

天主教輔仁大學英國語文學系學士班畢業成果
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
GRADUATION PROJECT 2018

指導教授：劉紀雯老師

Dr. Kate Liu

真善美聖

Who is Clueless? Girl Power and Girl Image in *Clueless*

學生：林書宇撰

Andrea Shu-Yu Lin

Andrea Lin
403110060
Composition & Conversation III Sec. C
Prof. Kate Liu
Research Paper
Draft 5, outline
14 July 2017

Who is Clueless? Girl Power and Girl Image in *Clueless*

- I. Introduction
 - A. General information on *Clueless*
 - B. Thesis statement: Aside from the modern setting, *Clueless* alters the original plotline in *Emma*, strengthens the female power in the characters, and presents a story of girls developing beyond consumerism; its core value and female empowerment are therefore able to correspond to Girl Power, a post-feminist movement originating during the 1990s.
- II. Similarities and differences in *Clueless* and *Emma*
- III. Literature review
 - A. Critical responses on *Clueless*
 1. Positive and negative criticisms
 2. The paper's focus: Despite the patriarchal implications, *Clueless* still explicitly celebrating female individuality and independence. These features allow *Clueless* to embody the post-feminist movement Girl Power in the 90s.
 - B. Discourses on Girl Power
- IV. Body

A. Male characters' lack of control over Cher

1. Cher's father:

- a. Although he is portrayed as a domineering father, he does not really influence Cher in being less clueless or intervene with her relationship.

2. Josh:

- a. Cher's reaction after falling in love is not changing her look but making a soul makeover.
- b. Cher's romance with Josh is not the end (or the aim) of the story, indicating that marriage is not the ultimate goal of Cher but her own growth.

3. Christian:

- a. Christian's figure in *Emma* is supposed to have a seeming affair with Emma, but the character is revealed to be a homosexual in *Clueless*.
- b. Cher's lack of disappointment toward her mismatch with Christian indicates the weak romantic attachment, and even makes Christian a part of Cher's girl clique.

B. Cher's character growth

- 1. Cher's voiceover enables her to take the authoritative narration throughout *Clueless*.
- 2. Cher demonstrates a sense of self-evolvement from claiming to be the master of makeover to her self-realization of doing a

soul-makeover.

3. Cher's improvement is done mainly through her own, and *Clueless* utilizes her change to establish a self-inventing protagonist.

C. Tai's regaining of self-confidence

1. Tai is given a chance to take over Cher's dominant position at high school and is written as an expressive person.
2. Tai's disrespect toward Cher and their later reconciliation show the evolvment from identity loss to retrieval of self-confidence.
3. Being with the reformed Travis not only subverts the romantic relationship Harriet Smith has in *Emma*, but also implies that Tai already feels no need to makeover herself.
4. Portraying an originally sidekick novel character as an outspoken protagonist retrieves Tai's identity and values her individuality.

D. Female bonding

1. Tai and Cher's relationship terns out to be more intimate and equal than Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith in *Emma*.
2. The female boding in *Clueless* is the main inspiration and model for Cher to conduct the final soul-makeover.
3. Celebrating female friendship then stressing the importance of changing oneself for romantic relationship can be seen as an embodiment of Girl Power.

V. Conclusion

A. Restatement

Andrea Lin
403110060
Composition & Conversation III Sec. C
Prof. Kate Liu
Research Paper
Draft 5
14 July 2017

Who is Clueless? Girl Power and Girl Image in *Clueless*

Over 20 years after the release of the film *Clueless* in 1995, its iconic catchphrase “as if,” is still popular today, and its fashion style continues to inspire numerous young females and runway designers. Directed and written by Amy Heckerling, *Clueless* is a modern adaptation of Jane Austen’s novel *Emma* set in a fictional high school in Beverly Hills in the late 20th century. The chirpy teen film focuses on American high school life with issues such as teen romance, the search for self-identity, the protagonist Cher’s personal growth, and her realization. Amy Heckerling’s clever use of slangy teen expressions and unique clothing taste redefine 1990s’ pop culture and make *Clueless* one of the classic teen films of the 90s. Aside from the modern setting, *Clueless* alters the original plotline in *Emma*, strengthens the female power in the characters, and presents a story of girls developing beyond consumerism; its core value and female empowerment are therefore able to correspond to Girl Power, a post-feminist movement originating during the 1990s. In this paper, I will first analyze how the male protagonists’ control over Cher contributes to her growth, and how she gradually gains the Girl Power as she develops, and how Tai regains her self-expression, and how the female bonding is established among the characters. In my analysis, I will also focus on the character differences

between the *Clueless* and *Emma* to support the idea that Amy Heckerling intentionally strengthens women agency and growth. Finally, in my conclusion, I would examine the limitation of *Clueless* and how it still strives to establish girls as both independent consumers and a community that finds identity through mental growth.

