

NOTE: This episode includes audio from the film *Clueless*. The segments in *italics* are audio clips from the film. They are also separated from the main discussion with three asterisks: ***

Episode 2.5 “Totally Buggin’!” Jane Austen’s Emma and Clueless (pt. 2)

Angourie (host)

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that this work was developed and presented on the unceded territory of the Lenape people. I wish to pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music]

Angourie (host)

Hello and welcome to another episode of The Community Library: a podcast, book club and discussion space. I’m your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music]

Angourie (host)

Welcome back, you guys, and thank you for coming back so soon to listen to part two of my discussion on Jane Austen’s *Emma* and its 1995 film adaptation *Clueless*. If you haven’t listened to part one, I highly recommend that you do that first, because I’m going to be picking up right where I left off. The episode is titled: “Ugh, As If!” Jane Austen’s Emma and Clueless (pt. 1), and it should be the episode right before this one! If you haven’t listened to it, check it out now. Um, but for now, let’s get right into the episode. So, where I left off yesterday, I had just spoken about the characters of Tai and Harriet, and their dynamic with Cher and Emma, respectively. I’m going to continue my discussion of the characters, starting with the character of Mrs Weston.

So, thus far, most of the character comparisons have been very true from book to film, but this is where things start getting a little tricky. Mrs Weston is the former governess of Emma and her sister Isabella, and she’s sort of a mother figure for the girls growing up. At the beginning of the book, Mrs Weston has just been married to widower Mr Weston, a match that Emma likes to think she set up herself. And Mrs Weston is the ideal Regency-era woman: she’s caring, well-mannered, and married to a man with more money than her. But despite having this image of perfection as a role model in her life, Emma is determined to not marry. She says, quote: “Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want. I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s.” End quote. So, similarly to Mr Knightley, Mrs Weston takes on the role of the friend / family member who gently tells Emma her decisions are sometimes questionable. While she has more authority over Emma and is more of a friend / guidance counsellor, she is also very indulgent and forgiving of her – possibly more than she ought to be. She’s less of an important character in the book than the film’s equivalent, Dionne, however she’s a great character for Emma to confide in. Mrs Weston is there to let Emma bounce ideas off her, often more for the benefit of the audience to know where Emma’s head’s at, rather than for Mrs Weston to have an input.

So, though there's really no straight comparison here, I'm taking Dionne, Cher's best friend, as an interpretation of Mrs Weston.

Cher

She's my friend because we both know what it's like to have people be jealous of us.

Dionne is in a relationship with Murray, a high-school boy who Cher mildly disapproves of, but understands that they like being in their, quote "dramatic relationship." Now, this aspect is similar to the Mrs Weston / Mr Weston dynamic – minus the dramatic spats. But, similarly to Emma, Cher is determined she that she wants none of that life. Of high-school boys, Cher says:

Cher

I don't know why Dionne's going out with a high-school boy. They're like dogs. You have to clean them and feed them and they're just like these nervous creatures that jump and slobber all over you.

Unlike Mrs Weston, however, Dionne isn't an advisor to Cher. That role is all Josh, and he gives more critique than advice. So, instead, Dionne is someone for Cher to confide in, and she's also there to also give us a parallel of what Cher's life *could* be like. Dionne shows us the possibility of what could happen if Cher decided to settle down and date a high-school boy. And she's also just a great side-kick, even though she doesn't really have an arc of her own, she plays an important role in painting the audience a picture of the privileged Beverly Hills lifestyle.

So, next I wanna talk about Mr Elton. Ugh, Mr Elton. He is the worst of all the characters. He is slimy, sleazy and gold-digging. Mr Elton is the vicar in Highbury, and he's reasonably well-mannered, but Emma thinks he's a bit of a joke. Of Mr Elton, Emma thinks, quote: "For with all his good and agreeable qualities, there was a sort of parade in his speeches which was very apt to incline her to laugh." End quote. So, Elton has his sights set on Emma from the beginning of the book, but she fails to see this and tries to set him up with Harriet instead. This goes terribly wrong when Elton declares his love for Emma and it's not reciprocated. Austen writes, quote: "She was preparing to speak [...] but scarcely had she begun [...] than she found her subject cut up – her hand seized, her attention demanded, and Mr Elton actually making violent love to her." End quote. He goes away for a long time after he's rejected, and comes back with an awful – but rich – new wife. So, Mr Elton is a variation on a character that appears quite often in Jane Austen's works: good-looking and charming on the surface, but turns out to be insincere and slimy. For more examples, see Mr Willoughby from *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr Wickham from *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Elliot from *Persuasion*, Henry Crawford from *Mansfield Park*, and John Thorpe from *Northanger Abbey*. I find it absolutely fascinating, and frankly quite scary, how easy it was to adapt this character into a

modern context. Everything about him is the same, and I think it just goes to show how this sleazy attitude has stuck around for 180 years.

