

“Doing the Thing and Subverting the Thing:”

Unboxing *Blondes* through Satire and Subversion

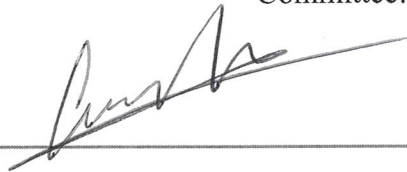
Austin Marie Rogers

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Committee:



George Thomas, Visiting Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing



Cynthia Nearman, Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing

Tim Kircher, H. Curt '56 and Patricia S. '57 Hege Professor of History



Abstract

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* was undoubtedly the biggest release of 2023, and though the film heavily resonated with millions of women and girls worldwide for its emotional impact, celebration of womanhood, and themes of feminism, it was not met without criticism. Many conservatives have condemned *Barbie* for being “too woke” and “man-hating” while, on the other hand, more liberal critics of the film claim it was a performative, over-simplified account of feminism. Gerwig herself has claimed that the film's aim is “doing the thing and subverting the thing.” However, this idea is somewhat confusing and leads to the question; what does this actually mean, and how is it feminist? To answer this, I will be taking a look back nearly 100 years to Anita Loos's 1925 novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

The novel tells the story of Lorelei Lee, a beautiful, blonde flapper who uses her looks and charms to enchant the men around her into financially supporting her endeavors. Looking at *Blondes* as a feminist text is funny because Loos never claimed to be a feminist, and even wrote critiques of suffragettes in her early film scripts, but this dismissal of the feminist movement is interesting when you consider one very important quote from Loos about suffragettes; “they keep getting up on soapboxes and proclaiming that women are brighter than men. That's true, but it should be kept very quiet or it ruins the whole racket.” A closer look at *Blondes* shows that rather than reinforcing sexist gender roles placed on women, Loos is actually satirizing these gender roles through the subversion of stereotypical female character tropes.

This subversion occurs in the novel's narration – as it is written in the form of Lorelei's personal diary – and Loos's satire comes through in not just the events of the story, but the way Lorelei describes them. Examining the narration shows us that Loos is doing much more than inviting us to laugh *at* Lorelei; she is also inviting us to laugh *with* her at the men who only view

her as a pretty face. This shows a particular kind of feminism in Loos's work that literary scholar Jason Barrett-Fox calls indirect feminism, which is a more subtle way of attacking the patriarchy and found in the way Loos "writes with a wink at the reader" (Barreca xiv) and reveals the novel's true intentions. Through all of this, we can see the importance of humor and satire as tools for feminism and understand that Barbie was also using these tools to break the traditional boxes society forces on women. "Doing the thing and subverting the thing" in *Barbie* is feminist because it shows us a more subtle way to both challenge patriarchal gender roles and laugh at them, which many who watched the film, whether they be liberal or conservative, might not have realized.

The Summer of Barbie

Years from now a look at the early 2020s will be incomplete without a look at the summer of 2023, or, as it has already been named on various social media platforms, the "Summer of Barbie."¹ Many people, particularly teenage girls and young women in their 20s, claimed 2023 to be "a year for the girls" due to the release of multiple pieces of media widely enjoyed by that demographic. Some examples of this include Taylor Swift's record breaking Eras Tour, along with her release of two remastered albums; new seasons of popular shows such as *The Summer I Turned Pretty* (2022-present) and *Never Have I Ever* (2020-2023); and new albums from young female artists such as Olivia Rodrigo and Sabrina Carpenter. But nothing has inspired women and girls to embrace and celebrate femininity quite like the release of Greta Gerwig's newest film, centered around one of the most recognizable symbols of womanhood today, *Barbie* (2023).

¹ This is the name given to summer 2023 on social media platforms such as TikTok and X (formerly Twitter); for example, the hashtag #barbiesummer has over 16.1 million views on TikTok as of March 2024.

The first Barbie doll was introduced at the annual Toy Fair in New York in 1959, created by Ruth Handler after one day observing her daughter Barbara – after whom Barbie is named – playing with paper dolls (Chappet). She wanted her daughter to have a real doll to play with, but the only dolls available for little girls at the time were baby dolls, so she took it upon herself to create a new type of doll: a woman little girls could look up to and aspire to be one day. Barbie has since come to be marketed as a woman who can be anything, and thus inspire in little girls the idea that they, too, can be anything. An advertisement launched in 2015 ends with the hook “When a girl plays with Barbie she imagines everything she can become. You can be anything” (“Imagine The Possibilities”). In the 65 years since her initial debut, Barbie has become one of the most famous toys in the world, and this has only been amplified by her live action film debut.

In addition to being the biggest cultural event of 2023, *Barbie* was one of the biggest cultural events in recent years as a whole. Excitement for Gerwig’s newest film began months before its July 21 premiere with women and girls of all ages – and some men too – either planning special all-pink outfits for their trip to the theater or recreating the outfit of their favorite childhood Barbie dolls. The film was also a huge commercial success as it was the highest-grossing film of 2023 both domestically and globally, having earned \$636 million in North America and \$1.4 billion worldwide, and in January 2024 *Barbie* won “the first-ever Golden Globe award for cinematic and box office achievement” (Murphy). *Barbie* has been praised as a love letter to women, and inspired a unique feeling of community and appreciation surrounding the notion of girlhood and femininity. “There’s a phrase that has entered the social media lexicon: ‘being a teenage girl in your 20s.’ It describes the experience of being in the throes of early adulthood and still finding joy in things you loved in your youth” (Masten).

Barbie has come to represent the very essence of that experience, as media made explicitly for women rarely dominates popular culture the way media made for men does.

The film presents a world where all Barbies and Kens live in the matriarchal utopia of Barbie Land where, as Barbie herself explains to humans Gloria (America Ferrera) and Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt), “women hold all major positions of power, control all the money. Basically, everything that men do in your world, women do in ours” (Gerwig 57:50). This reversal of the societal roles of men and women is one of the most fascinating parts of the film, and it is through this that Gerwig explores the concepts of both matriarchy and patriarchy. When the film’s protagonist, Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie), begins to “malfunction” and experiences thoughts of death and flat feet, she and her ambiguous counterpart Ken (Ryan Gosling) travel to the Real World to figure out how to fix things, and this is when Ken learns about patriarchy. He brings the idea of patriarchy back to Barbie Land, where the Kens take over and the Barbies are reduced to their doting servants. Barbie, with the help of some humans she meets, returns and figures out how to “deprogram” the rest of the Barbies and they trick the Kens into fighting amongst themselves so they can reclaim Barbie Land for the Barbies. The film then ends with Barbie deciding she wants to be human and leaving Barbie Land for good.

While *Barbie* was indeed a huge cultural and commercial success, it was still met with criticism, and the type of criticism it has received is interesting because it has come from both conservative and progressive audiences. Ben Shapiro, a well-known right-wing commentator, called the film a “flaming garbage heap” and deemed it one of the most “woke”² films he had ever seen, while “others have labeled it ‘man-hating feminist propaganda’ [and] a ‘two hour woke-a-thon brimming with feminist lectures and nuclear-level rage against men’” (Masten).

² The term “woke” is slang that is used to describe someone who is aware of social justice issues; it is commonly used by conservatives as an insult to those who are politically liberal or progressive.

“The editor in chief of [the conservative political news and analysis website] Human Events called the movie ‘an anti-motherhood, man-hating tangle of daddy issues’” (Levin). Piers Morgan, a television personality, said of *Barbie*; “If I made a movie that treated women the way *Barbie* treats men, feminists would want me executed” (Levin). Criticism for being too feminist is not exactly surprising for a film centered on women, even in the 21st century, but what is more surprising is how the film received criticism from progressive audiences for the opposite reason: not being feminist enough.

People have criticized *Barbie* for promoting a performative, “surface-level form of feminism” (Elder), particularly in regards to the status quo of Barbie Land – where women run everything and men are just accessories – and America Ferrera’s monologue – which has been called “disingenuous” and “oversimplified” (Simmons) despite its emotional impact on many women who saw the film. Some have claimed *Barbie*’s “failure to present feminism as intersectional” (Elder) to be why the messaging of the film fell flat. Despite having a diverse cast of racial minority, disabled, and plus-size Barbies, the true complexity and character development is reserved for Robbie’s Stereotypical Barbie. An article for STRAND Magazine sums up this point of criticism perfectly; “That is not to criticise [Robbie’s] acting in the role, where she successfully embodies the character of Barbie, but rather to suggest that casting her reinforces the idea that in its origins, Barbie was created as a figure rooted in an idealistic, male gaze-oriented representation of women” (Elder). According to Lois Tyson in her book *Critical Theory Today*, the male gaze refers to the depiction of women in media where “the man looks; the woman is looked at. And it is the one who looks who is in control, who holds the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world. The one looked at – the woman – is merely an object to be seen” (Tyson 102).

