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# Analysis And Review Of The Film Legally Blonde

## Introduction

As the saying goes, "Beauty is only skin deep." Elle Woods, in the film Legally Blonde, fulfills the proverb beautifully. The film debuted in 2001 during a time when feminism was not as notable as it is today; the early 2000s embodied a time of regression to classical gender roles in media and popular culture. Reese Witherspoon, the star of Legally Blonde, gained worldwide recognition for playing a role that required more than sitting poolside in a bikini. Witherspoon became a popular staple in American culture for her role as the ultra girly, yet driven Elle Woods in her journey to a prosperous lawyer. Legally Blonde is recognized for its inspiration plot that transcended into an American classic, defying blonde stereotypes forever.

The film, Legally Blonde, follows the natural blonde Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) who seems to arguably have the world at her fingertips. Woods is the president of her Delta Nu sorority, a scholar as well, and is dating an aspiring senator in her fraternity boyfriend Warner Washington. In the beginning of the film, it is clear that Elle lives a lifestyle of ease, luxury, and indulges in social approval. Expecting a proposal, Warner breaks up with Elle at dinner saying if he wants to be a senator by thirty then he needs to wed "a Jackie, not a Marilyn." It is evident that he does not see a future with Elle implying she is not practical partner generally and "too blonde." A heartbroken and insulted Elle devises a plan to not only win back her ex-boyfriend, but prove him wrong in the process. Impulsively, she is accepted and follows Warner to Harvard Law School planning to humiliate him with her intelligence. Different from her usual tendencies of shopping and poolside activities, Elle for once is socially disapproved due to her unsophistication and naivete. Later, she finds out that Warner has rekindled an old flame with the brainy, law student named Vivian Kensington. Throughout the course of the film, circumstances turn into Elle's favor as she finds a genuine passion for law and becomes a top student at the college. A vital supporting character in the film is Professor Callahan; Woods studies hard and wins an internship for Callahan. The perfect opportunity presents itself to showcase her knowledge and adoration for the field in a court case. Collaborating with Callahan and an attorney Emmett Richmond, they work together to bail out a prominent fitness instructor charged with murder. In the end Elle helps win the case, earns respect from her peers, and discovers a fitting career for herself in law. Warner attempts to rekindle the flame with Woods and is of course, rejected. Two years later, Elle Woods graduates with high honors and is the elected speaker at the ceremony. The film concludes with Elle being invited to one of the most prestigious law firms in Boston and settles down with Emmett.

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Prior to watching the film, I noticed that the *Legally Blonde* (2001) movie poster sports the slogan: “Boldly going where no blonde has gone.” It is evident that the film already sparks controversy and degradation towards blondes firsthand. In the first few minutes of the film, we are immediately introduced to the main protagonist, Elle Woods, who is an upscale college scholar with a near perfect life. It is known that she is the President of her sorority and we catch a glimpse of her sisters; they all are practically blonde clones of Elle, partaking in the same activities mindlessly, and are painted to be painfully simple-minded. Thus, abiding by the “dumb blonde” stereotype. Elle and her sorority sisters are seen mainly in pink, overcommunicating the idea that they are females; while everyone else is wearing darker, subtle colors. By the time we are introduced to the main antagonist in Woods’ boyfriend, Warner Washington, he is portrayed as the typical alpha male. Washington is a tall, privileged white man with a hunger for a successful career in being a senator. In turn, Warner breaks up with Elle because of the fact that she is “too blonde” making her not wife material. Elle was expecting him to propose; instead, she was slapped in the face with a sudden breakup. Like most women, she breaks down loudly and sobs uncontrollably to the extent where it almost becomes unrealistic. An exaggerated use of paralanguage is one of Elle’s tendencies throughout the film. Due to Elle’s upbringing as a rich, white girl it touches base with the standpoint theory discussed in our textbook. Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz (2019) state: “Standpoint theory focuses on how membership in groups, such as those designated by gender, race, class, ability, and gender identity, shapes what individuals experience”. With that being said, it is clear that Elle Woods does not have much experience with adversity, considering her lavish lifestyle, and her tendency to bask in approval from others. She even asks Warner, “You don’t like me? Everybody likes me.” In short, Elle is a socialite; she places her looks at a high importance. “Girls and women are more likely than boys and men to feel pressure to look good not just for special occasions, but all the time”. From finish to end, Elle is firm on an elegant presentation wherever she goes and here she questions if it is her looks that turned Warner off. On the other hand, Warner’s pursuit of status and prestige can be connected to the statement, “As adults, men are expected to compete to achieve status in their professions, ‘to make it’”. Biologically, men are portrayed to be the providers as a main precondition for manhood and often seek prominence in the workforce to do so.

