

LORELEI'S GUIDE TO A LADY'S LUXURY: THE SECRETS OF SOCIAL  
MOBILITY IN ANITA LOOS' *GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES*

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* constantly acknowledges tensions between the intentions and actions of its protagonist, Lorelei Lee. Some literary critics and authors have speculated in depth the reasons and/or effects of Lorelei's humorous oblivion, coming to the conclusion that Loos creates this character as a parody for the reader. This article asserts instead that readers should grant Lorelei autonomy, thus giving her more credit than she is generally given at face value. I read *Blondes* as a self-help book rather than a parody. Specifically, I read Lorelei as not only a creation of modernist work, but a creator of such work: her diary works as a satire on the nineteenth century social etiquette texts directed at women. By identifying some implicit lessons in Lorelei's diary, I will demonstrate how Loos carefully constructs Lorelei's humorous rhetoric as a disguised societal guide for the contemporary American flapper who aspires upward mobility.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

“Dorothy looked at me and she really said she thought my brains were a miracle. I mean she said my brains reminded her of a radio because you listen to it for days and days and you get discouraged, and just when you are getting ready to smash it, something comes out that is a masterpiece.”  
—Lorelei Lee, *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (Loos 87)

It is always assumed that blondes have more fun and less smarts. For some reason that bright head of hair draws men in like bugs to a light and we intellectual brunettes seldom get to flirt with more than the back of a man’s head. This dynamic inspired Anita Loos’ 1925 novel *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*. Loos shares with us in her original introduction titled “The Biography of a Book” her experience on a train while sitting next to her then love interest, H.L. Menken, editor of the *Smart Set*: “Menk liked me very much indeed; but in the matter of sentiment, he preferred a witless blonde” (Loos xix). So in a jealous fit, Loos grabbed a yellow notepad and wrote *Blondes*, which was later published serially in *Harper’s Bazaar* per Menken’s suggestion. The novel features the diary of one Lorelei Lee, a young American blonde girl from Little Rock, Arkansas who, despite her seemingly naïve worldview, successfully manipulates her gendered limitations for her own social betterment. Loos’ simultaneous jealousy and curiosity results in the clash between Lorelei’s infantile voice, her art for guaranteeing her own immunity from prosecution or consequence, and her ultimate judge-appointed stardom. Despite the fact that Loos creates Lorelei to be “a symbol of the lowest possible mentality of our nation” (Loos xxi), she may have also been asking the question, ‘Are these blondes really that clueless?’ I unpack this query, suggesting that we consider that Loos not only mocks witless blondes through Lorelei’s character, but also offers the possibility that

Lorelei has more autonomy than is evident at first glance. Lorelei's rhetoric is purposely passive, removing blame or responsibility for anything she does, including but not limited to stealing a diamond tiara and shooting a man. As a result of her performance of refined femininity, she is able to commit crime and manipulate rich men at ease, all while existing as a socially appointed decorative debutant, and ultimately as a Hollywood star whose blonde mane acts as proof that she is fated for fame. In paying close attention to what Lorelei implies by what she writes (and omits), readers can notice how *Blondes* works as a quintessential middlebrow text that expresses the undefined and evolving social and gendered dynamics of the early twentieth century's middle class.

I argue specifically that Lorelei's diary attempts to satirize and modernize the referential etiquette books for women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to determine how a lady is to act in order to become socially successful<sup>1</sup>. Matthew Sandler explains, "Many American modernists derived their ideas about failure from the rhetoric of late nineteenth-century success manuals" (Sandler 193). A widespread fear of failure in the early century fueled the popularity of these success manuals. They sold in a climate of anxiety around performing according to expectations to maximize chances for social success when expectations seemed to be changing very rapidly. Beth Blum explains "The modernists' formal investments in difficulty, uncertainty, and autonomy developed in conversation with self-help's valorization of agency, possibility, and utility" (Blum 122). Modernists, like Loos, wrote about their heroes and heroines experiencing "difficulty" and "uncertainty" and searching for or questioning their own "autonomy" in part because self-help books encouraged their readers that there is "possibility" for their own "agency"