Barbie has received criticism rooted in both logic and bias from both sides of the political spectrum, and the polarizing reviews of the film are fascinating. It is clear Gerwig intended to create Barbie Land as a kind of foil to our world, albeit in a slightly over-exaggerated way, in order to make us question the workings of our own male-dominated society. She has claimed *Barbie's* main achievement is “doing the thing and subverting the thing” (Smallwood), and while this is an interesting statement, it is not entirely clear what “the thing” Gerwig aims to subvert is. Perhaps the most obvious interpretation is that she is referring to the patriarchy, but if this is the case it is still somewhat confusing; the film ends with the Barbies back in control of Barbie Land and the Kens being granted only the smallest amount of equality with one singular lower court judgeship. However, there is an example of “doing the thing and subverting the thing” in terms of the patriarchy that can be found in a text written nearly 100 years before *Barbie*; Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Both texts offer satirical commentary conveyed through humor to show us that sometimes an outright challenge to patriarchal ideology is not the only way to go about it; subtle tactics can be just as effective.

Though *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* may be best remembered as the 1953 Howard Hawks film starring Marilyn Monroe, it was originally a very successful novel published in 1925. The novel tells the story of Lorelei Lee, a beautiful – and, yes, blonde – young woman who embarks on a tour of Europe at the expense of one of her many male suitors. Lorelei has very simple taste when it comes to men; the richer, the better. She entertains a number of men throughout the novel, happy to let them dote on her and fund her shopping trips, and on the surface Lorelei comes across as the textbook definition of a stereotypical, gold-digging, dumb blonde. But what makes Lorelei such an interesting character is how upon closer reading of her inner monologue we can see that she may be a blonde but she is far from dumb. Through the character of Lorelei,

Loos provides a clever subversion of a number of very well-known female character tropes, and the novel as a whole provides a satirical take on the attitudes towards women in the 1920s. Both *Barbie* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* are satires that ask us to question the nature of gender roles and show the power of subtle humor as a tool for feminism, as we must be “in on the joke” in order to play on patriarchal ideology from the inside by using tactics of indirection and subversion.

Anita Loos & The 1920s

Before looking at the text itself, it is important to know more about Anita Loos and what led her to write *Blondes* in the first place in order to understand the unique form of feminism Loos presents in her novel. The life of the author always has some effect on their work, be it the time and place they were writing or personal things they were experiencing. Loos was born in California in 1888 and began her career by writing screenplays for silent films, the first of which to be produced was *The New York Hat* (1912), which has been described as “a wry, feminist take on a small town scandal” (Speller). As her career in Hollywood continued Loos would work with such big names as W.D. Griffith and John Emerson. Loos and Emerson, who would later marry, formed a famous working trio with the early action star Douglas Fairbanks; Loos would write scenarios for Fairbanks to act out under the direction of Emerson, and though it was unusual for the time, Loos and Emerson became almost as popular as Fairbanks for their pictures. It was clear early on that the standout aspect of Loos’s writing was her keen use of wit and humor, and this allowed her to become successful in an industry that was – and, some may even argue, is still – dominated by men.

Loos's marriage to John Emerson was an interesting one. They married in June of 1919 after a few years of working on pictures together, and as Sally Speller recounts in her article "Cast of Thousands: The Life, Wit, and Work of Anita Loos," Loos would later summarize their marriage as follows;

I failed to realize that John suffered from a very dangerous pathological insecurity. When, after our marriage, he first heard himself addressed as Mr. Loos, it hit his egotism with a bang that reverberated as long as he lived. Had I been a *femme fatale*, I couldn't have destroyed him more thoroughly. Yet through it all, John loved me, was amused by me, depended on me, and then, alas, he envied me. And until the day he died he resented me.
(Speller)

Emerson was jealous of his wife's success, and Loos would do anything to appease him. As scholar Jason Barrett-Fox said, "There were two Anita's, really... When Emerson wasn't around, she was mischievous, giddy, very funny. But once he walked on the set... she became very subdued, very ladylike. She deferred to him *completely*" (Barrett-Fox 232). She would even give him co-writing credits for projects that were done entirely by her. Although Loos was a very important female writer in the early 1900s she still adhered to some of the gender rules of her time, specifically in regards to her marriage.

This is not to say that her work was not progressive. A perfect example of this is *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which Loos originally wrote as a joke. In *The Biography of a Book*, which precedes the novel in its modern editions, Loos recounts how she initially came up with the idea for her book. While traveling by train from New York to Los Angeles with many of her coworkers – including Emerson and Fairbanks – she noticed "a blonde who was being imported to Hollywood to be Doug [Fairbanks's] leading lady... was being waited on, catered to and

cajoled by the entire male assemblage” (Loos xxxvii). This was in stark contrast to the way Loos was being treated by the men around her, and she reasoned that it had to be because she was a brunette. She then began to compose a story based on her thoughts in a manner she claimed was “not bitterly, as I might have done had I been a real novelist, but with an amusement which was, on the whole, rather childish” (Loos xxxviii). This was where the character of Lorelei Lee was born, and months later Loos would mail the “smudged pages of my little critique” to her friend and idol H.L. Mencken to “give [him] a laugh” (Loos xl).

It was Mencken who suggested Loos continue and publish her story, and after being released as serial installments in the magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was published as a novel in November of 1925. It was a great success; “the first edition was sold out on the day it reached the bookshops and, although the second edition was of sixty thousand copies, it was exhausted almost as quickly” (Loos xli). According to Regina Barreca’s introduction Edith Wharton, another well-known female writer in the early 20th century, called *Blondes* “the great American novel” (Barreca xi), while the *New York Times Book Review* called it “a gorgeously smart and intelligent piece of work” and “one of the most delightful of recent publications” (Barreca xi). Contrary to the popular opinion, Emerson initially “dismissed *Blondes* as a frivolous exercise written for a female audience” (Speller), which is a familiar sentiment as media made by and/or for women is still often thought of as silly or “frivolous” by male-centric society no matter how popular or profitable it may be. And it was extremely popular and extremely profitable; “[the] 1925 bestseller sold out the day it hit the stores and earned Loos more than a million dollars in royalties” (Haven).

One would expect that Loos – as such a successful female writer in a time and industry dominated by men – was, if not an avid voice for, at least in support of the feminist movement

taking place in the 1920s. The turn of the century was a very important time for feminism and women's movements as women were gaining the right to vote and entering the workforce in far greater numbers as they had before. One of the most striking symbols of these changes for women in the 1920s was the idea of the "new woman," otherwise known as the flapper. The image of the flapper with her bobbed hair, short skirts, and long limbs has become the defining image of the Roaring Twenties, and it is also the image of Lorelei as depicted in the novel's original accompanying illustrations by Ralph Barton. The emergence of the flapper, however, was met with criticism from more conservative members of society. According to Kenneth A. Yellis in his article "Prosperity's Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper," "what appalled [conservatives] about the flapper, her behavior and her dress, was precisely her modernity. They saw her for what she was, the utter repudiation of... traditional morality and femininity. They saw, too, that she was not an isolated phenomenon but an extreme manifestation of changes in the life styles of American women" (Yellis 45).

One of these lifestyle changes for women in America was, of course, their entrance into the workforce. Yellis goes on to explain that "this 'new woman' threatened not only traditional morality, but made an assault on the prerogatives of traditional masculinity as well," (Yellis 46). The inclusion of women in what had previously been all-male spaces such as businesses and speakeasies left many more conservative Americans concerned for the future of women as a whole, but this did not stop women from establishing themselves as successful. Anita Loos was no different, even being one of the first women in the public eye to embrace the bold, flapper look when she bobbed her hair in 1921 (Speller). Loos's connection to flappers goes beyond adhering to their fashion trends, as although her marriage to John Emerson began as a workplace relationship it was Loos who was the ultimate breadwinner. When looking back on the 1920s as

a decade of increasing female empowerment, Anita Loos seems like the perfect role model for women; she was a vastly successful and intelligent woman who earned her place in an industry widely dominated by men. That alone is a significant challenge to traditional gender roles in true flapper style. It would make sense for a female author of this time whose great novel centers around a flapper, the very symbol of modernity and growing female empowerment, to publicly agree with the feminist movement, but that was not the case.

Anita Loos did not claim to be a feminist, and would even critique the women's suffrage movement in some of her works; "as her 1913 film *A Cure for Suffragettes* suggests, she saw her feminist contemporaries as self-important, turning to politics as a response to personal or sexual frustration" (Barrett-Fox 221). The film depicts a group of suffragettes who are so enthusiastic about their cause that they forget about their babies and leave them on the sidewalk to be picked up by a traffic squad ("A Cure for Suffragettes"), which suggests that advocating for women's rights takes a woman's focus away from her duties as a mother. It was the publicity of the women's suffrage movement that Loos so heavily disagreed with. She once said of suffragettes: "They keep getting up on soapboxes and proclaiming that women are brighter than men. That's true, but it should be kept very quiet or it ruins the whole racket" (Speller). From this statement we can see that Loos did hold some feminist beliefs, but she expressed them in much more subtle ways than the feminist activists in the public. Loos was very deliberate in her writing, and using the word "racket" here is interesting because it suggests something loud and clamorous that Loos did not want "ruined" by outspoken feminism. It is a very contradictory and layered sentiment, and perfectly captures what Loos is up to in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

To call back to the supposed achievement of *Barbie*, "doing the thing and subverting the thing," this very idea can be perfectly applied to *Blondes* because this is exactly what Loos does

in her novel. She does the thing – *Blondes* is a comical story about a stereotypical dumb blonde navigating her way through both a European tour and a sea of wealthy suitors – and in doing so she subverts the thing – though it seems like *Blondes* is a story that makes fun of women, blonde women in particular, a close reading of the novel actually presents a story where the female protagonist uses her good looks and society’s preconceived notions of her to get what she wants. The novel’s full title is *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady*, and it is indeed written in the form of Lorelei’s personal diary. Through this narration style Loos is able to go full force with her humor and present her critique of the way women are viewed in society within the carefree, “ditsy” voice of her heroine.

