

Ilus W. Davis Competition Winner

NOT ANOTHER DUMB BLONDE: A Feminist Standpoint Theory Analysis of Lorelei Lee from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

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Anita Loos' 1925 novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, was a near instant success when it was serially published in *Harper's Bazaar*. Loos' tale follows the adventures of a young, attractive blonde named Lorelei Lee as she entrances the gaze of wealthy men and uses this enchantment for material and social gains. Lorelei's story gripped both the public and the literary leaders of 1920s America, including James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Aldous Huxley (Dolan, 2008; Hegeman, 1995). At the time, Edith Wharton described Loos as a "genius" who was writing the "great American novel" (Hegeman, 1995, p. 525). With over eighty editions spanning fourteen languages since its initial publication, the story of Lorelei has proved to be a longstanding popular read (McCrum, 2014).

However, despite its successes with audiences, Loos' work has received little scholarly research over the years. Instead, literary researchers have favored studies on works published by other American authors of the 1920s such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and T. S. Eliot (Hegeman, 1995). In fact, Suzanne Bordelon asserts that Loos' "market success" has actually "worked against its critical attention" (2013, p. 715). Additionally, Bordelon explains that it is because Loos' story acts

as a subtle or ironic piece of feminist literature that the novella has received less literary criticism over time. According to Bordelon, “feminist scholars have conventionally tended to favor historical figures who resemble themselves” (2013, p. 716). This means, in general, that feminist scholars have been more likely to study overtly feminist rhetoric which better aligns with their personal viewpoints. However, writers such as Loos are able to use indirect feminist rhetoric to subvert audience expectations by revealing the contradictions inherent in male social hierarchies. As such, it is important to consider works such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* whose research is lacking in the literary canon. In particular, this essay seeks to not only fill this literary gap, but also to use Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) from the field of Communication Studies in order to demonstrate and explain Lorelei’s ability to use her social location and accuracy to act as an outsider within and achieve the result of raising her own social station.

Interestingly, Loos did not intend to publish a book when she started to write about a blonde flapper’s escapades in New York City and abroad. Instead, Loos herself admitted that she only wrote the first installment to amuse her friend, H. L. Mencken (Loos, 1963, pp. 12-14). Loos, a brunette, was interested in Mencken, but was disheartened by his apparently singular interest in blonde women (Loos, 1963, p. 12). Seeking to tease Mencken about his “weakness for blondes,” Loos wrote *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a short story, which she later sent to Mencken (Dolan, 2018, p. 76). Mencken liked Loos’ story so much that he encouraged her to publish the work in *Harper’s Bazaar* (Loos, 1963, p. 14). The magazine’s editor, Henry Sell, requested that Loos continue Lorelei’s story as she traveled through Europe so that Sell could publish Loos’ work as a monthly segment (Loos, 1963, p. 15). Over the next few months, Loos’ story “became a magazine sensation” while “newsstand sales of *Harper’s* doubled, tripled and quadrupled” (McCrum, 2014). Similarly, the story’s publishing

as a novella “sold out at once as a runaway bestseller, becoming the second highest-selling book of 1926” (McCrum, 2014). As such, Loos essentially published *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* three times: “once for Mencken in private exchange, once extended in five monthly installments in *Harper’s Bazaar*, and again in novel form” (Dolan, 2018, p. 80). In order to understand how FST relates to the story of Lorelei, it is first imperative to discuss the principle elements of FST and its history.

Initially conceived by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, FST started as simply Standpoint Theory. Hegel explained his theory through the example of a master-slave dialectic, in which each person has a different understanding of their society due to their very different positions within that same society (West & Turner, 2017). Moreover, according to Hegel, these societal positions only allowed each person to perceive a partial view of society. In the 1980s, Nancy C. M. Hartsock, who was concerned with the lack of women’s issues in Marxism, adapted Hegel’s concept into a feminist theory. Julia Wood later brought FST into the field of communication studies by claiming that shared standpoints affect women’s behavior more so than the idea of women’s “essential nature” (West & Turner, 2017, p. 512).