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on etiquette books of the twentieth century:  
Coslovi, Marina. "Why Blondes Need Manners? *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* and the use of Etiquette" *South Atlantic Review*. 76.2 2011. 109-113.

should they utilize their tools and opportunities in front of them. Ignoring these possibilities might cause one to lose a sense of self or belonging, making it difficult to be on track toward social success. Lorelei thinks she has figured out the way for a lady like herself (blonde, beautiful, young, and modern) to find success. So, Lorelei writes her diary to advise her female readers how they might avoid social failure—by following her example.

Lorelei's voice is unique; her diary combines first-person narration, omission of specific detail, a warped sense of time, a stream of consciousness style, and dialect—all elements of experimental modernist writing. In order to fully understand Lorelei's diary, we first need to recognize Lorelei as not only a creation of modernist literature, but also a creator— as an agent rather than just a character—thus we can read her diary as more than just a good laugh or the result of Loos' assumptions about dumb blondes, but as an innovative attempt to dramatize how a modern woman can maneuver through her limited agency, performing an exaggerated femininity for her own social advantage.

Lorelei's drive for success is evident the moment we meet her. In her very first entry of *Blondes*, Lorelei writes, "A gentleman friend and I were dining at the Ritz last evening and he said that if I took a pencil and 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" (3). Lorelei here chuckles at the man who underestimates her literary abilities. She subtly detests the gendered assumption that she *might* be able to create a book should she journal and organize her thoughts: she implies to her readers that there actually are not any limitations in what women can achieve. Lorelei classifies her private writings as a "book" and not just any book, but a "row of

encyclopediacs,” insinuating that she feels as though her private thoughts would constitute a public *reference* book—an entire row of reference books—from which her readers can learn. She will show her readers how to dodge blame and gain fame by flaunting femininity in the most subtly ironic way possible: innocent flirtation for manipulation. Formally, Lorelei’s diary functions ironically—it is a *public* diary, which means that its contents are not freely written at all, but rather are carefully chosen for the eyes of readers. Once we acknowledge this, we can read Lorelei’s diary as satire of the New Woman’s unclear social position: Lorelei offers these women a silver lining to their limitations by acting as a New Woman able to turn her ‘limitations’ into resources for social success.

This performative behavior prescribed by Lorelei’s diary is prevalent in flapper culture, as these New Women were still determining how to utilize their newfound, albeit limited, social independence. Instead of rebelling against gendered double standards, Lorelei turns her gendered limitations to her own advantage, using the gentlemen in her life (and their money) as tools to boost her up the social ladder. Loos veils Lorelei’s intentions with humor and ignorance to symbolize not only how the patriarchy limits female expression, but also how flappers used their gendered subordination and sexualization to their own advantage, faking it until they made it. In her book *The Gender of Modernity* Rita Felski includes a section called “Modernist Aesthetics and Women’s Modernity,” in which she explains that “critics [of modernism] have invoked the subtleties of modernist experimentation to defend an ideal of the autonomous, self-referential art object [...] The polysemic nature of modernist art is thus reappropriated for the feminist project through its radical unsettling of the fixity of the

gender hierarchy” (Felski 23, 24). Here Felski points to the fact that modernist art, writing and otherwise, is able to stand alone, and meaning can come through that artwork itself, from only its own context, because ambiguity plays a huge role in these works. Further she points to how these modernist works are used to emphasize or advertise feminism. As a result, multiple meanings arise from these works, depending on who is reading them. Feminist readers and critics may find evidence of rebellion to the gender hierarchy within modernist works. This, and the female readership of the time, leads me to read *Blondes* as more than just entertainment or mockery of blondes, but perhaps a useful piece of reference material for the modern lady. I thus read Lorelei, as a modernist herself who leans into the “fixity of the gender hierarchy” rather than attempting to unsettle it for her own social benefit. She acknowledges and tries to break through the gendered stereotypes by accentuating them. Lorelei demonstrates through her actions how a flapper can still have and achieve independent goals (e.g. becoming an actress or authoress) while taking advantage of her limited position as a beautiful and desirable blonde.

