

A discussion of Charity in *Emma* and *Clueless*

The concept of charity towards people of lower social standing is used in both *Emma* and *Clueless* to justify the advantageous position of the wealthy and to counterbalance the exclusiveness of the protagonists' worlds. Charity, which includes the voluntary giving of help to those in need as well as acts of kindness, can be viewed as the moral responsibility of the rich – those with the money, status and time. As such, this belief is integrated into the class structure represented in these two texts. In the case of Emma and Cher, their charitable deeds, for the most part, are rooted strongly in self-satisfaction.

Comment: Contrast between positions of the wealthy and those of lower social standing

In general, the lower classes are seen through acts of charity by this 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, "small, trifling presents, of any thing uncommon". It is most likely that the Bates are received charitably only because of their sweet personalities and their willingness to please. In particular, when Emma sends an entire hindquarter of pork, it reflects the arrogant subtexts that underscore their acts of generosity. Mr Woodhouse, pedantic as ever, comments on how best to eat pork and he says, "... no stomach can bear roast pork". However, the audience can sense the irony in the authorial intrusion, when Miss Bates claims, "If there is one thing my mother [Mrs Bates] loves better than another, it is pork—a roast loin of pork". Although charitable, Mr Woodhouse arrogantly imposes his own standards, and the continual reference to the superiority of Hartfield pork undermines any charitable thoughts.

Comment: Outwardly generous with material goods, but self-centred all the way

Comment: Consideration of those of higher social standing is always prevalent; acts of generosity undermined by arrogant subtexts

Emma also visits a local family that is poor and sick. The claim "Emma was very compassionate ... she understood their ways" is inherently absurd, from what the readers know about Emma. Such visits are considered part of Emma's duty, and although they are seemingly charitable, the fact that the visit is glanced over in just one paragraph, shows its insignificance to Emma; in fact, it is a deliberate ploy to walk past Elton's house with Harriet.

Comment: Emma manages to turn the situation to her advantage by walking past Mr Elton's house with Harriet

In contrast, Mr Knightley is wholeheartedly committed to assist. He gives the Bates all of his store apples – "now you have not one left. We really are so shocked!" The important difference is that when he performs an act of charity, he "never can bear to be thanked".

Comment: Mr Knightley gives generously; contrast

The contrast between Emma and Mr Knightley is reflected in Cher and Josh. Like Emma, until her epiphany, Cher's charitable sense is almost entirely self-motivated; Josh would die of shock if he "saw you [Cher] do something that wasn't ninety percent selfish". Her claims to charity by giving Lucy expensive Italian outfits (probably last-season throwaways) and braking for animals are ridiculous when juxtaposed with Josh's intelligence. Studying environmental law, Josh appreciates the genuine charity expressed by celebrity Marky Mark in planting trees. Cher's matching of Ms Geist to Mr Hall, to which she "contributed many hours", has as little validity as Emma matching Ms Taylor to Mr Weston. Clearly, she does not have a firm grasp on the concept of charity for the benefit of others.

Comment: Contrast between Josh/Cher and Knightley/Emma are apparent

However, over the course of the texts, attitudes to charity act as yardsticks to show change. Changed by a series of setbacks, both Emma and Cher have become more mature towards the end. For example, at the end, Emma kindly offers Jane Fairfax goods from Hartfield and a ride in the carriage, even though Jane continually rejects them. Evidently, Emma considers this charity to have merit; she is urgent in tone, "engagements now allowed of no delay". Similarly, in *Clueless*, Emma acts enthusiastically to assist with the Pismo Beach disaster, and as part of her makeover, "I felt better already". The audience can see her pulling clothes out of her endless wardrobe, and rummaging through the pantry. This disaster, outside the US, reflects the changes in technology and 'small world' thinking; instead of Emma assisting a local family in the local village, Cher has the opportunity to affect many lives positively in a distant location, the disaster relayed through television.

Comment: Attitudes to charity can represent the changes in the protagonists

Comment: Change in context: local/global outlook

In conclusion, charity is an important part of the social structure in both texts, and is reflective of the snobbishness that Emma and Cher had in common initially. However, their change is reflected in their changed attitudes to helping others in a benevolent manner.