Character Tropes in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

It is common for both male and female characters to fall into certain tropes, or certain predefined roles within a story. Audiences are familiar with these roles, and they offer a sense of comfort even if one is experiencing a story for the first time. This is another example of how our thoughts on female characters impact our view of women in reality; the characters themselves are not real, but they provide us with a canvas on which we can project our real-world thoughts and opinions, be they positive or negative. The tropes themselves can be positive or negative depending on how the characters who embody them are treated by the narrative. Patriarchal systems present in literature and media reward “good girls” for being pretty, young, and for conforming to the traditional gender roles they enforce, but even women deemed “good girls” must learn how to operate within patriarchal structures (Tyson 89). The opposite of this would be more negative tropes like the *femme fatale*, which treat female characters as “bad girls” and punish them for breaking patriarchal rules. This could apply to a female character who dares to

be more assertive or independent, or who simply has the audacity to be old and, therefore, undesirable to men under the patriarchy.

Because patriarchy is a term that constantly gets thrown around by the general public, and because it is such a big part of this thesis, it is important to take a moment to define. Tyson gives a very simplified definition of patriarchy as “any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (Tyson 85). Traditional gender roles dictate that men are strong, rational, decisive, and protective, while women are weak, emotional, submissive, and nurturing. For so much of history these roles were accepted and largely unquestioned, and Tyson provides an interesting explanation for why; “patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive... In other words, patriarchy creates the failure that it then uses to justify its assumptions about women” (Tyson 86-87). Another common strategy of patriarchy is to use “feminine” as an insult; for example, when little boys make fun of each other by calling someone a “sissy,” they are making fun of them for behaving like a girl, which is the least manly thing one could possibly do. “Whenever patriarchy wants to undermine a behavior, it portrays that behavior as feminine” (Tyson 88). Character tropes function in a similar way in that they confine characters to certain boxes just as gender roles confine women. One of the more brilliant things about Lorelei in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is the way Loos uses her to challenge many of these stereotypes.

The character of Lorelei is central to the story of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and this idea is reinforced by the fact that the novel is written as her diary. We experience the plot only loosely through Lorelei’s written accounts, and by choosing to write the novel in this way Loos asks us to think very carefully about how Lorelei operates in both the story and society. Though Lorelei

was initially written as a kind of caricature of the blonde woman Loos once shared a train ride with, there is much more to the character when we look at the way Loos wrote her. “While Lorelei’s frequent misspellings and comic errors make it easy to read her as a primary subject of Loos’s mockery, appreciating the doubled nature of the novel’s characters proves that target instead to be the social order that forces women into negligible and confining roles” (Barwise 4). This “doubled nature of the novel’s characters” can be applied to Lorelei as a subversion of the “confining roles” that are stereotypical female character tropes, as “Lorelei’s garter is flung down like a gauntlet as a challenge to the system that would confine her to the hideously dull realm of the appropriately feminine” (Barreca xii). The entire novel can be read as Loos subverting what is considered “appropriately feminine.”

Many hear the term “subversion” and think of the phrase “subverting expectations,” which then leads them to the technique of using plot twists in order to keep the audience from predicting where the story will go. The idea of subversion that is discussed in this thesis is similar to an extent but does not refer solely to unexpected plot twists, though *Blondes* is definitely full of unexpected and comically exaggerated plot points. Works are subversive if they aim to challenge the societal norms of the times in which they were made, and this can be done in many ways. To apply the idea of “doing the thing and subverting the thing” to both *Barbie* and *Blondes*, it is important to both look at what these texts are trying to subvert and how they are trying to subvert it. While this might not be as clear as Gerwig intended with *Barbie*, we can see that Loos uses *Blondes* to subvert expectations about stereotypical gender roles through the character of Lorelei and the way she operates as a subversion of not just the “dumb blonde” stereotype, but of many other stereotypical female character tropes as well.

Lorelei subverts several popular female character tropes and her subversions of these tropes serve Loos's satirical take on the societal confines of women. As Claire Barwise writes in her article "A Girl Like We: Narrative Doubling and the Politics of Femininity in Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*;"

Loos plays on... stereotypes and shows them to be deceptive while also acknowledging their hedonic power. As limiting as stereotypes of femininity might be, the joke is not on the women who play into them, but rather on the men who are so in thrall to the power of a pink 'negligay' (59) and a performance of helplessness that they fail to see a woman's true character or intentions. (Barwise 13)

Loos does not necessarily place importance on undermining or rejecting "the joke," rather the importance is placed on being in on "the joke" – and the joke, of course, is that men can be so caught up in a woman's appearance that they underestimate the true aspects of her character. Loos herself, when discussing the casting of Lorelei for the 1949 Broadway musical adaptation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, said "you can cast Lorelei two ways, with the cutest, littlest, prettiest girl in town or with a comedienne's... comment on the cutest, littlest, prettiest girl in town. I wrote her as a comedy, and Broadway is attuned to satire" (Speller). This is an example of Loos acknowledging the layers to Lorelei's character and the importance of humor in bringing her to life on the stage, and these would not be so important if they were not already staples of the character in the original novel.

The Love Interest

The love interest trope refers to when a woman's only role in a story is to end up with the hero at the end. She has a connection to the male protagonist, typically by being his friend's

sister or his boss's daughter or something similar, but she does not usually have much development or contribute to the overall plot beyond her romantic involvements. She is more or less a prize for the hero at the end of the story. An example of this trope is the character Sarah Jacobs from the 1992 film *Newsies* (Ortega). Sarah's introduction to both Jack – the male protagonist – and the audience is just that she is his new friend's sister. She does not have any personal motivation throughout the film, and only aligns herself with the protagonist because of her familial and romantic attachments. She and Jack are only given one scene where they have a private conversation, and though this is meant to serve as the development in their relationship they lack a true point of connection. The film ends with the two of them sharing a kiss because the hero must naturally get the girl.

One of the more noticeable differences between *Blondes* and other novels is the comical abundance of love interests, and the fact that these love interests are men. While it is common for protagonists to have one or more love interests, it is highly unusual for them to have ten, and this is the number of men Lorelei interacts with in ways significant enough to warrant consideration as love interests. For the purposes of this thesis, “love interest” will apply to men that Lorelei either seriously entertains as suitors or simply flirts with for some reason or other. On first glance one could read Lorelei's multitude of men as a dig on Loos's part at women for being overly flirtatious. After all, societal rules dictated by the patriarchy state that a woman who flirts with men to the degree that Lorelei does is anything but marriage material, and marriage was considered to be the ultimate goal for women. This idea was beginning to change in the 1920s with the rise of the flapper and women's growing sense of independence, but these progressive ideas were not embraced by everyone. When one thinks about Loos's own account of writing

Blondes as a joke about men fawning over a blonde woman it would be easy to assume that she held a more judgemental opinion of flirtatious women.

However, if one were to look at the male love interests through a more subversive lens, Loos is making a commentary on the absurdity of treating women as decorative objects whose purpose in a story is to end up with the male hero. She does this by showing us a role reversal in the form of a gender swap, much like is seen in *Barbie*; here, it is men whose importance to the narrative is only based on their relation to the heroine. While there are love interests who remain present throughout all or most of the novel – such as Gus Eisman, Lorelei’s benefactor – there are many who cease to be important the moment Lorelei loses interest, whether that be from boredom or because they are no longer useful to her. This is an example of Loos estranging us from the dynamic we are used to, which is male characters having significant importance to the narrative and female characters being expendable.

One such example is Gerald “Gerry” Lamson, an English novelist who begins going out with Lorelei while Mr. Eisman – whom Lorelei is already going out with – is out of town, despite the fact that Gerry is married. Lorelei writes “Gerry has had quite a lot of trouble himself and he can not even get married on account of his wife. He and she have never been in love with each other but she was a suffragette and asked him to marry her, so what could he do?” (Loos 11). The detail that Gerry’s wife is a suffragette is interesting as it speaks to Loos’s unflattering opinion on the suffragette movement and the more progressive women who participated in it, and Gerry apparently shares these sentiments because already being married does not stop him from professing his love to Lorelei and promising to get a divorce and marry her instead (Loos 14-15). Lorelei accepts his engagement ring but declares no feelings for Gerry that are stronger than that of “quite a little crush” (Loos 9), and it takes no more than one talk with Mr. Eisman to convince

her to abandon Gerry altogether and sail to Europe (Loos 17), leaving Gerry a letter saying she “will see [him] later perhaps” (Loos 18). Once something more entertaining comes along in the form of a European tour completely funded by Mr. Eisman, Lorelei has no qualms about never seeing Gerry again. Lorelei being the one to do this, to disregard a man in such a casual way, is not something we usually see.

