‘In a comparative study of texts and contexts, one text illuminates the other.’ Discuss this statement in relation to *Emma* and *Clueless*.

Amy Heckerling’s 1995 postmodern teen flick *Clueless* can be appreciated on its own, but when it is viewed as a transformation of Jane Austen’s Regency comedy of manners *Emma*, meaning becomes deeper and a shift in values is highlighted. By cinematically re-contextualising the genteel, idyllic Highbury to the fast-paced materialistic microcosm of a modern Beverley Hills high school, Heckerling’s film becomes a social commentary, giving responders an insight into both the parallels and realignment of social values and attitudes towards class distinction, marriage stability and gender roles over the past two centuries.

Heckerling’s *Clueless* represents marriage through the eyes of American teenagers as merely a distant prospect, a metamorphosis for the myopic view upon marriage and more specifically marriage suitability in rural Regency England, express in Austen’s *Emma*. In 1816 rural England, marriage suitability coalesces around the idea of a “good match.” This can be defined as a couple of near social rank and financial status. Emma speaks of Mr. Weston, - an “exceptional character, with good fortune, suitable age and pleasant manners” - and his companion Miss Taylor’s marriage. She states “how very acceptable it must be at Miss Taylor’s time of life to be settled in a home of her own, how important to her to secure a comfortable provision.” It is evident that Austen is commenting on the nature of marriage suitability through the union of Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor, as he is a genteel man, a representation of the rising middle class. Emma’s myopic view on marriage, “I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry,” is clever combination of both irony and authorial intrusion reaffirming the fundamental reality of the patriarchy and the concept of marriage for social benefit in Regency England. However, Emma is still a woman of her context as she ironically, eventually succumbs to social expectations and ends up marrying Mr. Knightley - the ‘knight in shining armour’ -, who embodies a perfect gentleman, at the end of the novel. This
representation of Austen’s criticism of such values, allows the reader to understand that she truly believes marriage should be based on affection, or a true attachment, which engenders genuine ethical and moral behaviour. In contrast, as cultural contexts shift the notion of marriage suitability is transformed into match suitability, in order to maintain image and social status, as well as simply for love, due to the fact that women are not pressured to marry as they more financially independent. However, through the replacement of Austen’s third person omniscient narration, Heckerling utilises voiceover “I realised how much I wanted a boyfriend of my own,” to portray the undertones of female dependence on males that still exist within patriarchal society. The mis-en-scene of Josh and Cher’s kiss on a staircase loosely resembles the shape of a heart, highlighting the absence of marriage merely for protection and the importance of love in a functioning relationship. Heckerling also incorporates the progression of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, as it opened discussion in the hands of the media, moving the values of marriage into casual relationships and sexuality. What was once relegated to hushed whispers behind closed doors became open discussion in the hands of the media, and sex before marriage is assumed in most social circles. So, while Austen deems finding personal satisfaction in marriage unusual in the late eighteenth century, Heckerling highlights through the stereotypical relationship of Dione and Murray that in a postmodern context marriage is merely defined upon fulfilling personal satisfaction. Heckerling uses crude jokes and overt sexual references such as “jeepin” and “hymenally challenged” to show the nature of diversity in relation to the acceptance of casual sexual relationships. Heckerling transforms the rigid Regency value associated with marriage present in Austen’s Emma, to more flexible notions of the perfect match, heavily linked to love as opposed to protection.