So let's move on to talking about Elton, who is played by Jeremy Sisto in the film. I believe this is the only character in the film to share a name with his corresponding character from the novel. But, anyway, Elton in the film, much like Mr Elton in the book, doesn't feature much until his scene with Cher in which he declares his undying love for her. It's creepy and it's gross, and poor Cher is left stranded in the Valley after he drives away without a second glance. And it's amazing to me how well this sequence adapts: it happens in the film exactly how it does in the book. Elton forces himself onto Cher, declaring his admiration for her, without for a second wondering if she feels the same way. And this is character, while it's a trope in Jane Austen novels, is one that we don't see that often anymore. I mean, how many times have you seen the trope of the guy who's been friend-zoned, until suddenly the girl realises she's been in love with him the whole time? I swear that's the plot of 99% of rom-coms. Instead, this Mr Elton and Emma dynamic is, in my opinion, a much more believable scenario in which the guy's sexual advances aren't cute and quirky and awkward 'cause the girl doesn't realise it – it's actually very mistimed and unwanted. As I mentioned before, it's scary how well it adapts. Also because, in Jane Austen's time, this was just an awkward situation that Emma had to deal with, and could have been read as a comedic scene. But now, this same scene reads as harassment. And I think it's an uncomfortable truth about our culture, that people like Mr Elton still exist today, and are still filled with that self-righteousness that makes them ignore consent. And it's also interesting how a whole genre of romance actually shifted to take Mr Elton's perspective: of a guy who keeps making advances on a girl, but she doesn't realise it. The only difference is, in that story, she finally comes around and they live happily ever after.

So now I want to move onto another of Emma's possibly love interests: Frank Churchill. He is the charming and rich son of Mr Weston. When the first Mrs Weston died, he went to live with rich aunt in London and relies on her for cash. He's a little pompous, um, he drives 16 miles to London just to get a haircut, and very self-assured and charming. And he's the talk of the town and everyone loves him – including Emma, who fancies herself a little bit in love with him. Until! Shock, horror! It's outed that he's secretly been engaged to Jane Fairfax this whole time. Oh my god! Frank is kind of like Emma – he's kind of the male version of her – he's smooth and charming and popular and well-liked. And he's definitely is prone to thinking a little too well of himself, but, unlike Emma, he's concealing something under his façade. When Emma finds out about his secret engagement she's horrified at her past behaviour, and at his past behaviour. I mean, he openly flirts in front of Jane, and he hardly speaks to her, and he taunts her with these riddles and games. And maybe that's the distinct difference between Frank and Emma, is that he does these things knowing, or rather, not caring, that they will actively hurt someone he supposedly loves. And there's nothing Jane can do about it except sit back and watch.

In the film *Clueless* we have Christian, played by Justin Walker. Christian is the new guy at school, very suave and smooth. The biggest difference between Christian and Frank Churchill – though can I just point out the clever name change from Churchill to Christian? I love it. Anyway, the biggest difference, and the twist is that Christian is gay. This is quite an obvious change, because in 1990s America it's not really plausible for two teenagers to be secretly engaged. Um, and so while think this character change is good and works for the story, I do think it takes some of the bite out of his character, because his motivations are completely different. He's not seducing Cher in front of his

secret lover – there is no secret lover – instead, he’s just uninterested. So, he becomes a much nicer character – he’s not slimy or malicious in any way like Frank is. And it’s all Cher’s fault that she misunderstands the situation, and Christian is off the hook. So, it does make him a lot nicer, but I also think that it makes him slightly less interesting, because he’s less morally grey. What I like about Frank Churchill is that we’re not sure that he’s the villain, because for a long time, he’s the hero. However, it does make sense for Christian to be gay, because there needs to be a solid reason that prevents Cher from dating him. Um, and it’s also good because it makes the film not completely heteronormative, though I would have liked to see Christian find a nice date for the wedding in the last scene. That would have been cute, but I guess you can’t have everything.