Although the time settings between *Emma* and *Clueless* are nearly 200 years apart, the director Amy Heckerling follows the basic structure of *Emma* (Bagno-Simon); yet she shifts the focus from the complex storylines in Highbury neighborhood to Cher's relationship with Tai and Josh. The community of Highbury in *Emma*, for one, is replaced in the film by a high school in Beverly Hills, while the protagonists of both texts, Emma Woodhouse and Cher respectively, are wealthy girls with a domineering father to adore and a brotherly figure for love (Mr. Knightley and Josh). The biggest alteration Heckerling makes lies in the Mr. Churchill-character Christian, who is revealed to be a homosexual in *Clueless*. To further put emphasis on Cher's growth and romantic relationship with Josh, Heckerling removes most of the neighbor characters in *Emma* and Jane Fairfax, the secret fiancée of Frank Churchill. Finally, instead of being engaged as Emma Woodhouse is, the protagonists in *Clueless*, all high school students, attend their teachers' wedding.

Critical Responses on *Clueless*

The current critical responses on *Clueless* mostly agree upon that fact that the film successfully transforms *Emma* into a modern teen story with detailed character development. Yet some also criticize *Clueless* for being a "less modern" story in terms of its patriarchal implications. Among the positive reviews, Sue Parrill suggests that with Cher's voiceover in the film, the audience knows better about the protagonist's

inner thoughts and realizations, unlike Austen's approach of using third person narrative (117). William Galperin argues that since the class boundary is not as clear as that in *Emma*, Tai is given more agency, her attachment to Josh makes Cher anxious about her loss of sexuality, creating more dynamics between the two females (173). Although the insecurity Cher feels after acknowledging her affection for Josh is a "powerful condemnation of the self-objectification demanded of women in patriarchal society," yet in the end, her confidence is restored when Cher confesses her feelings. The critics focusing on *Clueless*'s patriarchal implications, on the other hand, mainly discuss the male protagonists' influence. Cher's father, according to Ferriss, represents the patriarchal power that commands his daughter's behavior (440). Josh, likewise, criticizes Cher for being superficial and ignorant instead of guiding her as Mr. Knightley does to Emma Woodhouse (Parrill 116). This paper, on the other hand, claims that *Clueless* empowers women in its adaptation of the classic novel. Instead of seeing Cher subordinate to patriarchy, I will analyze how the characters' female identities embody Girl Power.

Discourses on Girl Power

Girl Power originated from the early 1990s, and it is a concept that denies the patriarchal pressure from society (Harris 16). In its rejection of the second wave feminism, Girl Power is generally considered as part of "post-feminism" (Griffin 33). Post-feminism, according to McRobbie, "invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account in order to suggest that gender equality has achieved," and by doing so post-feminism emphasizes the idea that feminism has already passed away (4). Girl Power, therefore, mainly centers on images of young women as independent

and self-inventing (Harris 16); the ideas of Girl Power are evident mostly through pop culture celebrities and fictional characters who are portrayed by media as outspoken and powerful in controlling their own lives (Harris 17). Under the portrayal of mass media, Girl Power “appears to endorse and value female friendships, even over and above the pressure to get (and bother about) boyfriends” (Griffin 33). Moreover, Girl Power’s close connection with popular culture links it to the promotion of female consumption (Harris 27), encouraging girl consumers to shop so as to make personal statements through fashion (Harris 85). The self-assured image of girls is thus constantly taken as an appeal to young people who can afford to purchase trendy clothing or accessories. This paper would treat Girl Power as a discourse on young women’s empowerment related to female consumption in the 90s, and examine how the character developments in *Clueless* respond to Girl Power and then further discuss the film’s attempt to step beyond the concept of portraying confident and self-inventing female through consumption.