Loos uses Lorelei to subvert the stereotypical idea of the woman as the love interest by having her treat men with the same disregarding tendencies they usually reserve for women. In fact, it is interesting to note that the most important relationship Lorelei has throughout the novel is her relationship with Dorothy. Scholars have analyzed *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* with a focus on Dorothy’s importance to the narrative, and there have been different conclusions about her character. Claire Barwise views Dorothy as an extension of Lorelei; “With Dorothy and Lorelei, Loos creates the fictional unit of a doubled character: two characters that the novel asks be read in terms of one another, rather than as separate individuals, because they represent two aspects of the same construct” (Barwise 7). On the other hand, Susan Hegeman sees Dorothy as Lorelei’s foil, who “functions primarily as a counterpoint to Lorelei’s comic reversals of convention: she is a critic, a truth teller, and the voice of liberated, un hypocritical moral authority” (Hegeman 529). Regardless of which interpretation you choose, as both have merit, it cannot be denied that the relationship between Lorelei and Dorothy is the strongest in the novel, and Loos uses this to further “break the rules and threaten the usual social order” that demands a woman to place her romantic relationships above her platonic relationships (Barreca xvii).

While it is not unusual for female characters to have friends, it is not common for their friendships to be given more importance than their romantic relationships, and Loos giving Lorelei and Dorothy the most enduring relationship in the novel was yet another way to subvert

the typical treatment of women as love interests. Loos shows that Lorelei is at her strongest when she is with Dorothy, as both of the most complex and important schemes in the novel – the diamond tiara and Lorelei’s marriage to Henry Spoffard – require Dorothy’s help. Dorothy has her own special kind of humor that works in the opposite way of Lorelei’s, because where Lorelei is using indirection and subversion at every opportunity, Dorothy is brutally honest. That honesty, however, is still masked in Loos’s clever and snarky humor; for example, when discussing a district attorney who is publicly in support of 1920s prohibition policies, Dorothy says, “If he poured 1,000 dollars worth [of alcohol] down his sink to get himself one million dollars worth of publicity and a good job – when we pour it down our sink, what do we get?” (Loos 81). Loos uses Lorelei and Dorothy’s specific styles of humor to show that they both counter and compliment each other, further establishing their narrative connection. The lack of a male love interest with any real agency and her friendship with Dorothy show how Loos establishes Lorelei as a character who breaks the traditional mold whenever possible.

The Damsel in Distress

The damsel in distress trope refers to when a woman’s primary role in a story is to be rescued by the male protagonist or other male characters. The rescuing could be in a variety of ways such as saving her from a kidnapper, providing financial assistance, or helping her save face in social situations. Despite the specific circumstances, the woman has a problem and needs the man to solve it. A character who fits the damsel in distress trope is Bella Swan from the 2005 novel *Twilight* (Meyer). Being the only human surrounded by various supernatural creatures, it is structured into the narrative that Bella needs to be saved by her vampire boyfriend Edward. Even when she tries to take matters into her own hands and act with agency in the story, she still needs

Edward to save her because at the end of the day she is mixed up in problems that she is physically not strong enough to handle on her own.

One thing we see countless times throughout *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is that despite the act Lorelei puts on, she is far from helpless when encountering difficult situations. She might play the part of a damsel in distress to elicit the help of men but this is just that, an act. Lorelei blatantly subverts the damsel in distress trope by exhibiting agency in every situation she finds herself in, and this can be seen through the scheme she enacts to procure and protect a diamond tiara while she and Dorothy are in Paris. As soon as Lorelei learns how expensive it is, \$7500, she begins to look for someone to buy it for her; “So then I looked around the room and I noticed a gentleman who seemed to be quite well groomed. So I asked Major Falcon who he was and he said he was called Sir Francis Beekman and it seems he is very, very wealthy” (Loos 37). After striking up an acquaintance, Lorelei begins her plan to condition him into buying her things in the hopes of working up to the tiara; “I told Dorothy that I always believe that there is nothing like trying and I think it would be nice for an American girl like I to educate an English gentleman like Piggie, as I call Sir Francis Beekman” (Loos 41).

The first step in Piggie’s “education” is for Lorelei to teach him “how to act with a girl like American gentlemen act with a girl” (Loos 44) by tricking him into buying her an expensive amount of orchids. Lorelei does this by instructing a bellhop to buy and send 10 pounds’ worth of orchids to her room while Piggie is there, giving him the credit for sending her the flowers (Loos 44). After Lorelei goes on and on about how wonderful Piggie is for sending her the flowers – that she had sent for herself – he eventually stops denying that he was the one who sent them. This all goes according to Lorelei’s plan, as Piggie then begins to send her boxes of orchids. Lorelei reasons that “by the time Piggie pays for a few dozen orchids, the diamond tiara

will really seem like quite a bargain. Because I always think that spending money is only just a habit and if you get a gentleman started on buying one dozen orchids at a time he really gets very good habits” (Loos 46). Her logic proves to be well-founded because only two days later the diamond tiara is hers, and three days after that she and Dorothy are on their way to Paris.

While preparing to go out shopping Lorelei is confronted by Piggie’s wife, Lady Francis Beekman; “So it seems that she said that if I did not give her back the diamond tiara right away, she would make quite a fuss and she would ruin my reputation” (Loos 57). After Lorelei and Dorothy have quite the confrontation with Lady Beekman – which results in some great examples of Loos’s comical writing in the form of Dorothy’s one liners, such as “Lady, if we hurt your dignity like you hurt our eyesight I hope for your sake, you are a Christian science” (Loos 59) – they are met by her solicitor and a man Lorelei assumes is his son, who Lorelei calls Robber and Louie respectively. Lorelei and Dorothy do not speak French, so they have a waiter translate what the men are saying to each other and learn “they said that they would ask us out a lot and that they would charge up all the bills to Lady Francis Beekman because they would watch for their chance and they would steal the diamond tiara” (Loos 64). This prompts Lorelei to concoct what is perhaps her most outlandish scheme in the novel in order to both keep her tiara and enjoy spending Lady Beekman’s money.

The entire tiara scheme is the clearest single example of Lorelei’s true intelligence beyond the innocent, ditsy persona she presents to the world around her. After learning of the plan to steal the tiara, Lorelei has an imitation made out of paste so she can “leave the imitation of the diamond tiara lying around, so Louie and Robber could see how careless I seem to be with it” (Loos 64). This is meant to make them think stealing the tiara from her will be easy, and therefore encourage them to keep spending Lady Beekman’s money on Lorelei and Dorothy until

they get an opportunity to take it; “I mean the imitation of a diamond tiara would only cost about 65 dollars and what is 65 dollars if Dorothy and I could do some delightful shopping and get some delightful presents that would seem more delightful when we stopped to realize that Lady Francis Beekman paid for them” (Loos 64-65). Lorelei even considers allowing the tiara to be stolen after enough money has been spent for the sake of it being “quite amusing” for Lady Beekman to realize she spent all that money just to end up with an imitation tiara (Loos 65).

The tiara scheme only gets more complicated when Louie and Robber both separately try to get Dorothy to steal the tiara from Lorelei, and the girls use it as an opportunity to make even more money by having Dorothy sell the tiara to Louie for Lorelei to steal back and then turn around and have Dorothy sell it to Robber (Loos 69). After this development in the plan leaves Louie and Robber fighting amongst themselves, the girls confess to the whole scheme and propose having a second imitation made for the men to give to Lady Beekman (Loos 71-72) as Lorelei decided she wanted to keep the first, resulting in three tiaras total. This whole incident shows that Lorelei is more than capable of handling herself and should never be mistaken for a damsel in distress. Every time she was faced with new developments she assessed the situation and adapted her plans accordingly, proving that she is perfectly aware of her strengths and the best ways to use them.

Loos makes it clear that despite the act, Lorelei is very much aware that she has the agency, both in this tiara scheme and in every other situation in the novel. Her subversion of the damsel in distress trope shows that through their preconceived notions of who she is and what she is capable of, the true victims in these situations are the men. They think they are coming to the social or financial aid of a beautiful woman, but are unaware that her eyes are actually for their wallets. In making the men in the novel the damsel in distress instead of Lorelei, Loos

shows an example of how patriarchal gender roles have a negative impact on men as well. Not only have they been conditioned to see women as helpless damsels who need saving, they have also been conditioned to believe that they must always be the savior. Tyson discusses how strict gender roles dictate that men must always be the provider, never showing physical or emotional weakness (Tyson 87), and this translates into Loos's work through the male characters' eagerness to show their ability to financially support Lorelei. In a way, the men are the damsels in distress in this novel, not Lorelei, and Loos's satire of this dynamic shows us that patriarchy is not just something that affects women.