Current interpretations of FST begin with the idea that people are situated in specific social locations due to attributes such as gender identity, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and education level among other factors. As a result, scholars like Donna Haraway have theorized that a given person’s knowledge is grounded in their lived experiences and circumstances (West & Turner, 2017, p. 520). Due to these social locations, each person is only able to view their society through their particular vantage point. However, members of lower social stations are able to see beyond their own position and, therefore, are able to better understand more powerful standpoints. This ability is referred to as “accuracy” (West & Turner, 2017, p. 520). Despite the enhanced

view of the less powerful, all standpoints can only perceive a partial understanding of other vantage points. Meaning, while anyone can comprehend some amount of others' viewpoints, only those at the lower rungs of society can understand more than those at the higher rungs of society. FST also states that members of the ruling group force members of all groups to participate in their vision of material relations. As a result, the ruling group structures life in a manner that can remove some choices from subordinate groups. Subsequently, these subordinate groups struggle to obtain their own vision of social life, despite the fact that less powerful groups have a more complete and accurate understanding of society than more powerful groups.

Over time, feminist scholars have added to these tenets, arguing that women's position in society is historically lower than the position of men. As men—particularly white, middle-class, heterosexual men—have more access power, men have sought to use their perspective to silence other perspectives. In addition, Wood describes how “patriarchy naturalizes male and female divisions, making it seem natural, right, [and] unremarkable that women are subordinate to men” through the sexual division of labor, in which men exploit women by demanding work without providing fair wages” (West & Turner, 2017, p. 521). However, professor of sociology Janet Saltzman Chafez has stated that “feminist theory can be used to challenge the status quo when the status quo debases or devalues women” (West & Turner, 2017, p. 514). Therefore, those in lower social groups such as women are able to use their accuracy to challenge social norms in order to produce changes in society. According to Richard West and Lynn Turner, one way to achieve this change is through the “outsider within,” a person from a typically marginalized social position who is able to gain access to a more privileged social location (2017, p. 520). A compelling example of the outsider within is represented by the main character of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Lorelei Lee.

Loos' 1925 novella is written from the perspective of Lorelei, an attractive blonde living in New York City whose lifestyle is funded by her wealthy, male suitors. One of her gentlemen friends has encouraged her to start writing a diary by telling her that "if [she] took a pencil and paper and wrote down all of [her] thoughts it would make a book" (Loos, 1963, p. 19). The resulting story follows Lorelei as she spends time with her suitors. Her largest benefactor is Mr. Gus Eisman, who is interested in "educating" Lorelei through literature and the arts. Many of Lorelei's suitors remark on her intelligence, such as Gerry Lamson, who notes that he "has never seen a girl of [Lorelei's] personal appearance with so many brains" (Loos, 1963, p. 30).

In the second part of the novella, Mr. Eisman gives Lorelei and her best friend, Dorothy Shaw, the opportunity to go on an educational tour of Europe. While sailing to London, Lorelei recounts a distressing memory of her past in Arkansas to her new acquaintance, Major Falcon. After arriving in London, Lorelei has the opportunity to purchase a diamond tiara and becomes determined to find the money to afford it. As Lorelei explains, "I think a diamond tiara is delightful because it is a place where I really never thought of wearing diamonds before, and I thought I had almost one of everything until I saw the diamond tiara" (Loos, 1963, p. 59). Thus, she resolves to convince her newest acquaintance, Sir Francis Beekman, to buy her the tiara through the promise of Lorelei's interest and affection. Despite his reputation as a tight-fisted man, Sir Beekman falls for Lorelei's scheme. After receiving the tiara, Lorelei and Dorothy abruptly leave London and travel to Paris. Later, Lorelei and Dorothy are interrupted by the infuriated wife of Sir Beekman, Lady Beekman, who demands to be given the tiara. After Lorelei refuses, Lady Beekman later sends her solicitors to retrieve the tiara. However, Lorelei, far from intimidated by the threat of legal action, concocts a plan to further take advantage of the Beekman's money. Lorelei

and Dorothy befriend the solicitors and convince them to take the women to expensive dinners and buy them gifts while charging these expenses to Lady Beekman. Eventually, Lorelei has a replica of the diamond tiara made from inexpensive material called paste. This tiara dupe pleases Lady Beekman, and Mr. Eisman invites the women to join him in Vienna.