Firstly, the male characters’ control over Cher not only contributes to Cher’s personal development but also strengthens the female community as the main subject of *Clueless*. Cher’s father, a domineering lawyer, regulates his daughter’s grade, driving skills, and relationships. *Clueless* does not try to alter his strong personality that already appears in *Emma*, yet it makes his restrictions fail to influence Cher positively and in fact results in Cher’s dealing with her grade in unconventional ways. For example, when Cher gets C-minus because of her poor debate performance, she utilizes her matchmaking expertise to improve the score rather than really polishes her debate ability, as her father would have wanted. Cher experiences her first victory by

matchmaking and her father even does not sense the impropriety in Cher's behavior. When Cher goes on a date with Christian, whom the father is clearly not fond of, he merely gives a word of warning without really questioning whom Christian is. Therefore, despite the manipulative façade, Cher's father displays little influence over Cher's clueless behaviors. Even though he father does offer advice for Cher when she is troubled by her feelings for Josh, the scene appears after Cher's self-reflection, and during the conversation, the father describes Cher as the one being in charge of the household and taking care of everyone else. The father takes a small part in making over his daughter; instead, he only supports her decisions and affirms Cher's power among the family.

Christian, different from the character Frank Churchill in *Emma*, lacks romantic attachment with Cher and later even becomes a part of her girl clique. In *Emma*, Frank Churchill flirts with Emma Woodhouse, and for a while, Emma is confused about whether she really does love Frank; in *Clueless*, however, Christian is directly regarded as Cher's target because of his good taste and manner. Cher takes the initiative in baiting Christian, but later when Murray surprisingly informs Cher and Dionne of Christian being a "cake boy," Cher only replies "oh, my God, I am totally bugging. / I feel like such a bonehead." She blames herself for not noticing the truth earlier but is not sorrowful toward or bothered by the unsuccessful match, her reaction suggests that she actually has a weak romantic attachment with Christian. Besides, the fact that Christian being a homosexual makes him later a part of Cher's girl clique. After her conversation with Murray, Cher finds Christian to be a great shopping partner as well as a company, and his role can be a part of the female friendship in

Clueless. The three male protagonists altogether are ultimately unable to intervene with Cher's individual development and replace the importance of her involvement; the lack of control then strengthens the narrative of a self-inventing girl.

The plotline of Josh's relationship with Cher, moreover, suggests that it challenges the conventional romance setting and emphasizes the importance of Cher's own soul makeover. Sue Parrill argues that the uncertainty after feeling infatuated with Josh urges Cher to discard her dressing styles and looks (120), yet Cher, in fact, reflects on her former conducts and intends to have a "soul makeover" by making some contribution without selfish purposes. When not knowing how to behave in front of Josh, Cher first acknowledges that her after school activities may not be good enough, then realizes her friends' merits, and at last is determined to completely change her soul by participating in charity work. Cher does not forcefully change herself into a more attractive image; rather, she manages to understand what it takes to become a better person. In the final scene, Cher even suggests to the audience and then denies the ending of a typical romance: Well, you can guess what happened next. Therefore...As if! I am only 16...and this is California not Kentucky," which thus shows how *Clueless* differs from other traditional romances. By doing so, the ending also implies that finding a boyfriend is not a destination in *Clueless*, and Cher's development from being clueless to being less judgmental and manipulative is actually the core value throughout the film.

Besides showing Cher's development through plot, *Clueless* also utilizes voiceover to claim Cher as the "author" of this story of growth, which responds to Girl Power and then moves beyond it. Amy Heckerling, according to Laura Carroll,