In begin this case, it is useful to more fully contextualize Lorelei as a flapper. In *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* Liz Conor explores how the flapper simultaneously lives as spectacle and as spectator, embracing the profitable potential that comes with her mass-produced sexualized image:

Thus ‘the very act’ of scrutinizing women’s practices of appearing only served to intensify women’s exposure and eroticism. The coincidence of sexuality’s entry into discourse and the increasingly feminine content of reproduced images positioned the spectacularized woman as sexualized object. [...] Small wonder

feminine spectacle became iconic in commodity culture. But the real scandal was what women themselves did with this iconicity: they adopted and negotiated it as an intrinsic part of their status as not just subjects, but specifically sexual subjects. [...] Narcissism and exhibitionism were compatible with lingering perceptions of feminine deviancy. [...] Making a spectacle of oneself was condemned as “flapper manners” and reviled. (Conor 231)

The flapper uses her sexualized visibility to her own material advantages: she can attain higher status by using the male gaze as a tool to get men to give her what she wants—expensive materials and social prestige. Narcissistic, the flapper is largely concerned with rising up the class ladder. When she is adorned, she acts as ornament: there for the viewing pleasure of men. If they wanted to get more than just visual pleasure, men would have to adorn their flappers with expensive gifts. “Flapper manners” or “making a spectacle of oneself” were therefore tactics: flappers used their seductive rhetoric and attractive image to deviously attain higher monetary status by means of material collections. The sexualized female image is not necessarily *only* objectification, but can also be an advantage, depending on the lady’s goals: if her goal is to raise her social status, then she can use her beauty and ability to attract men with money for social betterment. The flapper therefore deploys her limited agency to her advantage, finding agency by luring and tricking the gentlemen around her.

My view that Lorelei is not just some idiot heroine but has an ulterior motive for her own self-betterment is not wholly a unique one. For example, Laura J.C. Cella asserts

What makes Lorelei Lee [...] so appealing is her ability to manipulate her own image and effectively become mistress of her own grand confidence game. [...]

Lorelei is aware of herself as an image, and constantly adjusts this image to best ‘take advantage’ of the situation around her. In effect, she is smarter than she looks, and she uses this to her rhetorical (and financial) advantage. (Cella 2, original parenthesis).

Cella notices that Lorelei crafts her image so that it can yield her social success. Lorelei plays and wins her own “confidence game” as the most confident lady knows she can exploit the male fascination with the female image so that it can work toward “her own rhetorical (and financial) advantage.” Yet Cella seems to still assume Lorelei’s words as Loos’, reducing her reading to authorial intent: “a closer examination of these grammatical errors suggests that Loos may have had another aim: to put her readers in a position of false superiority comparable to Lorelei’s hapless suitors” (Cella 5). Assuming the reader is in the same position as “Lorelei’s hapless suitors” assumes that there is nothing to be learned from Lorelei, and rather that Loos writes this pieces to play a joke on her readers: Cella recalls Lorelei’s very first entry, and Lorelei’s “almost smile” in reaction to Eisman’s suggestion that Lorelei write a book, and asserts that the “small joke on Eisman is made more subversive when Loos enacts a similar verbal play on her readers” (Cella 5). While Cella notices the heroine’s ability to manipulate her surroundings to her own advantage, she assumes that the text primarily aims to play a joke on readers. While this reading makes sense when we consider that the text was originally written to mock Mencken and his attraction to ‘dumb blondes,’ it assumes that Loos herself is wearing the mask of the dumb blonde through her character, Lorelei, to perhaps point to the way blondes seem to always get their way. Again, this reading eliminates the possibility that Lorelei herself is autonomous and able to teach her readers

lessons, rather than tricking them or entertaining them. In other words, Cella reads Lorelei as production of Loos rather than as an agent of influential effect, which I assert.