On the train to Vienna, Lorelei meets the very wealthy Henry Spoffard. The two become close over time, and Henry proposes to her. Lorelei is initially hesitant to accept his proposal, as she simultaneously has a relationship with a handsome screenwriter named Gilbertson Montrose. Lorelei and Mr. Montrose devise a plan to convince Henry to finance Mr. Montrose's screenplays into films with Lorelei as the leading actress. After Henry agrees to this plan, Lorelei decides to marry him. Subsequently, Lorelei achieves her longtime dream of becoming an actress, as well as solidifying her position in both East Coast high society and in Hollywood through her marriage to Henry. Lorelei resolves to "say goodbye" to her diary by claiming that "everything always turns out for the best" (Loos, 1963, p. 156).

Over the years, scholars have debated various aspects of Loos' work, perhaps as a result of the novella's ambiguity in regards to its genre. Some view the story as "a satire of '20s morality, as a thinly disguised tragedy, or as a combination of the two: a tragedy problematically dressed up as satire" (Hegeman, 1995, p. 526). Likewise, scholars have been further divided by their interpretations of Lorelei, which mainly originate from questions surrounding her intelligence level and personal bodily agency. As Susan Hegeman has asked, "is she a sexual predator, or is she an innocent party; does she coax men into recklessness, or is she the passive object of their dangerous passions?" (1995, p. 534). Moreover, the language used in the novel is open to interpretation. Many critics debate what Lorelei actually means when she claims that men like Mr. Eisman are "educating" her. Scholars like Johanna

M. Wagner claim that this terminology acts as a “euphemism of sexual education, suggesting Lorelei is being sexually educated by men in exchange for diamonds, jewelry, and other lavish gifts” (2017, p. 659). However, other scholars disagree with this interpretation. As Erin Holliday-Karre has stated, “to suggest that Lorelei’s social and economic advancement is the result of sexual acts, however, limits the scope of power that Lorelei wields in a society not only insistent on the male as sexually dominant, but also on the propagation of masculine discourse” (2016, p. 334). In order to make sense of these divergent interpretations, it is beneficial to consider Lorelei and her story through the lens of FST.

In FST, every person has a unique social location based on their demographics and background. As Lorelei recounts to Major Falcon, she grew up with her parents in Arkansas. Although her Papa wanted her to go to college to become a stenographer, Lorelei was only in college for about a week before a lawyer, Mr. Jennings, offered her a job. As such, Lorelei is fairly uneducated, which is evidenced by the numerous misspellings and grammatical errors littering her diary. She refers to a charity function as a “maskerade ball” rather than a masquerade ball, the Eiffel Tower as the “Eyefull Tower” and describes Mr. Eisman’s mother as “authrodox” instead of “orthodox” among other mistakes (Loos, 1963, p. 52; 79; 22). In addition, Lorelei’s lower education level is also shown through her disregard for historical monuments like the Tower of London, which she dismisses as “a tower that really is not even as tall as the Hickox Building in Little Rock, Arkansas and it would only make a chimney on one of our towers in New York” (Loos, 1963, p. 61). With this evidence in mind, it is clear that Lorelei did not have access to a formal education, thereby lowering her social location.

Along with this specific information regarding Lorelei’s upbringing, it can also be determined that her identity as a woman and as a flapper in 1920s America also affect her social location. The advent of the flapper led to new opportunities for

women in that “they could dare to act as only men could have acted decades earlier – they flirted, they changed partners, they had fun” (Coslovi, 2011, p. 116). The flapper represented a series of dualities, a woman who “was independent but young enough to be malleable; sexual and yet not overtly sexually active or aggressive; consumerist enough to want work” while still interested in marriage (Hegeman, 1995, p. 537). Similarly, the “New Woman” or “Girl” literary archetype can also explain Lorelei’s character. According to Katharina Von Ankum, these archetypes describe a woman who is inaccessibly cool, self-reliant, and sexually liberated (1994, p. 160). Thus, as a flapper or the embodiment of the “New Woman” archetype, Lorelei does have some amount of independence as a woman in 1920s America.