successfully transforms Cher's mental states into voiceover in a way that is even more intimate than the third person narrative in *Emma* (173). Cher's voiceover provides the audience with the first-hand contrast between her interpretation and the actual events. The effect of the voiceover "safeguards against the possibility that an unsympathetic audience might attribute Cher's meddling to ill will or an inflated ego, by showing that everything she does is done in seriousness and with good intentions" (Carroll 173); when Cher takes the authority in storytelling, the audience could see her gradual self-growth from her behaviors as well as inner thoughts, and could affirm Cher's positive transformation later in the film. In the beginning of *Clueless*, Cher argues her way out of the low academic performance, while her desire of doing more good deeds stems from her self-interests and the classmates' gratitude. Cher's sense of superiority can also be found when she views herself as Miss Geist's "only hope" and judges Tai for being "adorably clueless." Similarly, her offer on making over Tai is a project for self-satisfaction since Dionne says to Tai: "[c]ome on, let us. Cher's main thrill in life is a makeover, okay? / It gives her a sense of control in a world full of chaos." Considering herself a master in fashion, Cher's original way of doing makeover is by shopping and putting on makeup, and here a confident girl image is constructed with the pleasure and the necessity of consumption. The project, however, marks Cher's first failure because the matchmaking between Tai and Elton turns out to be a mistake; the failure also indicates that Cher is even more clueless than Tai, which proves her remark on Tai when they encounter for the first time to be wrong. Furthermore, when Cher offends the housemaid due to her ignorance, performs terribly during the driving test, and quarrels with Tai about her interest toward Josh, her vanity completely

collapses upon realizing that her perception of the world is flawed and that she actually needs Miss Geist, who is considered one of Cher's projects, to be the role model in her "soul makeover."

After undergoing a series of setbacks, Cher's mission in *Clueless* gradually shifts from transforming others to becoming a person who makes contributions.

Offended by Tai's sour comment, Cher clears up her mind and comes to the conclusion: "I was just totally clueless." The self-reflection in *Clueless* here forms a striking contrast to the climax in *Emma*, in which Mr. Knightley's serious scolding forces Emma Woodhouse's to recognize her pride and rudeness. Cher, different from Emma Woodhouse, barely relies on Josh's lecture but actively determines to conduct a complete makeover on her soul. The soul makeover allows Cher to observe the admirable qualities in her friends and enables her to take the responsibility as the captain of Pismo Beach disaster relief. In the process of making contribution for a good cause, Cher perceives classmates around her differently as well; for instance, she naturally shows gratitude toward Travis's donation for the relief and even establishes friendship with him. The changes make Cher, a confident wealthy high school girl, in the later half of *Clueless* be portrayed as a female with evolvment because of her self-reflection and positive transformation. Although *Clueless* does not totally reject the idea of being a consumer or enjoying the pleasure of making personal statement with fashion, Cher changes her focus from building self-image through purchasing fancy clothing to improving herself through making actual contributions, and the shift of emphasis can be regarded as *Clueless*'s attempt to step beyond the consumerism in *Girl Power*.

Parallel to the female empowerment in the character Cher, Tai is transformed from Emma's sidekick to a girl with regained confidence in *Clueless*. Tai, similar to Harriet, initially obeys Cher's forceful guidance in order to be socially elevated in the high school society. While after the mismatch with Elton, Tai starts to experience a different fate that steers away from *Emma's* plotline. Tai is given the position as the spotlight at school after the deathly accident at a shopping mall, and due to her dramatic narration she suddenly takes over the role that Cher usually plays. Cher's astonishment is evident when her voiceover goes: "Tai being the most popular girl in school? / It was like some sort of alternate universe." What's more, as Tai receives Cher's doubt on her interest in dating Josh, she changes her timid and shy personality and criticizes Cher as a virgin without a driving license, suggesting that she is no longer a sidekick as Harriet Smith but one having a strong personal voice. The instant popularity and Cher's former manipulative behavior result in Tai's disrespect and making comments containing gender stereotype; this part serves as the turning point for Tai to find self-identity and regain confidence when she ceases imitating Cher and treats her as a friend, not as a guide.

The romantic relationship between Tai and Travis, moreover, differs from Jane Austen's writing and suggests that Tai has conquered her insecurity and regained confidence. Unlike Harriet's suitor Robert Martin, Travis used to be addicted to drugs and gets the most tardies in class, making Cher dissuade Tai from dating him. Travis's initial negative portrayal paves the way for his "reformation" in order to win back Tai's affection. Whereas in the novel Harriet gets proposed when Robert accidentally encounters her on the street and soon finds her feelings not fading. The change of

Travis subverts the relationship between Harriet and Robert, and Tai has also reached a phase where she feels no need to have any makeovers to be in the top of high school hierarchy or to attract boys. Tai is *Clueless*, therefore, is not the schoolgirl who is socially and intellectually inferior to Emma, but an outspoken girl with opinions and is confident in being who she is at the end of the film. With a more complex character development and plotline, *Clueless* reinterprets the story of Harriet Smith, values the individual growth of Tai, and makes her eventually regain confidence.