That said, Loos' character represents many concerns for middlebrow culture at this time. The high anxiety to perform properly and act according to socially accepted norms are a result of a moment of rapidly shifting social hierarchies and gendered politics. The middlebrow culture of the Jazz Age attempts to find clarity in the undefined new culture that comes with the shift to urbanity and female independence. Lorelei's concern to *appear* refined and join the upper class is thus not unique to her, but rather is evident in the general middlebrow concern for social upward mobility. In "Introduction: The Middlebrow—Within or Without Modernism," Melissa Sullivan and Sophia Blanch discuss the tensions that existed between the classes: "The rivalries between high, middle and lowbrows regarding cultural capital during the first half of the twentieth century in Britain and American were indeed the cause of great anxiety and confusion over taste, aesthetic production, audience, race, class, and gender" (1). Sullivan and Blanch inform us that this came to be known as the "battle of the brows" and that at the time, the middlebrow had a variety of names, which "suggest its complexity and adaptability, attributes that are often appealing for artists, but problematic for acquiring cultural capital or even a clear generic identity" (1). When thinking about the middlebrow as an adaptable and complex category, we can begin to recognize the middlebrow as a culture that includes people unsure of their positionality—or identity—in this new and evolving society.

As Sullivan and Blanch explain, the middlebrow is often recognized for being "neither one thing nor the other" (2). The middlebrow, especially women of the

middlebrow, were neither ‘one thing nor the other’ in part because they striving to determine what counts as classy or distasteful in this up-and-coming new culture. *Blondes* actively represents the process of the middlebrow cultural attempt to define social politics because it explores a protagonist who vacillates between performing as a refined lady and a tasteless flapper: Lorelei has no problem shooting a man or conning her way out of the court case, stealing expensive jewelry, smack talking others around her the way she does with Lady Beekman and other Europeans she encounters, or manipulating and seducing rich men for whatever material or status gain she can win from them. She also encounters all manner of culture, from Hollywood to Conrad, German “kunst” to the Folies Bergere. Yet she has the utmost concern for appearing and acting ‘refined’: Lorelei is always showered in jewelry and minding her image and demeanor to make sure she not only appears—or, more aptly, advertises herself—as refined and innocent when in actuality she is conniving and concerned with nothing other than her own financial and social upward mobility. In other words, although she sometimes mocks the rich around her, especially the rich women like Lady Beekman, Lorelei suppresses her ‘brains’ and advertises her beauty, sneaking her way to social success.

Lorelei’s strategically concealed ‘smarts’ have been the subject of much scholarly debate, sometimes written off as true ignorance. For example, in a notorious early review Wyndham Lewis asserts Loos “makes fun of the illiteracy, hypocrisy and business instinct of an uneducated American flapper-harlot for the benefit of the middle-class public who can spell”; Lewis contends that Loos permits her readers “to chuckle over the dish of bad grammar and naughtiness to their hearts’ content” (Lewis quoted in

Hegeman 528). Lewis assumes that Loos creates Lorelei as a parody character for the reader: one that the reader can “make fun of,” one over whom the reader may feel superior. However, not all early readers felt that Loos’ text was purely the entertainment of superciliousness. In fact, Edith Wharton famously describes *Blondes* as “The great American novel,” and also “as ‘a masterpiece’ in two unpublished letters” (Hammill 59). Faye Hammill explains that “the literary status of Loos’ novel has, in fact, been ambiguous from the moment of its publication” as it received both praise and criticism (59). The tension between Lorelei’s words and her actions result in a tension in criticism, in part because the text can be read in at least these two ways: as a hilarious form of entertainment to make the reader feel superior or as a modernist work that accurately points to the confused social position modern women like Lorelei were forced into as they tried to assert independence in a society that continuously implied they existed primarily for pleasure and entertainment of men. The latter does not gain much scholarly attention.