However, despite these liberating qualities, the ruling class was still dominated by wealthy, White men during this time period. According to FST, the ruling class structures life in a way that removes some choices from subordinate groups by supporting the vision of the ruling class. In the case of Lorelei, the ruling class of men have influenced her entire life, starting with her origins in Arkansas. The only reason why Lorelei goes to college is because her father did not like the man that she was dating, and, thus, her father “thought it would do [Lorelei] good to get away for a while” (Loos, 1963, p. 48). Moreover, the only reason why Lorelei left college so early was because Mr. Jennings hired her to be his stenographer. Finally, the only reason why she left Arkansas was because Judge Hibbard, who presided over a case against Lorelei and aided in her acquittal, bought her a ticket to Hollywood. Judge Hibbard even gave her the name Lorelei “because he said a girl ought to have a name that ought to express her personality” (Loos, 1963, p. 48). Therefore, the men in Lorelei’s life determined her opportunities and structured her life according to their vision, including through the name she went by. This influence of the ruling class also extends into her present life, as she is only able to

afford her lifestyle in New York and her tour of Europe through the extravagant presents from her gentlemen friends like Mr. Eisman and Sir Beekman. In accordance with the principles of FST, although Lorelei benefitted from the freedoms of her social location as a flapper, she still had to adhere to the vision and life structure that the ruling group of wealthy, White men made for her.

One of the most important elements of FST is accuracy, a concept which describes how a person from a lower social standing has the ability to see above and beyond their social location. In this regard, Lorelei is uniquely talented. She is able to effectively use her own social location to understand the desires of the wealthy, powerful men above her. Laurie J. C. Cella describes Lorelei's ability as "her own grand confidence game" (2004, p. 47). According to Cella, Lorelei not only recognizes that men objectify her, but is able to "constantly adjusts this image to best 'take advantage' of the situation around her" and ensure financial advantages for herself (2004, p. 47). For example, after Lorelei first sees the diamond tiara in London, she becomes obsessed with the expensive item, going as far as to claim that "I really think if I do not get the diamond tiara my whole trip to London will be quite a failure" (Loos, 1963, p. 60). Rather than try to pay for the tiara herself, Lorelei uses her wits to manipulate Sir Beekman into buying the tiara for her. Despite the fact that Sir Beekman is widely known as a frugal man, Lorelei resolves to "educate" him on "how to act with a girl like American gentlemen act with a girl" (Loos, 1963, p. 67). In short, she insinuates that if Sir Beekman were to give her lavish gifts, she would feel compelled to hug and maybe even kiss him in gratitude. Lorelei's scheme works because, as she explains, "I always think that spending money is only just a habit" and "by the time [he] pays for a few dozen orchids, the diamond tiara will really seem like quite a bargain" (Loos, 1963, p. 68). In Cella's words, "Lorelei knows that he thinks of himself as a generous, handsome catch, so she feeds into his own illusion of

himself” through a “type of seduction” that “underscores Lorelei’s astute recognition of the frailties and foibles of (male) human nature” (2004, p. 50). Thus, in this anecdote, Lorelei shows that she knows how to persuade a man at a higher social station, a feat that she would not be able to accomplish if she did not possess the ability of accuracy.

Furthermore, the historical popularity of social etiquette literature adds to this discourse between the FST element of accuracy and Lorelei. According to Marina Coslovi, “etiquette books are for the most part written by and for the members of the social group immediately below the dominant classes, by and for people who appear to belong to and succeed among the dominant classes” (2011, p. 117). Considering this historical context, it is conceivable that Lorelei could have used a resource like etiquette books to better hone her sense of accuracy surrounding elite cultures, thereby allowing her to use the rules of etiquette “to climb the social ladder” (Coslovi, 2011, p. 109). In any case, Lorelei clearly understands that her suitors appreciate her good manners. She even quarrels with her friend, Dorothy, over Dorothy’s lack of manners. As Lorelei explicates, “she does not seem to realize that when a gentleman who is as important as Mr Eisman spends quite a lot of money educating a girl, it really does not show reverence to call a gentleman by his first name” (Loos, 1963, p. 21). Thus, it is partly through Lorelei’s understanding of elite social etiquette that she is able to see above her social location and into higher social circles.