The Girl Next Door

The girl next door trope refers to a female character who is approachable, helpful, and wholesome, and is a reliable presence for the male protagonist during the story. She is commonly rewarded by the narrative for being there to assist the male protagonist, and can often play the role of the love interest as well. This trope reinforces the idea that women are naturally soft, helpful, and will do anything for the male protagonist while expecting nothing in return, though they are often rewarded with romantic interest. A typical girl next door would be a character like Sandy from the 1978 film *Grease* (Kleiser). It is her sweet, good girl image that sets her apart from the rest of the female characters in the film, and she even sings a song about her hopeless devotion to the male lead whom she remains in love with despite all of the problems they face. Even when she iconically abandons her good girl image at the end of the film, the moment is only so impactful because it is the exact opposite of who she has been throughout the rest of the film. It is also heavily implied that despite the change in her appearance she is still the sweet and innocent girl she has always been, just with a change of clothes.

Lorelei's subversion of the "girl next door" trope can best be seen when she meets her eventual husband, Henry Spoffard. She meets Henry while on a train to the "Central of Europe" (Loos 75) and says of their meeting, "it was really nobody else but the famous Henry Spoffard, who is the famous Spoffard family, who is a very very fine old family who is very very wealthy" (Loos 76). Henry is a known Presbyterian and in the business of "senshuring [censoring] all of the plays that are not good for peoples morals" (Loos 76), and this is in very stark contrast to Lorelei's flapper lifestyle of grand parties and shopping sprees. This does not, however, stop her from pursuing Henry and putting on airs that she holds the same unfavorable opinion of flappers that his older mother holds;

So he told me that that is the reason he has never got married, because his mother does not think that all of the flappers we seem to have nowadays are what a young man ought to marry when a young man is full of so many morals as Mr. Spoffard seems to be full of. So I told Mr. Spoffard that I really felt just like his mother feels about all of the flappers because I really am an old fashioned girl. (Loos 79)

Readers know, of course, this is a lie. Lorelei knows that playing the part of an "old fashioned" girl next door will bring her closer to Henry – and his family's wealth – so that is what she does.

This performance as the girl next door is not reserved just for Henry, but for his mother as well; "I mean if a girl gets to know what kind of a mother a gentlemans mother is like, she really knows more what kind of a conversation to use on a gentleman's mother when she meets her" (Loos 79). Something to note in this passage is that Lorelei says a conversation to "use on" and not a conversation to "have with." This is an example of Loos's attention to language, and shows that Lorelei is perfectly aware of the strategies she implements to woo not just the men around her, but their families as well. And woo she does, as Lorelei's act thoroughly charms Henry's

mother. Funnily enough, Lorelei's method of charming Mrs. Spoffard includes a combination of "old fashioned" talking points washed down with copious amounts of champagne. This method was effective, though, as "Henry's mother said that I was really the most sunshine that she ever had in all her life" (Loos 95) and winning his mother's approval was all Henry needed to ask Lorelei to marry him (Loos 97).

After returning to New York and announcing their engagement, Henry brings Lorelei to stay "at his old family mansion outside of Philadelphia" (Loos 109) where she once again plays the role of the girl next door in order to charm the rest of his family. The Spoffards' lifestyle is very different from Lorelei's, as a more family oriented and religious life is not something she is used to. Here we can see through Lorelei's narration that she does not enjoy the act she is putting on, as she writes "I am beginning to think that family life is only fit for those who can stand it" (Loos 109). After complaining about the family's habit of waking up very early every morning (Loos 109) and attending church twice in one day (Loos 111-112), Lorelei decides that her girl next door act is no longer worth it, and she decides "the best thing for me to do is to think up some scheme to make Henry decide not to marry me and take what I can get out of it and be satisfied" (Loos 112). This would put her in a position to sue him for breach of contract, getting his money without actually tying herself down to him. It is not until her plan is already enacted that Lorelei changes her mind and decides she does want to marry Henry after all; not because she finds she has any real affection for him, but because she finds a new way to use his money and his position for her benefit.

Lorelei subverts the girl next door trope by showing how easy it is to play into. The entire act she puts on for Henry and his family works just as she intends, and although she eventually grows tired of the performance, she is never caught or called out on it. She ends her stay with the

Spoffard family on her own terms. Most people think of the girl next door as helpful, attentive, and innocent just for the sake of being helpful, attentive, and innocent. She does not have ulterior motives, and even if she did they would be centered around someone else because the girl next door is not selfish. While Lorelei's motivations are not ultimately malicious, they are extremely self-involved. Lorelei's subversion – one might even call it a mockery – of the motivations behind the girl next door persona is an interesting way to call attention to the way women will feel like they need to hide or change aspects of their personalities in order to get a man to like them. This same idea is seen in *Barbie* when Barbie dresses up and goes to tell Ken she is “ready to be [his] long-term-distance low-commitment casual girlfriend” (Gerwig 1:21:40) as part of the plan to reclaim Barbie Land from the Kens. Both *Barbie* and *Blondes* play on the idea of women playing it up for men and show audiences that these tropes, these gender roles, cannot have any genuine weight outside that which society gives them if they can be so easily undercut.

The Dumb Blonde

The dumb blonde trope focuses on a female character's appearance, and operates on the assumption that a woman cannot be both beautiful and intelligent. For much of history blonde hair has been the Western beauty standard, and the dumb blonde became a popular character trope during the 20th century. Often the narrative will compare her to a brunette who is the less conventionally attractive but more intelligent of the two. The character to popularize this trope is, of course, Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and Marilyn Monroe's portrayal of her in 1953 (Hawks) led to Monroe herself being thought of by the public as a dumb blonde even though she was merely doing her job and playing a character. There have been many characters in books and films in recent years that have challenged this stereotype, such as Annabeth Chase

from the *Percy Jackson* series (2005-present) and Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde* (2001), but it is truly a testament to Loos's writing ability that she managed to subvert the dumb blonde trope in the same novel where she popularized it.

The previous examples of Lorelei both inhabiting and subverting classic female character tropes all demonstrate her true intelligence because they show her to have a very strong understanding of the society she lives in and how to thrive in it. This, of course, means that Lorelei's actions and the motivations behind those actions speak to the aspects of 1920s society that Loos wants to draw attention to through the character of Lorelei. "Despite the political moves in the early twentieth century toward equality, Loos signals the wide divide between political progress and an actual shift in a typical man's view of women" (Barwise 14). The multitude of men who Lorelei charms out of money and other material gifts is Loos's way of saying that men will almost always be won over by good looks; Lorelei is fully aware of this, and uses her looks to get the main thing throughout history that women have longed for and struggled to get – financial security. This shows that beyond establishing Lorelei as a complex and intelligent character in order to challenge traditional gender roles, Loos is also providing a social commentary that asks us to laugh at the societal boxes we create so that we might question why they are there in the first place.

Lorelei's understanding of the importance of financial security in a world still largely controlled by men is what prompts her entire game, and a game is exactly what she sees it as. When she first accepts Henry's marriage proposal, she writes;

So then Henry said that when he looked at all of those large size diamonds he really felt that they did not have any sentiment, so he was going to give me his class ring from Amherst College instead. So then I looked at him and looked at him, but I am to full of

self control to say anything at this stage of the game, so I said it was really very sweet of him to be so full of nothing but sentiment. (Loos 100-101)

By having Lorelei say that she is too far into “the game” to risk saying something to Henry that could ruin things, Loos tells readers that despite the lofty attitude Lorelei exudes – both to those around her and in her own diary – she is much more aware of what she is doing than we might know. One of the most enticing things about Lorelei as a character is that she is so good at her “game” that it can be hard to tell when she is being genuine, even in her internal narration.

There are instances where we can see just how important financial security is for Lorelei through the way she talks about certain things. For example, there is a moment when she and Dorothy are on an Orient Express to the “Central of Europe” where they see “quite a lot of girls who seem to be putting small size hay stacks onto large size hay stacks while their husbands seemed to sit at a table under quite a shady tree” (Loos 75). Seeing these field workers prompts Dorothy to make a joke that Lorelei “will probably end up in a farm in the Central of Europe doing a sister act with a plough,” and this leaves her feeling “worried” and “depressed” (Loos 76). Though Dorothy was not really serious, “the reality that [Lorelei] depends on men to avoid a life of menial work is not a joke,” (Barwise 15) and Loos shows us that Lorelei is aware that what is at stake in the “game” is her social class and future. It is immediately after this that Lorelei goes to cheer herself up by finding “some American gentleman” (Loos 76) in the dining car to buy her luncheon and this gentleman turns out to be Henry Spoffard, from whom Lorelei eventually receives the financial security she desires after their marriage.