But that is not to say that Loos is never recognized as an important modernist female writer. Although Loos repeatedly comments that she is not “a real novelist” (itself a sarcastic remark toward the absurd social assumption that men are the only real novelists), it is clear that she creates, in *Blondes*, a quintessential middlebrow text, which addresses the tensions that much middlebrow modernist art considered (Loos xix). As Susan Hegemen argues, “Loos’ comical use of illiteracies, [...] her repetition of words, her simple diction suddenly seem akin to Stein’s stylistic experiments. [...] Loos’ narrative device of telling the story of heroine Lorelei Lee through her diary comes to suggest something like the temporal conundrum Stein elucidated in her essay” (Hegemen

527). Situating Loos with Stein makes it clear we should locate her “within modernist literary criticism” as Hegemen points out (526). Scholarship on the modernist middlebrow frequently considers topics such as, but not limited to identity, agency, social placement, consumption, mocking the upper class, modern love out-of-wedlock, and gender politics post WWI. *Blondes* seems to address each one of these concerns in a satirical style that makes a narrative that might be read as a tragic defeat by a corrupt social system, a classic plot of decline, read instead as a comedic and satirical triumph of a blonde girl from a small town who manipulates her way to luxury and urbanity. Lorelei’s ultimate success can be read as a practical guide for the New Woman who has to (and by Lorelei’s example, can) make the most of the mediocre and limited hand she has been dealt; *Blondes* shows readers that, because of the undefined and evolving social standing of women at the time, the women who appear the most incapable and uneducated are ironically able to succeed socially despite—or, as I assert, because of—their assumed immaturity. Why not take advantage?

When we consider Lorelei not as a caricature or a parody but as an autonomous woman, we can read the text as entertaining the possibility that blondes might have just as many ‘brains’ as any brunette or man. We can see how they use their stereotype to work in their favor. Daniel Tracy notes, “vernacular humorists were usually men writing to men. [...] Loos reworks this form in a middle-brow magazine directed to middle-class women” (Tracy 118). With Tracy’s point in mind, we can see how Loos took an old genre—something traditionally reserved for men—and made it new. Loos uses Lorelei not only to demonstrate how a flapper might exploit gender politics of the society, but also to symbolize how women, too, are able to write in the same style as men and assert

their words and intelligence to other women. This is another reason why looking at the text—at Lorelei herself—as some kind of idiot or joke reduces Lorelei’s character as she stands, separately from her author’s original branding of the character as the “lowest possible mentality.”

Because Loos creates a character who is unapologetically obsessed with public image and material consumption, it comes to no surprise that her novel is originally published in *Harper’s Bazaar*, a fashion and life magazine “aimed at affluent women that operated as a kind of guide on how to live—and live well—in the modern world” (Mooallem<sup>2</sup>). *Blondes* just like the magazine in which it was published, is meant for women who desire self-improvement by means of social success. Considering this readership, I argue we take Lorelei’s rhetoric seriously, and give her intellectual agency. Doing this, we can read *Blondes* as a kind of self-help manual, much like an advice column. Reading the text sympathetically and really listening to Lorelei, rather than critiquing her vernacular and dismissing it for nonsense, clarifies how Lorelei uses herself as an example to teach female readers to utilize proper etiquette to improve their social status and reach stardom.