Despite the evidence that Lorelei has the use of accuracy, FST also claims that no one is able to fully perceive the social locations of others. Instead, each person is only afforded a partial view, including Lorelei. This partial view of Lorelei’s can be seen in her relationship with her maid, Lulu. Lorelei sympathizes with Lulu, even though Lulu is a Black woman in a lower social station than Lorelei. This relationship can be explained by the fact that both

characters have a similar backstory in which they were deceived by men. In addition, although it was not necessarily a popular time for a White woman to support a Black woman, Lorelei does respect and value Lulu. Lorelei recognizes the harm that racially derogatory language causes, and makes sure that Lulu does not see this language on any of the books that her suitors give her, explaining that Black people “have their feelings just the same as we have” (Loos, 1963, p. 33). Thus, although Lorelei has a higher social status than Lulu due to their respective races, Lorelei can have a partial viewpoint of Lulu’s struggles due to their similar experiences.

A significant part of FST concerns one’s ability to use their lower station to challenge the status quo, particularly when combined with the concept of the “outsider within.” Lorelei easily fits into the model of the outsider within, a person from a typically marginalized social position who is able to gain access to a more privileged social location. As this essay has shown, Lorelei is able to use her accuracy to not only understand the desires of her elite gentlemen friends, but also to raise her own social station through expensive gifts and a high society lifestyle. In addition to raising her own social location, Lorelei also uses her abilities to confront societal norms. This occurrence can best be viewed through Lorelei’s relationships with Lulu and Dorothy. Although her behavior would have been somewhat outside of societal expectations at the time, Lorelei is continually respectful of Lulu and has “always” promised to employ Lulu, even while Lorelei is away in Europe (Loos, 1963, p. 44). Thus, Lorelei uses her ability to see injustices in their social order to rectify some of these injustices. Moreover, Lorelei frequently cites her desire to “educate” Dorothy, whom Lorelei believes has bad manners. Lorelei often tries to correct Dorothy’s etiquette through various methods including telling Dorothy not to use slang terms because it “gives gentlemen a bad impression” of her (Loos, 1963, p. 45). Lorelei’s reason

for this chiding is to better Dorothy's social station in the hopes that Dorothy will stop "wasting her time by going around with gentlemen who do not have anything" (Loos, 1963, p. 43). By using her position as an outsider within, Lorelei tries to provide a better life for Lulu and Dorothy, thereby challenging the societal status quos that would keep these women at lower social locations.

Despite this interpretation of Lorelei's actions and behaviors through the lens of FST, some scholars remain convinced that Lorelei is nothing more than a "dumb blonde" or "gold digger." Much of this negative interpretation relies on Lorelei's language, which Noël Falco Dolan describes as "speaking more as a child would than as an adult of refinement and reflection" (2008, p. 82). Daniel Tracy is even less impressed, stating that Lorelei's use of vernacular humor "relies on the narration of uneducated, usually rural, rubes" (2010, p. 118). According to Tracy, this language is used to "distance readers from a kind of white stupidity embodied both by the 'dumb blonde' persona and the gentlemen who prefer her" (2010, p. 121). He furthers this argument by stating that "Loos's use of satire enlists the reader into an assumption of superiority over its figure of ridicule" (2010, p. 132). Tracy believes that Lorelei's misspellings and poor grammar are not the result of an uneducated upbringing, but that they serve to make the reader feel they are mentally above Lorelei to the point of ridiculing her mistakes. However, interpretations such as Dolan and Tracy's remain at the surface of the text, and generally ignore plotlines and character development which disprove their theories.