As Barreca states in her introduction to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, “[Lorelei’s] heroicism relies on her intelligence even more than on her blondness, and on her willingness to understand the pleasures and penalties of the choices she makes” (Barreca xviii). This can be applied to her

knowledge of financial security as she understands the penalty of going without it would be a life of struggle, which is something she does not want for herself or for her best friend. There are multiple instances throughout the novel where Lorelei “[scolds Dorothy] because she does nothing but waste her time by going around with gentlemen who do not have anything” (Loos 19). While on the surface this is showing Lorelei to be a shameless gold-digger who could not fathom why Dorothy would ever date a man without money, this is actually her own way of looking out for her friend and trying to ensure she ends up with someone who will be able to comfortably support her. This is also shown in the 1953 film adaptation, which highlights the relationship between Lorelei and Dorothy even more than the novel. On the ship to Europe Lorelei tells Dorothy “when a man has ‘and valet’ after his name, he’s definitely worthwhile. I’m simply trying to find a suitable gentlemen escort for you” (Hawks 13:15), and in this scene we see that Lorelei is both concerned for her friend and aware of the challenges women can face in a man’s world without money.

Lorelei knows the world she lives in, she knows what place in that world she wants to occupy, and she knows how to get there. Even when unforeseen developments occur outside of Lorelei’s control, she is able to adapt and reclaim control of both the situation and the image she wants to project in that given moment. As it was previously mentioned, when Lorelei meets Henry Spoffard she presents herself to him as an old fashioned girl next door in order to win his affections, and though she is ultimately successful, her plan does encounter a hitch early on. She learns upon meeting Henry that he always travels with his mother (Loos 79) and that his mother has a travel companion who always accompanies her called Miss Chapman (Loos 80).

Lorelei’s act is almost ruined when she finds out “Miss Chapman had been talking against [her] quite a lot” (Loos 92) and making inquiries about Lorelei and her past. This does

not hinder Lorelei in the slightest, as she merely adjusts her story to Henry and uses what he would consider the mistakes of her past to make her look even better to him in the present.

So then I had to tell Mr. Spoffard that I was not always so reformed as I am now, because the world was full of gentlemen who were nothing but wolfs in sheeps clothes, that did nothing but take advantage of all we girls... So I told Mr. Spoffard that when I left Little Rock I thought that all of the gentlemen did not want to do anything but protect we girls and by the time I found out that they did not want to protect us so much, it was to late... So then I told him how I finally got reformed by reading all about him in the newspapers and when I saw him on the oriental express it really seemed to be nothing but the result of fate. (Loos 92-93)

Though Lorelei's story contains elements of the truth – too many women, especially traditionally attractive women, still experience situations similar to what Lorelei described – she knows just how to phrase it to not only keep herself in Henry's good graces but also improve her standing. After this Lorelei has her private meeting with Henry's mother, without Miss Chapman, where her act is so good it results in a marriage proposal. Loos shows Lorelei to put on many airs throughout the novel, but behind all of them is an impressive level of intelligence that proves her to be anything and everything but the dumb blonde she knows the world sees her as.

Satire, Humor, & Language

Anita Loos uses the character of Lorelei Lee to subvert a number of standard female character tropes and, in doing so, creates a clever work of satire that asks us to think about how we view women and shows us the absurdity of the different societal roles we force them to play. Loos's satire is implemented through humor and indirection, and much of that comes from the

voice of the novel's heroine. Once again, the novel is written as Lorelei's personal diary, and though comical situations occur frequently a significant amount of the humor comes not from the events themselves, but from the way Loos has Lorelei describe them. In "Narrative 'Confidence Games': Framing the Blonde Spectacle in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984)" Laurie J. C. Cella writes, "By handing narrative control to [her heroine, Loos allows Lorelei] to frame [her] own performances rhetorically and thus to alter our perception of [her] subsequent parodic performances" (Cella 47-48). On first glance, Lorelei's abundance of spelling and grammatical errors would lead one to conclude that Loos was using these to convey that Lorelei really is a dumb blonde and that we should be reading her diary and laughing at her. However, looking at the novel through a lens of satire, we see that Loos is doing much more than just inviting us to laugh *at* Lorelei; she is also inviting us to laugh *with* her.

Literary scholar Evan Gottlieb defines satire as "the art of making someone or something look ridiculous, raising laughter in order to embarrass, humble, or discredit its targets" (Gottlieb). Satire is commonly mistaken with "parody," which, according to Gottlieb's fellow professor Ehren Pflugfelder, is "a creative work that is created in order to imitate, comment on, critique, and / or mock its subject" (Pflugfelder). While this is very close to the definition of satire, there is one key difference that sets them apart; "satire... often has a larger purpose. Both parody and satire will frequently make fun of something, but satire doesn't target a specific author or work. Satires will usually make fun of a genre, a cultural belief, or a social movement, and in doing so hope to critique society more generally" (Pflugfelder). Loos was known for a certain satirical wit in her writings and, in the case of *Blondes*, used humor to prompt us to question social norms about gender and the roles of women.

We have already established that Lorelei's dumb blonde persona is an act, at least to a certain degree. Someone truly unintelligent would not be capable of constructing such elaborate schemes as those Lorelei enacts. The fascinating thing about Lorelei, though, is that Loos makes it almost impossible for readers to determine exactly where the act begins and where it ends. Cella offers the idea that "a closer examination of [Lorelei's] grammatical errors suggests that Loos may have [aimed] to put her readers in a position of false superiority comparable to Lorelei's hapless suitors" (Cella 48). This idea gives Lorelei's very first diary entry so much more substance than merely the ramblings of a dits: "A gentleman friend and I were dining at the Ritz last evening and he said that if I took a pencil and a paper and put down all of my thoughts it would make a book. This almost made me smile as what it would really make would be a whole row of encyclopediacs. I mean I seem to be thinking practically all of the time" (Loos 3). While part of the irony here comes from the fact that Lorelei's thoughts do indeed "make a book," this opening line also serves as an early indication to readers – if they pick up on it – that there is more to this novel and to this character than initially expected.

As we can assume Lorelei used her usual charms on this unnamed suitor, we can also assume that what he said was meant to be both joking and misogynistic; his way of saying "well at least you're pretty" while intending for it to go over her head. But when Loos specifically notes that this comment "almost made [Lorelei] smile" she tells us as early on as the second sentence that Lorelei fully understood what her gentleman friend meant and turned it into her own private joke at his expense. In attempting to joke about Lorelei's seemingly lacking intelligence, this man became the subject of a joke himself. And the way Loos did this in just two sentences is a testament to her skills as a writer. Sally Speller recalls how Loos is said to have "possessed a great talent – in her life as well as her writing – for finding the humor which exists

at the exact moment when male entitlement and female disempowerment collide” (Speller), and this can be seen throughout *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

There is a scene where Lorelei recounts an altercation she had with her former boss, who clearly did not hire Lorelei for her talents as a stenographer, that includes another great example of Lorelei’s very particular language;

I mean one evening when I went to pay a call on him at his apartment, I found a girl there who really was famous all over Little Rock for not being nice. So when I found out that girls like that paid calls on Mr. Jennings I had quite a bad case of hysterics and my mind was really a blank and when I came out of it, it seems that I had a revolver in my hand and it seems that the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings. (Loos 25)

If the novel is meant to be Lorelei’s private diary – a place where we would expect her to let all of her guards down and be honest – then that makes sections like the passage above stand out because even in detailing the time when she shot her former employer, Lorelei still avoids taking any personal responsibility for what happened. She did not shoot Mr. Jennings, “the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings.” Lorelei also writes that “it was when Mr. Jennings became shot that [she] got the idea to go into the cinema” (Loos 25) and moved to Hollywood. Once again Loos has Lorelei avoid any blame for the situation, framing it to have been Mr. Jennings’s fault that he just happened to get shot just as one happens to fall down the stairs. In Lorelei’s comical dismissal of the seriousness of this incident, Loos puts the blame on the man once more and insinuates that “becoming shot” was the consequence of hiring Lorelei based solely on her looks.

Another interesting use of Loos’s comedic language is that which is used surrounding Lorelei’s debut party, which she and Dorothy throw after her engagement to Henry Spoffard is announced. Lorelei writes “I really did not make any debut in Little Rock, because just when it

was time to make my debut, my gentleman friend Mr. Jennings became shot, and after the trial was over and all of the Jury had let me off, I was really much too fatigued to make any debut” (Loos 104). After this, she writes about Dorothy suggesting they throw her a debut party so she can become a proper debutant before her marriage to Henry;

[It] seems that Dorothy is dying for a party... So I told her to come right over and we would plan my debut but we would keep it very, very quiet and give it tomorrow night, because if Henry heard I was making my debut he would come up from Pennsylvania and he would practically spoil the party, because all Henry has to do to spoil a party is to arrive at it. (Loos 104)

Despite Lorelei’s insistence that the party would be “very, very quiet,” it ends up being a three day long affair involving multiple gentlemen’s clubs, bootleggers, Ziegfeld Girls,³ the police, and a prohibition judge who “dearly loves a party” (Loos 107). Lorelei even loses interest during the final night of the party and leaves Dorothy to see off the guests (Loos 106).