I am not the first to notice Lorelei’s independent agency and opportunist approach to a lady’s social upward mobility. Marina Coslovi explains how

Lorelei Lee, a staunch believer in the democratic opportunities for self-improvement, offered by American society, embraces etiquette rather than rejects it, thus blithely causing the very momentum of good manners to work against

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the origin of *Harper’s Bazaar*, see the following source: Mooallem, Stephen. “150 years of Harper’s Bazaar” *Harper’s Bazaar*. Harper’s Bazaar. 21 November 2016. Accessed 5 June 2017.

their exclusivist foundation. [...] Lorelei Lee uses [the rules of etiquette] to climb the social ladder, and in the process compels her readers to re-appraise the social manners that she so skillfully applies.” (Coslovi 55)

Coslovi does point to Lorelei’s self-defined status as “a professional lady,” as the book’s full title reveals, and notices how she strategizes success, consciously using her actions and decisions to achieve specific goals; however, she does not look closely at how Lorelei’s language works to teach readers specific lessons: how the words themselves function as learning material. I take Coslovi’s idea further by pointing not only to what Lorelei shares with us, but also to *how* she tells her stories: how Lorelei’s specific language and dialect functions rhetorically to teach her female readers lessons to improve social status.

I will show how Lorelei “decided not to read the book of Ettiquette” she receives from Mr. Eisman, and rather decides to write her own book of etiquette for a modern professional beautiful lady with personal goals and dreams (Loos 30). Instead of transcribing others’ words and becoming the stenographer her father expects her to be, Lorelei decides to write her own reference manual to show readers how a lady can truly get the best of everything (31). In what follows, I will identify and examine the lessons Lorelei teaches to her readers, looking closely at how her innocent rhetoric works to demonstrate how the period’s gendered hierarchy, need not set a lady back from attaining her social and financial goals.

## CHAPTER II

### LESSON ONE: A MAN IS REALLY YOUR BEST ASSET

Lorelei's main concern is possessing expensive materials; however, she realizes her gendered limitations, and thus acts accordingly, noticing that connections with wealthy men will allow her to thrive within consumer culture without having to spend any of her own money. She therefore uses the men in her life as tools to boost her up the social ladder. For instance, during incident with the diamond tiara, Lorelei was very adamantly confirms her ownership of the item, so much so that she had no problem interfering with the marriage between Sir Francis Beekman (whom she calls "Piggie") and his wife. She not only seduces this married man, but also strategically uses his interest in her as a tool to profit and 'earn' the diamond tiara. At one point, Lorelei tricks Beekman into believing that he should shower her with orchids (and eventually the tiara). After having purchased herself a bouquet of orchids to convince Beekman to spend money on her, Lorelei narrates:

[S]o I grabbed Piggie and I said I would have to give him quite a large hug because it must have been him [who purchased the flowers]. But he said it was not him. [...] But I said I knew it was him, because there was not a gentleman in London so really marvelous [...] to send a girl one dozen orchids *every day* as him [...] I told him he would have to look out because he was really so good looking that I might even lose my mind some time and give him a kiss [...] So this morning [I] had a box of one dozen orchids from Piggie. So, by the time Piggie pays for a few dozen orchids the diamond tiara seem like quite a bargain (Loos 59-61, my emphasis).

Lorelei blatantly uses this man to get what she wants. She knows that he has a physical interest in her and thus throws herself at him, intentionally flirting with him to get what she desires. By writing this down in her ‘encyclopedia,’ Lorelei teaches her readers that men are there as tools for financial gain. A woman can feign the fool and use her beauty to gain financial capital without having to spend a cent of her own money. I intentionally highlight the phrase *every day* in the quotation to stress Lorelei’s deliberate manipulation: she buys the orchids to get her tiara; she manipulates Beekman by means of flirtation and trickery; and, she always gets what she wants—Mr. Beekman not only buys her more orchids but the tiara as well! Lorelei’s strategy thus leaves no room for ‘lady-like’ moral concerns, and neither should the prerogative of any flapper who desires to excel financially and socially.

