At first glance, the movie *Clueless* (1995) might seem like any other teen comedy as it pokes fun at high school cliques and overly dramatizes the almost weekly changes in love of the main characters. The abundance of fashion discussions and the detailed depictions of the products that fill the daily lives of the characters are so specific to the mid-90s that they threaten to make the movie outdated just over 10 years later. However, *Clueless* is not just another teen comedy; it is an adaptation of the novel *Emma* published almost 200 years ago by one of England’s most revered novelists, Jane Austen. Understanding the connection between the film and the book elevates the movie from others in its genre and highlights the timeless nature of their shared theme.

Published in 1815, *Emma* tells the story of a young lady who is described in the opening chapter as handsome, clever, and rich. These descriptions help to set the tone of what her character is like. She has high standards and an even higher regard for society’s ideals and the way things should appear. Because she thinks so very highly of herself, she tries to inflict her ways of thinking on others by playing matchmaker. As Austen writes, “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” (688). It is not until she undergoes an involuntary transformation that Emma is forced to realize the arrogance of her ways.
Clueless follows Cher who is wealthy, self-centered, spoiled, and highly obsessed with social status and looks, all traits which she shares with her counterpart Emma. Like Emma, she plays matchmaker throughout the movie, trying to mold the people around her according to her own, often shallow ideas of how the world should be. It is important to note while Emma’s proper etiquette and dialogue is replaced with “whatever’s” and “as if’s,” this adaption does a very good job of making a younger audience more receptive to the message that lies within Emma.

Clueless modernizes Emma by making certain changes that make the scenario more recognizable to today’s society. Fancy horse and carriages are replaced with convertibles. Portrait painting is replaced with photography. Gypsies, who threaten Emma’s friend, Harriett, in the novel are replaced with mall rats who threaten Cher’s friend, Tai. Elegant dinner parties are replaced with rowdy house parties. Just as Austen pushed the boundaries of the novel genre with her incorporation of irony and comedy in her portrayal of the daily lives and emotions of women, the movie’s combination of humor, satire, and romance within a teen comedy similarly expand the genre’s boundaries. Clueless, although a loose adaptation of Austen’s Emma, closely follows the main traits of each character from the novel and recreates modernized versions of important scenes.

The ideals of both Emma and Cher become evident in the way in which they try to transform girls they think could be made better through their instruction. In Austen’s novel, Emma takes Harriett, a girl who was boarded at the parlor school and who has no real parents, under her wing to improve the way Harriett thinks and acts. In Clueless, Cher goes one step further to make an outward transformation of Tai, who is a new girl at school, by giving her a
total makeover. In both scenarios, Emma’s and Cher’s main focus is to make Harriet and Tai a more socially acceptable girl. While this can appear as shallow in both the characters, their intentions are sympathetic.

A foil to Emma’s and Cher’s tendency to think too fondly of their own opinions appears in both novel and movie as well. Mr. Knightley, a friend of the family and Emma’s brother-in-law, is the only person who tells Emma exactly what he thinks and makes no reservations in pointing out her flaws. It often appears that Emma appreciates Knightley’s brutal honestly and actually looks forward to the comments he makes. In Clueless, Josh is Knightley’s counterpart, and also technically Emma’s step-brother, though they were not raised in the same house. He, like Knightley, does not have a problem sharing his opinions of Cher with her and often pokes fun of her somewhat self-indulgent ways.

It is within the recurring efforts at matchmaking that the limits of both Emma’s and Cher’s perception and their acceptance of social ideals are revealed. Both have some initial success at matchmaking. Emma’s first try at matchmaking is successful when she pairs her best friend and governess, Miss Taylor, with Mr. Westward. Eventually, the two get married. In a slight twist, Cher’s first effort stems from the fact she received a poor grade in her debate class. In order to distract her teacher, thinking this will make him grade less harshly, Emma pairs him with the school’s guidance counselor, Ms. Geits.

In future efforts at matchmaking, when both Emma and Cher try to arrange relationships for the girls whom they have tried to transform, they seem to pay more attention to social status than true compatibility. Harriet has found love with Mr. Martin, a man who is of a lower class than Emma finds acceptable. Although he is fond of Harriet and requests her hand at
marriage, when Harriet tells Emma this news, she does not appear to be happy or accepting.  

In a manipulative way, Emma convinces Harriett that she should not accept Mr. Martin’s proposal, stating that she needs someone who is socially acceptable and pleasant. In Clueless, Tai finds companionship in Travis, a skateboarder who is in an unpopular clique in high school. Even though Tai finds him funny and attractive, Cher has just the right amount of persuasion over her to make her change her mind.  

Both Emma and Cher are used to getting what they want and not failing, so when a matchmaking effort fails, they both rationalize the failure rather than learning about their own limitations. Emma’s first experience with this comes when she tries to match Harriett with Mr. Elton. Instead of falling for Harriett, Mr. Elton professes his love to Emma. When Emma tells Harriett of this incidence, she claims that Mr. Elton is not a good suitor after all and points out his flaws. In Clueless, Cher tries to match Tai with Elton (Mr. Elton’s counterpart). Just like in Emma, this match fails due to the fact that Elton has fallen in love with Cher. Cher then tells Tai of all of Elton’s bad and not-so-charming qualities.  

While their efforts to find matches for their friends do not meet with success, neither are their efforts to find love for themselves very successful. Emma finds herself drawn to Frank Churchill, a well known person in society, which is a trait she finds admirable. Clueless introduces the audience to Christian, a new kid at school. Cher takes an immediate liking to him and tries to draw attention to herself by sending herself chocolates and flowers. Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Churchill has been secretly engaged to Miss Lucy Fairfax, who is considered an opponent of Emma’s. In Clueless it becomes apparent that Christian cannot be a possible love interest for Cher because he is gay. The news of Churchill’s
secret engagement or Christian’s sexual preference does not seem to faze Emma or Cher.  

57 However, the revelation from Harriett and Tai of their attraction to Knightly and Josh does.  

58 It isn’t until this point that the reader is able to see a more vulnerable side to Emma and Cher as they finally become aware of their feelings for Knightly and Josh.  

59 Jane Austen is known for her happy endings, so it is perhaps no surprise that after the revelation of their true feelings, both Emma and Cher receive their happily-ever-after with the men they truly love.  

60 When Harriett and Tai receive theirs as well, with the very men they wanted to be with all along (Mr. Martin and Travis), the novel and movie demonstrates the limitations of Emma’s and Cher’s worldview, based as it was on social standing and appearances.  

61 The film takes Austen’s classic novel and transforms it into a modern update that is highly entertaining to the modern viewer.  

62 While pop culture, an updated wardrobe, and a hip lingo replace Austen’s more traditional scene, the theme of Austen’s novel shines clearly on the screen.  

63 Even though Emma’s characters come from the 1800s, they are still found in and relevant to society today.  

64 In either version, the underlying message appears timeless: sometimes what is socially correct does not correspond to what is true to a person’s heart.