In Barreca’s introduction, she discusses what Loos does with Lorelei’s debut party in a very eye-opening way; “Loos, like many other women writers of comedy, masks her satire of this scene by having her female protagonist appear to describe faithfully a series of events without, apparently, embellishing any of them. She writes with a wink at the reader, assuming both common ground and comedic camaraderie” (Barreca xiv). We, the audience, are in on the joke Loos has fabricated through Lorelei’s narration, and because we are in on that joke we can see how Loos uses comedic satire throughout the novel to critique the many different boxes society demands women conform to. As Barreca writes, “The world turned upside down can prove that the world has no rightful position at all... [and] we have created our own systems of

³ Ziegfeld Girls were theatrical performers in the Ziegfeld Follies, performances akin to vaudeville shows in the early 1900s-1930s that were produced by Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.

balance based on nothing more than the continuation of what has gone before” (Barreca xv). An example of one such system society has created is the patriarchy, which is largely upheld by the continuing ideas of traditional gender roles that put women in boxes just as tropes do to female characters. And just as Lorelei shows us that undermining different character tropes involves subtly blowing them up from the inside, Loos shows us that undermining patriarchy in our own world can be done in a similar fashion.

Indirect Feminism & Authorial Intent

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about feminist literary criticism is that it is a vast and complex topic. There are multiple ways to apply feminist criticism to a text, and as stated by Tyson, “broadly defined, feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 83). The meaning of feminism and what it means to identify as a feminist are also complicated ideas with no one true meaning across the board. One definition is that feminism “believes in the importance of social and political activism in order to ensure equal opportunity and equal access to justice for women” (Tyson 96). Many people have taken this to mean that feminists are anti-men and believe women should have more rights than men, but this is not true when it comes to the most basic sense of feminism; it is the equality of women and men, not the superiority of women over men. Another common way to misconstrue the idea that feminism means equality is when people hear phrases like “girls *can* do the same things boys do” – which do contain important sentiments that are not intended to be harmful – and take them to mean “girls *should* do the same things boys do.” This idea, that in order for women to gain equality with men they must first act like men, is reflected in much of modern

media through “strong female characters” who are only strong because they act like male characters.

Since there is not a universal definition of feminism, there are many different kinds of “feminisms” in literature and other media; this is a term some feminists use to describe their field of study, as it acknowledges the multiple points of view through which one can conduct feminist readings of a text (Tyson 83). As it would be impossible to cover all aspects of feminism as a whole in just one paper, this thesis has focused on Anita Loos’s particular style of feminist writing: indirect feminism. This concept was originally introduced in reference to Anita Loos and *Blondes* by Jason Barrett-Fox, a professor of rhetoric and writing studies at Kansas State University, in his article “Rhetorics of Indirection, Indiscretion, Insurrection: The ‘Feminine Style’ of Anita Loos, 1912-1925.” In this article Barrett-Fox claims that Loos’s writing indirectly promotes feminist ideals by hiding them behind humor, which has been examined in practice through the many ways Lorelei Lee challenges and subverts character tropes and gender roles. The concept of indirect feminism is in direct contrast to both the larger feminist movements happening in the 1920s when *Blondes* was written and the girlboss feminist movement that seems to be happening in media today, as both of those movements favor directly promoting feminist ideas which, as it has already been established, Loos did not openly support.

To return briefly to Loos’s opinion of suffragettes – “They keep getting up on soapboxes and proclaiming that women are brighter than men. That’s true, but it should be kept very quiet or it ruins the whole racket” (Speller) – this statement is key to understanding Loos as an indirect feminist. Barrett-Fox writes, “Almost certainly, Loos saw feminism as the material manifestation of a larger self-pitying cultural impulse. As she explains in an oral history interview taken near the end of her life, she saw self-pity to be the ‘most boring emotion in the world’” (Barrett-Fox

221). This explains why Loos did not align herself with the official feminist movements she lived through, as she thought of her feminist contemporaries as “self-important” (Barrett-Fox 221). However, to take Loos at face value and declare that she was not a feminist writer would not be entirely accurate; according to Barrett-Fox, “Loos has too long been taken at her word, which evidence suggests is not propositionally reliable” (223). Loos, as we have seen with *Blondes*, wrote an entire novel on the basis of using specific language to create a narrative voice that purposefully masks reality behind humor and satire. If this is true, why should we take her rejection of the suffragettes at face value? After all, Loos’s statement contains the same humor and wit we see present in *Blondes*, which we know we cannot take at face value.

In his article, Barrett-Fox also goes on to say that Anita Loos “fulfills many if not most of [Keith] Miller’s criteria for radical feminist rhetoric” identified in *Beyond Postprocess and Postmodernism*. In his essay “Jim Corder’s Radical, Feminist Rhetoric” Miller writes that radical feminist rhetoric “generally avoids certainties... affirms multiple perspectives... assails rigidities... undermines hierarchy... invites dialogue... valorizes puzzles... [and] prompts laughter... [Its] strategies of indirection, circling, bouncing... and contradicting one’s self are decidedly rare and important... [and] it probes ethos at length, refusing to simplify” (Miller 71). It is easy to see how these aspects relate to Loos, even if she would never have openly claimed to use radical feminist rhetoric. In Suzanne Bordelon’s “Reflecting on Feminist Rhetorical Studies and the Covert Rhetoric of Anita Loos” – a response to Barrett-Fox’s essay – she discusses another continuum proposed by historian Anne Firor Scott which “features radical feminists at one end and more traditional women at the other” and “provides a place for women like Loos who did not use old values to protect her against criticism, but who instead used indirection and humor to poke fun at and undermine such values” (Bordelon 716). Loos might have claimed to

not be a feminist, but that does not stop her writing from containing feminist elements and strategies that we can pick up on today.

This does bring up a question of authorial intent; can we claim a work of literature to be feminist if the author was publically against the larger feminist movements going on at the time? Intentionality and whether or not art can be separated from the artist – or to what degree it can be separated – have been questions in the literary world for some time, and W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley offered an answer in the form of the intentional fallacy. According to them, “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (Wimsatt 468). In other words, an author’s intent ultimately has no bearing on the work they produce. Trying to determine what an author intended to do with their work is irrelevant because “the poet's aim must be judged at the moment of the creative act, that is to say, by the art of the poem itself” (Wimsatt 469). The intentional fallacy was developed in relation to poetry, but can be applied to any published work, because the moment a work is published it ceases to belong to the creator and instead belongs to the public (Wimsatt 470). We, the readers, are the ones who determine the meaning of a text based on what we see in the text itself, and in the case of Anita Loos and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, what is present in the text is indirect feminist ideas conveyed through satire and humor.

Unboxing *Barbie* & Conclusions

The tropes – or boxes – we put women into both in fiction and in real life have changed to give them more agency, but they are still there. After examining the strategies Loos used to establish character tropes and gender roles in her novel while simultaneously blowing them up from the inside, we can now see this same strategy being used in *Barbie* to challenge the more

modern day limits we place on women, which many might not see as limitations at all. But, as Barbie Land shows us with its reversal of real life patriarchal norms in its establishment of a matriarchy where the Kens have no importance at all, Gerwig suggests that the girlboss feminism movement has just overcorrected and caused a new set of problems for feminism. Because the goal of feminism, as previously stated, is “to ensure equal opportunity and equal access to justice for women” (Tyson 96), directly flipping the script and giving women all of the power is not the answer either. The key is to find a balanced middle ground, and this is the idea we see Gerwig playing with in *Barbie*.

The Girlboss

The most recent female character trope is when a female character is in every way better than all of the male characters around her. She is smarter, snarkier, and more physically capable; she both knows it and, at times, flaunts it. She typically rejects romance, either directly or through the absence of a male love interest altogether, and also views other female characters as silly for being feminine. While showing a female character to be physically strong and capable is not an inherently bad thing, it can come across as antifeminist because it promotes the idea that a woman can only be respected if she acts like a man. An example of this can be seen in the 2020 live action Disney remake of *Mulan* (Caro); instead of overcoming challenges with her intelligence as well as her physical capabilities, Mulan in this version is a naturally incredible fighting prodigy who outshines the men around her because she really is just better than them. With characters like this, there is no incentive to root for them or be glad when they succeed because they never had to struggle or develop to reach their goals. Being naturally perfect at everything also makes it hard to relate to these characters.

