even though the Bates are made to feel comfortable by those in the gentry, there still remains an undertone of dismissal by the upper-class. In Clueless, an incident where the affluent subtly gain from the disadvantage, either unknowingly or intentional, can be seen when Cher volunteers to be the captain of the Pismo Beach disaster relief. Even after Cher’s epiphany, even after the gaudy pink lights of the fountain have lit up in her moment of revelation, and even after her positive attempts to build a better Cher who is more considerate of others, she is still innately clueless. As such, in general, she is quite charitable in her deeds for the relief, but her actions are at times inappropriate. Donations of caviar and athletics equipment are doubtful, and her innocent reply to her father’s queries show an inherent arrogance. At school, Cher becomes the centre of attention, wearing gaudy colours, obviously revelling in the limelight of being captain. The music increases its vitality during the appeal scenes, showing her gain at the expense of others who have lost, in the words of Miss Geist, “... you know, every single possession, every memory, everything you had your whole life”.

Trust and deception are integral to the workings of Emma and Clueless, and in particular with the ‘secrets’ that Frank Churchill and Christian withhold from the other characters dishonestly. Jane and Frank are engaged before the reader meets them in the book, but until the very end, the other characters, with the exception of the astute Mr Knightley, have no inkling as to what the relationship between these two people were. In fact, the Westons, who were very much attached to the Woodhouse family, were almost brought to the edge of tears when the secret engagement was revealed; “Mrs Weston was looking so ill, and had an air of so much perturbation”. To a society that places so much emphasis on the sanctity of marriage, such an arrangement would appear as foreign as the idea to Emma that Christian, the boy she wanted to have sex with, was homosexual. In both cases, hints were dropped throughout the texts, and only Mr Knightley and his counterpart Josh realised the full extent. Thus, the composers have used authorial intrusion and dramatic irony to illustrate their point, and to highlight Emma and Cher’s flaws. Indeed, when viewing Clueless, it is doubly ironic to a person who has read Emma, because of the additional force afforded by the strong parallels with the originating text Emma.

Emma and Clueless are related texts in more than just plot. These are texts that are representatives of their times, and are true social satires that document the follies of human relationships. Even though Austen did not follow some of her contemporaries and write realism, and Heckerling did not produce a documentary, they have fully utilised their medium of expression to comment on their respective societies; in fact, Heckerling adds to the rich irony already present using the direct parallels to the novel. The result is an accurate depiction of values as seen by modern society and the creation of a wholly satisfying masterpiece.