This is a good Segway into a discussion on a change that was made from book to film. And this one is somewhat a point of contention in the *Clueless* fandom, and it’s about Josh being Cher’s ex-step-brother. A lot of people think it’s weird. I agree, it is weird, to some extent, but I understand why this choice was made. And I think to understand it, we need to look at Mr Knightley’s position in *Emma*. His relation to Emma and her family is quite unique: he is a neighbour and a family friend who has now become a brother-in-law to Emma and son-in-law to Mr Woodhouse. So this brother / sister dynamic between Emma and Mr Knightley is crucial, because they need to be comfortable enough that they can criticise each other’s flaws and mistakes, but distant enough that they’re not really “pals” like Emma and Mrs Weston are. He can’t be considered a love interest for her before – not by Emma herself, or by the gossiping townspeople. And also, the history of growing up together is important, too. Another important thing is that Mr Knightley has to have a connection to Mr Woodhouse. In *Emma*, Mr Woodhouse doesn’t like many people, but he is very fond of Mr Knightley, and therefore he is always hanging around the house. So if we consider the character of Josh, and his position of former step-brother, he ticks all these boxes. They have a brother / sister dynamic, they grew up together, they poke fun and criticise each other but they’re not really friends, he’s never been a love interest for her before, and also he has a connection to her father, Mel, because he helps out at his law firm and therefore he’s always around the house. While people might find Josh and Cher’s history a little weird, I’m willing to look past it for the sake of keeping the character true to the book. And I also think it’s actually a very clever way of adapting his position into a modern context.

So, finally, I want to talk about a theme that I touched on a little bit when talking about the characters, but I want to expand on it here. This theme is privilege and class. I also think this is really interesting to look at when adapting into a modern context, because obviously society has changed so much since then. This is obviously a huge theme – Emma and Cher are both extremely privileged, and, as a result, they’re also very popular. And to talk about Emma’s social standing, I want to bring up a character I haven’t really spoken about much, and that is Jane Fairfax. Jane is the one who was secretly engaged to Frank the whole time. So, Jane was orphaned at a young age, and grew up with her poor aunts Mrs and Miss Bates in Highbury until she was taken away to live with a rich family friend of her father’s. Jane and Emma are around the same age, and grew up together until Jane moved away. In the novel, Jane comes back to Highbury for a while and so Emma must revisit her acquaintance with her. Now, Emma doesn’t really like Jane, but she doesn’t really know why. Maybe it’s because she sees who she could have become, had she not had the money and privileges she was born with. Maybe it’s because she knows Jane is a better person than she is. That, at least, is Mr Knightley’s theory. Austen writes, quote: “Why she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer; Mr Knightley had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman which she wanted to be thought herself; and though the

accusation had been eagerly refuted at the time, there were moments of self-examination in which her conscience could not quite acquit her.” End quote. So, I really love this dynamic between the women; they are polar opposites in terms of character and disposition. Emma is loud and charming, while Jane is, quote: “so cold, so cautious”, and always, quote: “wrapped up in a cloak of politeness.” Emma wants to like Jane, but they just don’t click. She says, quote: “I wish Jane Fairfax very well, but she tires me to death.” End quote. I love that line, it’s so funny. But the funny thing is that even Jane Austen criticises Emma’s dislike of Jane, saying, quote: “it was a dislike so little just.” End quote. But coming back to the class discrepancy between Emma and Jane. Now, Jane has no prospects and no fortune, so she is doomed to a life of being a governess. On the surface, this doesn’t seem so bad: she’ll have a job, she’ll get paid. However, the position of a governess was pursued by women who weren’t rich, and who had no prospects to marry. So, essentially they had failed in life. The difference in attitude between these two women, Jane and Emma, I think really criticises the way that one’s power and wealth determines what you can get away with. Jane couldn’t get away with half the shit that Emma says or does: Jane must be quiet and humble because she’s poor and just lucky to be included. Emma says that Jane has, quote: “such extreme and perpetual cautiousness of word and manner, such a dread of giving a distinct idea about any body.” End quote. So, Austen gives us these parallel women, who, because of their different social standings, have grown up to conduct themselves very differently. And I think it’s a major stab at the societal conventions and rigid class system of the time. Austen suggests that Jane is a better person than Emma because she hasn’t been spoilt and indulged in the same way. And this is supported through Emma’s treatment of Harriet, too, that the elitist attitude of the upper class is really harmful – not only to those who aren’t in the club, like Harriet, but also those who are. I mean, after all, this environment created Emma, who, at the beginning of the book, at least, is jaded and conceited. But the interesting thing is, even after all of Austen’s criticism of class and how the wealthy abuse their power and the poor are at the mercy of the rich, the outcome of the novel still endorses those societal structures. Emma still marries Mr Knightley, who is also rich and privileged. Harriet marries Mr Martin: a respectable man, but still a farmer, and definitely more her social rank. Mr Elton, a conceited social climber, marries rich but not that rich, and is completely unhappy. And poor Jane Fairfax: by the end of the book, she’s set to marry Frank Churchill, which is a relatively advantageous match in terms of money, but he’s still of the same social rank as her. Also, she definitely deserves better than him. So this “happy ending” that all the characters get, is a happy ending where nothing about the social climate has changed. And maybe it’s just Jane Austen being cynical, and suggesting that this never will change, or maybe it’s her internalised classicism coming through.