Cher, Tai, and other female characters, furthermore, form a female bonding that contributes the most to Cher's self-growth and realization. After Cher makes the decision on conducting the soul makeover, her voiceover goes: "I realized all my friends were really good in different ways." For example, Cher finds that Christian owns exceptional aesthetics, and Dionne and Murray behave considerately to each other. More interestingly, Miss Geist, Cher's first makeover project, influences Cher tremendously in seeking ways to be a do-gooder; she calls her students for helping refugees who lose all of their property, and such enthusiasm urges Cher to finally take her words seriously and actively participate in the charity campaign. Towards the end of *Clueless*, Cher reflects on her lack of support for Tai and they resume their friendship, while Emma Woodhouse fails to do so. Due to class differences, Emma cuts her intimate relationship with Harriet, as Austen describes: "[t]he intimacy between her and Emma must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of good-will; and, fortunately, what ought to be, and must be, seemed already beginning, and in the most gradual, natural manner" (Austen 444). In *Clueless*, on the contrary, Cher admits to Tai: "I cannot even believe I was so unsupportive of your feelings for

Josh,” acknowledging her wrong attitude; with Tai apologizing back for being offensive to Cher, the two reconcile and form an even closer attachment when they treat each other equally rather than maintaining the leader-sidekick relationship. Overall, almost every female in *Clueless*, along with Christian, contributes to Cher’s self-realization and self-understanding. The contemporary setting facilitates the female interpersonal relationship in *Clueless*; the celebration of female friendship and bonding, are therefore emphasized in Girl Power’s discourses.

Clueless explores female image and identity under the structure of *Emma*, and the male characters’ control, female protagonists’ detailed evolvment, and female bonding overall establish powerful female figures that meet the female presentations in Girl Power. However, since Cher’s distinguished fashion taste sets the teen trend in the 90s, the girl image in *Clueless*, to some degree, is still inseparable from being a consumer. Yet, instead of portraying the characters as girls who construct confidence and independence mainly through consumption, *Clueless* emphasizes the notions of making self-reflection and learning from one’s mistakes. Then, who exactly is clueless? The film begins with Tai’ being regarded as “adorably clueless”, reaches its climax when Cher acknowledges her being “totally clueless”, and eventually ends with Cher and Tai’s growth. Thus, two of them have both lost their directions in the search for self-identity, but at last, they successfully restore the self-inventing image and develop as a community. From Emma Woodhouse in 1816 to Cher in 1995, *Clueless* has surely redefined Austen’s classic romance and penetrated the heart of Girl Power; because of that, in *Clueless* modern teenagers girls can identify their struggles and puzzles, but also discover possible ways to gain confidence.

Word count: 3065

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Emma*. New York: Bantam , 1981. Print.
- Bagno-Simon, Libby. "Make Me Over: *Emma's* Social Rules of Engagement Revisited and Revised in Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*, 2013. Web. 12 Dec. 2016
- Carroll, Laura. "A Consideration of Times and Seasons: Two Jane Austen Adaptations." *Literature Film Quarterly* 31.3 (2003): 169-76. Print.
- Clueless*. Dir. Amy Heckling. 1995. Film. *Clueless*. Paramount Pictures Corporation, 19 July 1995. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.
- Driscoll, Catherine. *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Berg, 2011. Print.
- Ferriss, Suzanne. "Emma Becomes Clueless." *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Eds. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield. Kentucky: Kentucky UP, 1998. 435-443. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
- Galperin, William. "Adapting Jane Austen: The Surprising Fidelity of *Clueless*." *Wordsworth Circle*. Wordsworth Circle, 22 June 2011. Web. 22 May 2017.
- Griffin, Christine. "Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood." *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004. 29-43.
- Hancock-Piper, Layla. "Clueless? A Feminist Investigation Beneath the Surfaces of *Clueless*, *She's All That* and *10 Things I Hate About You*." N.d. *Academia.edu*. Academia. Web. 20 May 2017.
- Harris, Anita. *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

McRobbie, Angela. "Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime." *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004, 3-14.

Parrill, Sue. "Emma." *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study on the Adaptations*, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002. 116-123.