As stated previously, Warner Washington is a man who flexes his dominance by showing no emotion or vulnerability. He does so in the scene following their breakup, as Elle flees the restaurant, when he persuades her to ride in his car saying: “You’re going to get your shoes dirty.” Such a statement undermines the value of a woman by basically saying that her shoes are of higher importance than her emotional wellbeing. “Masculine speech [consists] of ways to accomplish concrete goals, exert control, preserve independence, entertain, and enhance status”. Warner takes pleasure in not feeling like he is the perpetrator in the film, does not empathize, but simply puts women (Elle) in their place of a lesser value as emotionally fragile and dependent beings. Stubborn to put his pride aside, he shows no remorse or emotion to

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justify to Elle that he is not missing out on anything without her.

A common theme in the film is the traditionalist view of gender roles being upheld. Later on, when Elle is conversing with her mother about applying to law school the mother makes an incredibly sexist comment regarding gender roles. Boggled by her daughter's newfound interest, she says: "Honey, you were First Runner-Up at the 'Miss Hawaiian Tropics' contest. Why are you going to throw that all away?" Although it is clear that Elle does well in school, even her parents cannot look past a pretty face; it makes it seem that college girls solely care about their image and maintaining an appearance. Of course, the film incorporates many instances of a patriarchy "...reflecting the perspectives and priorities of men more than those of women". In the U.S. western culture is very apparent and it comes as no surprise when it is referenced in *Legally Blonde*. When Elle wins the internship from Professor Callahan, she is designated to complete mindless and tedious tasks not pertaining to the field of law itself. Along with the other female interns, they are doing personal tasks to please the man. It seems as though they only were granted the internship for their supporting and nurturing services.

Similarly, women are sexualized in the film at times wearing exposing or hardly any clothing. In their article, Jaimee Swift and Hannah Gould speak out on the exploitation of women and girls in popular media. "A report by the American Psychological Association (APA) on the sexualization of girls in the media found that girls are depicted in a sexual manner more often than boys; dressed in revealing clothing, and with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness". Within the first five minutes of the film, the Delta Nu sorority are mingling with fraternity members wearing bikinis while engaging in activities. Swift and Gould (2019) also mention that the media is hugely responsible for the promotion of female sexualization. The females in these films wearing little to no clothing entice males and give off the impression that they are willing to give themselves up for sexual pleasure. Furthermore, it leads audience members that when women are wearing bikinis or exposing articles of clothing, it is okay to take it as a sign to make immediate sexual advances on them. Likewise, another instance of an unmistakable element of patriarchy is Elle's admissions video to Harvard. As a mandatory guideline to be considered for admission to Harvard, she does so in a naive way and one that only she would devise. The video has her dressed in a bikini boasting her finest "assets" and "qualities." In the video, we see a poolside Elle in a bikini for most of it as a montage plays with her talking nonsense. Immediately afterwards, the admissions board is deeply infatuated with the video solely based on her looks and ultimately accepts her. This speaks volumes on how a man thinks and their perception of women as property.

Correspondingly, *Legally Blonde* encourages heteronormativity with both heterosexual and the few homosexual characters. As a reminder, "...heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is normal and all other sexual orientations are abnormal". It is presumed that Elle's family and close companions are all deemed heterosexual. The LGBTQ characters are

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all portrayed in cliché supporting roles. When Elle's friends discover that Warner broke up with her they say: "We thought she'd be the first one married and now she's totally adrift." A cold statement like this signifies that anything but a straight sexual orientation is frowned upon; it almost makes it seem like that women can't be single and should be in a relationship always. When Elle is the head lawyer of the court case, she befriends a gay pool boy named Enrique. She blatantly states: "Gay men know designers, straight men don't." When in actuality, there are plenty of heterosexual men who are more than aware of fashion designers. While on the topic of Enrique, someone shouts: "I should have known; he did leave a Cher CD in the pool house." Identically, Enid is a lesbian that Elle also meets and is depicted as a radical feminist. In fact, makes it clear that she would never associate herself with the girly-girl that is Elle; it comes as no surprise as she is impolite and egotistical. The movie stigmatizes the LGBTQ community in the most stereotypical fashion by making the characters one-dimensional: gay men are dainty and lesbians are hostile.