But do we have an equivalent of this in *Clueless*? There is no “Jane” equivalent: the closest thing we get is the female antagonist Amber, but she begins dating Elton after Cher rejects him, so I’m inclined to believe she’s more of a Mrs Elton character. So maybe the issue of class instead comes through in the Tai and Cher relationship. When Tai confesses that she has a crush on Josh, and she thinks it’s reciprocated, Cher questions whether they’d be good together. Tai hits back:

Tai

What, I’m not good enough for Josh, or something?

Cher says that she doesn't think they'd mesh well. But the real issue becomes Cher's jealousy, rather than discrepancy of class or intelligence between Josh and Tai. In *Emma*, it's all about Harriet's gall to assume that she could have a shot with Mr Knightley. Emma thinks, quote: "Such an elevation on her side! Such debasement on his!" End quote. Harriet's real crime is that she has dared to challenge the conventions of class, thinking she is of the same rank as Emma and Mr Knightley – whereas Tai's crime is that she is dismissive and rude to Cher in their argument. So I think this issue of class and social groups isn't as prevalent in *Clueless* in the first place – and this definitely isn't helped by the fact that we don't get a character like Jane. But I also think that, unlike in *Emma*, the social hierarchy changes by the end of the movie. Cher and Tai are still friends, and they both go to Travis' skateboarding competition together. In *Emma*, Harriet and Emma don't remain friends. Austen writes, quote: "Harriet [...] was less and less at Hartfield, which was not to be regretted. The intimacy between her and Emma must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of good-will." End quote. So I think that *Clueless*, like *Emma*, challenges the social hierarchy, but, unlike in *Emma*, actually succeeds in disrupting it. And perhaps this is a more idealistic take on the story, or maybe it's just more modern. But either way, I don't think it's a bad moral to take away.

So, in conclusion ... if I can come up with a conclusion. I feel like I've been talking for hours and none of it has made sense, but anyway. My conclusion is this: I love *Clueless*, and I love *Emma*. And I love *Clueless* as an adaptation of *Emma*. And I think it's my favourite ... mm ... no, actually, it's my second favourite adaptation of a Jane Austen. I think my first favourite is the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. But, anyway, I think I love *Clueless* because it stays so true to the book, but more than staying true to the content of the book, I think it stays true to the tone, which is where, I think, other adaptations of *Emma* have failed. It's playful, but still gives gravity to the teenagers' problems without mocking them. And Cher maintains that wide-eyed and innocent foolishness, and you can't help liking her, flaws and all, because she's just so completely charming. And, I mean, maybe I like her so much because she represents a very conceited and shallow part of myself that I don't like to indulge that much. It perfectly gets that balance between recognising the characters' foolishness, but also participating in it. It's self-aware, but not to the extent that the audience feels disconnected and cruelly mocking the characters. And I think it captures the sentiments of *Emma* that transcend time. Cher may be wearing miniskirts instead of bonnets, but both texts capture the follies of youth and tell a sweet and witty coming-of-age story.

Thanks so much for listening to this episode, and for coming back for the second half of the discussion. I really hope you enjoyed it. I also hope you enjoyed our first themed month. This month's theme was book to film adaptations, and I hope I covered some of the things you wanted me to cover. I know this was a very heavily requested topic. Next month's theme is CLASSICS. So, you can look forward to discussions on modern classics, future classics, what the term "classic" even means. Also, December's discussion pick was chosen by you guys, the listeners! So, I posted suggestion boxes on my Instagram and the most suggested book, by far, was *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. So this will be our discussion pick for the month of December, and that episode will be released on the 15th of December, so make sure you read along and stay tuned!

Another little reminder: I have a full transcription of this episode and transcriptions of all of my previous episodes on my blog, which is www.angourieslibrary.wordpress.com. Also on my blog you

will find more links to resources and references and articles that I drew from when researching for this episode. So, if you're interested to read any of those articles, they will all be listed on my blog.

[theme music]

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[theme music]

Tai

You're a virgin who can't drive.