Despite undertones of social fluidity, Heckerling transforms Austen’s rigid view of the social hierarchy during Regency England, merely defined by a combination of parentage, reputation and property, into the context of a Beverley Hill high school, where consumerism and materialism are prominent. Through Austen’s gently satirical vignette of village life, “Highbury, the large and
populous village almost amounting to a town, to which Hartfield, in spite of its separate lawn and shrubberies and name, did really belong, afford her no equals,” it is clear that the Woodhouse's are landed gentry and are therefore ‘old money’. Through the omniscient narration of the protagonist, the reader discovers Emma’s egocentric mentality and social blindness, furthermore highlighting that due to her parentage she considers herself of high status. Similarly, through the visual metaphor of a blinking neon sign of a clown, dwarfing Cher as she is abandoned in the carpark by Elton, Heckerling highlights society’s mockery and disapproval of Cher’s attempts to undermine a defined systems of classes and cliques. Elton conveys similar class consciousness in his rhetorical questions towards Cher, “Why Tai!? Why Tai!? Do you know who my father is?” In Regency, England, those who rank lower in the hierarchy aspire to advance socially, and often become dependent upon the charity and initiative of those in high class. Mr Elton, a clergyman, “with most agreeable manners” who “has fitted in his house so comfortably,” is a caricature of the sycophant. His pretentious nature, highlights the pressures within the hierarchy. This method of social advancement was especially crucial to women, who were denied the possibility of improving their status through hard work or personal achievement. Emma’s comment’s on the Yeomanry, who “are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do,” referring Mr Martin’s proposal to Harriet, who in Emma’s naive mind is beneath herself. Through Austen’s use of hyperbole, the reader becomes privy to the belittling of those in lower class. The discrepancy between Emma’s innermost thoughts and Austen's moralising critique creates the irony that works to both comic and satiric effect. Similarly, a prevailing sense of class stratification is conveyed by Tai reverting back to her flannel ‘working-class’ clothes at the skateboard park in contrast to Cher, who dresses smartly with a hairband, sweater, plaid skirt and stockings, thus re-emphasising socioeconomic disparities and divisions between the upperclass and lower-class. However, the socially lower Tai is momentarily popularised following her ‘near-death’ experience at the mall, shown by her central position in the camera frame when she becomes the focus of Cher’s friends and associates. This enhances the notion that social position is defined image. Where Austen satirises the stiff and meaningless forms
of her society, Heckerling snickers at teenagers’ self-absorption, self-righteousness, and cluelessness.

Both Heckerling and Austen critic society, in the way people must portray a certain code of manners, allowing them to present an image that adheres to societal needs. In the context of 1816 rural England, Austen emphasises the importance of gentility and moreover the importance of remaining respectable during social interactions, as well as commenting on the rigid expectation of women. The reader is immediately introduced to the importance of gentility in the opening line, “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition,” where Austen satirically describes our eponymous protagonist Emma. She further states that Emma “seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence.” The use of the word seemed, foreshadows Emma’s downfall and naivety, influencing the reader to consider that Miss Woodhouse’s life may not be quite as wonderful as what it appears. It is clear that Austen is both outlining and more importantly critiquing this notion of being genteel, and the pressure associated with following these social codes within the patriarchal society. When placed in the consumeristic society of Beverly Hills, gentility is depicted as image, more specifically image obtained through status and wealth. This superficial lifestyle is established through the opening montage, where visual images such as a spinning overhead shot of a group of girls having fun in a white jeep, carrying designer items and teenage girls with plasters on face after cosmetic surgery are presented. The fast camera movements emphasise the fast paced materialistic lifestyle of the 20th century, in conjunction with the ironic soundtrack of ‘Kids in America’, further commenting on the impossibility for all America’s to present the image of a ‘rich and famous’ lifestyle, as well highlighting the insular quality of the town. Both Emma and Clueless are texts that critic the unachievable and unmaintainable societal standards, and highlight that although they are ever-changing people will face constant pressure to meet their expectations.
Austen writes of a society defined by a patriarchal hierarchy, where notions of marriage suitability and social decorum are centred around one’s need to belong to the highest order of class. Heckerling in turn presents society where the patriarch is absent, where women are more financially stable and therefore match suitability is although steered by maintaining status and image, undercut with the importance of love. Both texts portray worlds where women are pressured by societal standards, highlighting that society may well be constantly demanding people to meet specific expectations. Furthermore, when comparing *Emma* and *Clueless* it is evident that one text illuminates the other, highlighting the changing values the parallels and differences between 1816 rural England and 1995 postmodern America.