Barbie offers a subversion to the modern girlboss trope because on the surface it appears to be all about girlbosses; the film's tagline was quite literally "She's everything. He's just Ken" (Richardson). In *Barbie Land*, Margot Robbie's Stereotypical Barbie is surrounded by a diverse cast of "girlboss" Barbies such as Physicist Barbie (Emma Mackey), Doctor Barbie (Hari Nef), Writer Barbie (Alexandra Shipp), and Lawyer Barbie (Sharon Rooney). Gerwig's subversion of girlboss feminism comes at the end of the film, right before Robbie's Barbie decides to leave *Barbie Land* to become human. Gloria, a human and secretary at *Matel*, suggests they sell an Ordinary Barbie; "She's not extraordinary. She's not president of anything, or maybe she is. Maybe she's a mom. Maybe she's not. Because it's okay to just want to be a mom, or to wanna be president or a mom who is president. Or not a mom who's also not president. She just has a flattering top, and she wants to get through the day feeling kinda good about herself" (Gerwig 1:39:25). With this being the film's resolution, Gerwig tells us that while there is value in being a strong and capable "girlboss," there is also value in just being a woman – just being human. And this is what Barbie does at the end of the film; she becomes Ordinary Barbie.

The final line of the film gives a very Loos-like satirical joke that further subverts the girlboss trope and brings home the message of the film. The final scene shows newly-human Barbie, or Barbara Handler, being dropped off by Gloria and Sasha at what appears to be a job interview. Barbara is dressed in business casual attire and being hyped up and reassured that "[she's] got this" and they are proud of her (Gerwig 1:46:57), leading the audience to assume she is going to apply to one of the many careers we have seen Barbie have throughout the years. That assumption is turned on its head as soon as she goes inside, however, because she proudly states "I'm here to see my gynecologist" (Gerwig 1:47:43) before the film cuts to the credits. In the final minutes of the film Gerwig takes her final opportunity to once again show us that Barbie's

character arc is complete, not with a career, but with something so fundamentally and routinely human. Ultimately, the message of *Barbie* is not rooted in girlboss feminism, but in the idea that women are human and should be allowed to exist outside of modern stereotypical boxes that place them on pedestals with unfairly high expectations.

“Doing the Thing and Subverting the Thing”

It was Greta Gerwig’s idea of “doing the thing and subverting the thing” in *Barbie* that prompted this analysis of Anita Loos “doing the thing and subverting the thing” in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which she does by having her heroine seem to embody stereotypical female character tropes in order to subvert them from the inside. In doing so, Loos highlights the true complexity of women and shows us that the boxes society loves to put them in have no real basis at all. This concept of boxes connects to *Barbie*, as the metaphorical boxes of society women are placed in are represented by the actual box that a Barbie doll would come in. There is a moment in *Barbie* where Margot Robbie’s Barbie is asked by a fictionalized version of the all-male Mattel executives – who own the Barbie brand – to “get [back] in the box” (Gerwig 48:00). She is presented with a cartoonishly large, human-sized version of a Barbie doll box and told if she gets in the box she will “go back to Barbie Land. And everything will be as it was” (Gerwig 46:21). Though Barbie initially agrees to get back in her box, the moment she begins to be restrained she pulls her arms out and runs away, rejecting the notion of getting back into the box that society – society run by men – expects her to conform to. This is the moment where Barbie chooses the Real World over Barbie Land, even if she might not fully realize it yet.

The ending of *Barbie* includes the most emotional scenes in the film, and it is here where we see the main difference between *Barbie* and *Blondes*. All of the satire and humor is stripped

away for a moment when Barbie has a conversation with the spirit of Ruth Handler – the creator of Barbie – about her desire to leave Barbie Land and become human. *Blondes* never has a moment where Lorelei breaks character, where Loos takes a step back from the satire and makes a clear, direct point. Ruth tells Barbie “You understand that humans only have one ending. Ideas live forever, humans not so much... Being a human can be pretty uncomfortable... Humans make things up like patriarchy and Barbie just to deal with how uncomfortable it is” (Gerwig 1:42:52). Where Loos uses tactics of humor and indirection to “[access] her actual political power through what seems like its public evasion, creating a unique, ethotic link with her audience” (Barrett-Fox 224), Gerwig takes this moment to throw the box away completely and establish with her audience a very different kind of link; one created through realism. It is the raw emotion and realness of the montage scene (Gerwig 1:45:12) in *Barbie* that resonated so heavily with the millions of women and girls who have watched the film, and *Blondes* never invokes direct emotion in this way because Loos stays true to the character she created. In a way, this is another example of “doing the thing and subverting the thing,” because the subversion of “the thing” comes from this moment of raw honesty.

Just as *Barbie* establishes a special relationship between Ruth and Barbie – the creator and her creation – we can also see a special relationship between Loos and Lorelei. Going back to Loos’s account of how she came to write *Blondes*, and how Lorelei as a character was inspired by the blonde woman on the train (Loos xxxvii), this was Loos’s way of establishing a separation between Lorelei and herself. Part of the satire of *Blondes* is rooted in the way the novel appears to be Loos making fun of blonde women, so separating herself from the “unintelligent” women she seems to target in her writing is her way of establishing her own intellectual superiority. This makes sense when we remember that Loos was a female writer in a male-dominated era, and

likely felt that her success came from her being on the same level as the men around her. Loos even makes a clear distinction between herself and the blonde woman in *The Biography of a Book*; “as to our mental acumen, there was nothing to discuss; I was the smarter” (Loos xxxvii). However, if we have established that we cannot take Loos’s word at face value, Lorelei might have more of a connection to Loos than she cared to admit.

In Judith Kegan Gardiner’s article “On Female Identity and Writing by Women,” she writes about the relationship between the female author and her female protagonist;

[The] woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character. Thus the text and its female hero begin as narcissistic extensions of the author. The author exercises magical control over her character, creating her from representations of herself and her ideals... Thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero. (Gardiner 357)

Loos was known for not being entirely truthful to the greater public; “[she] later insisted this disaster [her first marriage] ended the [day after the wedding.] The truth was that several months elapsed before the morning she sent her husband out for hairpins, and disappeared... [And by] the time Loos died in 1981 at the age of 93, she had been misrepresenting her age for over 70 years” (Speller). These instances are just further proof that Loos was not above telling little white lies or hiding her truth within humor, so this makes her self-proclaimed separation from Lorelei very interesting.

As Gardiner goes on to say in her article, “[women] are encouraged to judge their inner selves through their external physical appearance and to equate the two. At the same time, they are taught to create socially approved images of themselves by manipulating their dress, speech,

and behavior” (Gardiner 360). This is the very definition of a box created for women by society’s patriarchal gender roles and, just as Lorelei does in the novel, Loos adapted and did what she needed to do in order to be a woman operating and succeeding in a man’s world and in a man’s industry. Barret-Fox, responding to the literary critic Michael Warner, said “Loos' radical though coded feminist critique [in *Blondes*] addresses ‘a public that does not yet [fully] exist’ [because] writers like Loos, ‘finding that their language can only circulate in channels that are hostile to it,’ tend to ‘write in a manner designed to be a placeholder for a future public’” (Barrett-Fox 222; Warner 130). If Loos was writing for “a public that does not yet [fully] exist” in 1925 when she published *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, it is very likely that the “future public” she was writing for is the same public who flocked to movie theaters in a wave of hot pink and sparkles to see *Barbie* in July of 2023.

Barbie and *Blondes* have many things in common, in ways both superficial and profound. Yes, they both feature a blonde female protagonist, and they both raise questions of gender and the societal roles and perceptions of women in their respective time periods, but their connection goes deeper than that. The song “I’m Just Ken” – the 11 o’clock number that stole the show for many viewers, ironically making Ken the fan-favorite character in a film about Barbie – was nominated for Best Original Song at the 2024 Academy Awards, and despite losing to another song from *Barbie*, Ryan Gosling’s performance stole the show once again. It is not a coincidence that Gosling’s number was heavily inspired by Marilyn Monroe’s iconic performance of “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” from the 1953 Hawks adaptation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (McIntyre). Gerwig revealed in an interview a list of 33 films that inspired her when writing *Barbie* (Edwards), and *Blondes* not being on that list is surprising given the amount of overlap the two works have. Both *Barbie* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* use satire to critique

aspects of the patriarchy by relying on humor, and it is the importance of the way humor works in these texts made by women and about women that they force us to see.

One of the longest held patriarchal beliefs that is still heavily present in our society today is the idea that women are not funny. Though it sounds like such a simple and obviously untrue statement, it is a belief widely held, and one that is challenged outright by both Anita Loos and Greta Gerwig. As literary scholar Katherine Fusco writes, “The project of recovering funny women is a feminist project, in part because women and feminism alike are so often seen as unfunny” (Fusco 345). Loos, much like Lorelei, was aware of the society in which she lived, and aware that any feminist ideals she did agree with must be hidden behind humor or she would not have been taken as seriously as she was. A mastery of humor is a sign of significant intelligence, and in a patriarchal society it makes perfect sense that men would not want to feel as if women were their intellectual equals or, worse, their intellectual superiors. Understanding the way Loos uses humor to satirize gender roles in *Blondes* gives us a better understanding of how Gerwig does this in *Barbie*, and gives the moment in *Barbie* where the humor and satire stop even more emotional weight. “Doing the thing and subverting the thing” – playing into character tropes, gender roles, and any other societal boxes in order to break them open from the inside – is a very important feminist tactic; we just have to be in on the joke to realize it.

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