Aside from the flak found throughout the film, it does promote the notion of women can do anything men can do, often times better. There are quite a few uplifting and optimistic lights of feminism that aid in Elle's triumphant towards the conclusion of the film. In spite of the petty female rivalries and drama, Elle is surrounded by many loyal companions that want the best for her. For example, Elle's is clearly well-respected and adored by all of her sorority sisters and it is indisputable that they are proud to call her their President. In the beginning of the movie, we see that the sisters of Delta Nu are all supportive of her impending proposal. Another instance is when she begins her journey to the east coast applying for Harvard; Serena and Margot, her two closest friends, emboldened her that she had what it takes to be accepted. When it came down to the court case, with Elle as head lawyer, her friends would be protective when she was doubted or disrespected. Feminine friendships make the best camaraderie for these reasons because "...communication between women friends tend to be empathetic, expressive, and supportive". Arguably, men tend to be more uptight when socializing and tend to not have permeable boundaries with friends; whereas women are more unified and share a higher sense of togetherness. Although Elle may have had a better future than some of her friends, her friends remained emotionally supportive and caring from start to finish.

## Personal Opinion

Overall, the film did take me by surprise given how basic-looking and simplistic the Elle Woods character was made out to be. However, this was my initial thought in the first ¼ of the movie as I did not believe that Elle was actually a genius underneath all the glitter and wealth. I think the most important lesson to take from the film is to never form an opinion until you truly become close with the person. If Elle Woods was a real person then I would presume that she was another stuck-up blonde that has never experienced struggle because of her socioeconomic status. But, I was gravely mistaken and by the end of the film it was clear that Ms. Elle Woods

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truly had it all: the looks, brains, and taste. Woods' plan of sabotaging her ex transformed into an admirable and successful legal career for herself! The LGBTQ characters were poorly represented and would not match to how they are characterized in the contemporary society. The film made the gays and lesbians out to be very narrow in personality and almost annoying at how predictable their role was. I think that Enrique would have been a great supporting role to Elle and could have been someone she could also disclose to like her girlfriends. Our textbook mentions that the relationship between a straight woman and a homosexual man are very intimate, due to their shared sexual preferences. The whole film centered around Elle attempting to prove her ex-boyfriend wrong and I think a gay character like Enrique could have been an insider to be of great assistance to Elle.

It is noteworthy to mention that because the film debuted in 2001, almost twenty years ago, it makes young adults like me think at how cliché and cheesy the characters are at times. I definitely do not believe that the film coincides with my own perceptions of gender and communication for a few reasons. One of them being is that I would never think of viewing a woman as a sex object or think to sexualize them regardless of the circumstances. We live in a day and age where women are still underpaid and undervalued for what they do for society. Without women, who is going to have our kids? Exactly. This world would crumble without women; a world with only men would be one without balance and chaotic. I think women are beings of love, affection, and empathy that help stabilize society to a state of equilibrium. In essence, I am a firm believer that females are almost like a large pair of opening arms that are understanding and can help heal people through physical and emotional trauma.

As for men, the roles in the film were supporters of a patriarchal world and that is a society that people have been advocating for generations. Most of them were brainless oaths who wanted to use women for their own sexual desires or use them so that they would make a fool out of themselves. An example of this would be when the professor was trying to make sexual advances towards Elle and she quickly rejected him. He then had the nerve to ask her if she wanted to be involved in law, implying that she would sleep with the professor to do anything it takes to be successful in the field. For me, I am very androgynous but I regard myself as straight. If I was in the film, I would be ridiculed for possessing both female and male traits. Naturally, I never conformed to the full biological male gender role or stereotype. I, personally, am fond of being androgynous because it makes me, me. For example, people assume I am gay because I keep a clean-shaven look and I have a skincare routine. People are so judgemental and quick to assume one's sexuality all because of gender schemas, stereotypes, and roles. All in all, I learned I saw how misogynistic the male characters were and it made me even more grateful that I am the complete opposite; I respect everyone regardless of sexuality, gender, looks, or social class.

## Conclusion

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Legally Blonde blends gender conformity and defiance elegantly. It ends like a fairy tale, with the lovely Elle Woods finding herself a lifelong passion in a law firm. The film includes alludes to female sexualization, stereotypes, misogyny, and the significance of feminine friendships. Woods transforms herself from an ordinary blonde to a gender-defying scholar with the looks, intelligence, and taste. Viewers can learn quite a bit from the film as it speaks volumes on the topic of gender and communication.

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