Instead of only considering *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* superficially, it is necessary to recognize the satirical nature of the book as well as the evidence of Lorelei's cleverness through her cunning schemes. In her discussion of Lorelei as the "New Woman" archetype, Von Ankum proposes that Loos uses Lorelei to "subvert two traditionally negative female stereotypes, the 'kept woman' and the 'dumb blonde,' to construct a female type who

knows and gets what she wants” (1994, p. 161). As Von Ankum explains, Lorelei “is able to transfer successfully the principles of investment and return from the economic to the emotional realm” (1994, p. 161). Lorelei understands the value of her youth and beauty, and uses these attributes as a currency in exchange for “significant material compensation” (Von Ankum, 1994, p. 161). For example, when Lady Beekman’s solicitors are trying to retrieve the diamond tiara from Lorelei, Lorelei uses her charm and good looks to befriend the solicitors. She then convinces the solicitors to use Lady Beekman’s money to purchase expensive dinners and gifts for Lorelei and Dorothy. Lorelei even devises a plan to have the solicitors buy an imitation diamond tiara to give to Lady Beekman, purchased with Lady Beekman’s own money. This scheme works, causing the solicitors to revere Lorelei’s “brains” (Loos, 1963, p. 97). As a result, it can be said that Lorelei utilizes men’s objectification of her to her own benefit, thereby transgressing “the boundaries between subject and object” (Holliday-Karre, 2016, p. 333). Furthermore, as Holliday-Karre contends, “the idea that a woman asserts herself as subject through turning herself into an object” “negates the notion that the object position lacks agency and authority” (2016, p. 333). In effect, Lorelei’s utilization of her objectification demonstrates her agency and independence, as evidenced by Lorelei’s ability to understand how to manipulate men like the solicitors through her charm and beauty.

Moreover, Cella directly refutes Dolan and Tracy’s interpretations of Lorelei’s language by claiming that Loos used grammatical errors “to put her readers in a position of false superiority comparable to Lorelei’s hapless suitors” (2004, p. 48). Cella expands upon this interpretation by referencing Lorelei’s language when describing “her brush with murder” involving her former employer, Mr. Jennings (2004, p. 49). While reciting the story to Major Falcon, Lorelei says that “the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings,” thereby using grammar that “displaces the responsibility

for the crime to the revolver” and “diminishes her own culpability” (Cella, 2004, p. 49; Loos, 1963, p. 48). As a result of such language, Lorelei “charms a courtroom full of men and relishes her ability to obscure facts” around her possible guilt (Cella, 2004, p. 49). According to Cella, this interpretation of Lorelei shows the significance of her “frequent misnomers and grammatical errors, [...] suggesting that everything Lorelei chooses to include in her diary demonstrates her awareness of audience expectations and her subsequent disregard for these expectations” (2004, p. 49). Therefore, while it can be easy to see Lorelei as a misogynistic stereotype, her actions and behavior demonstrate a person who understands her abilities and uses them to raise her social position, as outlined through the lens of FST.

Although there are divergent interpretations of Lorelei among scholars, the lens of FST provides a clear understanding of her character. Lorelei’s uneducated upbringing and gender lower her social station in accordance with the ruling group of wealthy men’s vision of societal structures. Despite this, she is able to mitigate some of these hinderances through the historical context of her role as a flapper and as part of the “New Woman” archetype. Along with her understanding of elite social etiquette, Lorelei is able to have a partial view of other social locations. However, as FST describes, Lorelei has accuracy, the ability to comprehend the viewpoints of those above her in a way that is more precise than how the ruling group sees her. In using this accuracy, Lorelei is able to act as an outsider within in order to not only raise her own social station, but also to challenge societal norms regarding other women like Lulu and Dorothy. Therefore, by interpreting Lorelei through FST, it is evident that she is far from the “dumb blonde” stereotype that rests on the surface of some critic’s arguments. Instead, it is clear that Lorelei is a clever woman with bodily agency who uses men’s objectification of her to further the social station and opportunities of herself and others.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The title of this essay, "Not Another Dumb Blonde," alludes to a common stereotype about blonde people. What are some aspects of this stereotype, and who are some characters in popular media fit in this stereotype?
2. What is Feminist Standpoint Theory? How have you seen this theory at work in your own experiences?
3. *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* came out in the 1920s. What elements of 1920s culture are prevalent in Lorelai's story?
4. The author makes a direct connection between Lorelai's speech and the "New Woman" archetype. Think about other common archetypes. What are common characteristics of these archetypes' speech?