Despite her poor spelling and grammar, Lorelei carefully controls her language so as to never put the blame on herself for her conniving—and sometimes criminal—behavior. In terms of the tiara, worth ten thousand dollars and for which Mr. Eisman, the man who pays for Lorelei’s “education” only provides one thousand (52), Lorelei admits to knowing that Mr. Beekman has a wife, and therefore expedites the process in achieving the tiara:

I told him that I only felt fit to be with him in a diamond tiara. So then I told him that, even if his wife was in London, we could still be friends because I could not help but admire him [...] So now I have the diamond tiara and I have to admit that everything always turns out for the best (Loos 63).

Lorelei has no problem seducing Beekman, and she has no care about his wife or the well-being of his marriage. Her only goal is to get the tiara. Once Beekman’s wife

enters the picture, Lorelei notes that his society “is beginning to tell on a girls nerves” (63). In other words, the interference of another woman bothers her greatly. However, once she has the tiara, she has to “admit that everything turns out for the best.” That is, *her* best, which acts as a message to her readers: ‘have no care for any man or his life; only care about your own “best,” your own financial gain, if you want to move upwardly on the social ladder.’

Felski explains that “the cliché of the insatiable female shopper epitomizes the close associations between the economic and the erotic excess in dominant images of femininity” (62). Loos satirizes this cliché to show not that women like Lorelei need to continue to shop and consume to remain an erotic figure in the eyes of men, but that Lorelei can use her attractiveness to combat this cliché, and let her looks do the shopping for her. In other words, she shops for men, and the men shop for materials for her, as they are told to do. Assuming Lorelei plays into “the cliché of the insatiable female shopper” is a superficial reading that assumes Lorelei and women like her (i.e. flappers) are the ones who are easily persuaded. They will simply look at things, become attracted to them, and buy into them without even thinking. But Lorelei, in her deceit, combats this cliché by feigning this identity to swindle her way toward fortune and fame. Lorelei shows her readers that it is actually men who are easily manipulated—even a married old man like Piggie—and that the money obtained by way of these men can benefit women in the end. As Lorelei says, “Kissing your hand may feel very very good, but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever” (Loos 75).

It makes sense that this story was published in a women’s magazine like *Harper’s Bazaar*, a magazine whose main focus is to advertise what a middle-classed lady *can*

purchase and do to stay socially relevant; offering reminders of agency but also temptations to follow a self-improvement guide, *Bazaar's* product advertisements themselves can be seen as symbols of the limited agency of the New Woman. Lorelei herself is teaching these lessons to her readers by her own example and her story is told alongside ads for perfume, shoes, bras, pearls, and more. We can see this, for example, in the May 1925 issue where chapter three of *Blondes*, "London is Really Nothing" is published. The text continues almost seventy pages later, and next to the column where the story continues is an ad describing the "approved silhouette" for "feminine beauty" (*Harper's Bazaar*, 77, 140). After passing two full pages of advice on "daintiness" and fashion options that will accentuate a "slender figure," the text continues alongside shoe, perfume, and brazier ads (142-144). Rhetorically, the working with the text to persuade female readers that in order to be successful, they must buy things so that they can appear the most feminine; appearing the most feminine will enhance beauty and attract men who will help them to climb the social ladder. The ads themselves also carry the message or lesson that Lorelei puts forth: women at this time are unable to succeed socially should they attempt to rebel against or reject female beauty standards. Instead, women should lean into the etiquette of the refined beauty standards and use the male gaze to work to their social advantage. If they play their cards right, not physically engaging in modern love but rhetorically acting as the flirtatious female, then they will be able to persuade and woo the men to a point where the men will provide them with all materials and connections they need for social success.

So while women's innocence and ignorance makes them easily persuadable and impressionable subjects for the commercial market, women themselves can persuade men

to buy them things simply by looking beautiful—another contradiction that is representative of the limited and shifting social agency of the women at this time. Loos satirizes this take on women by creating a character who knows her societal expectation, knows her ability to attract a multitude of rich men, and acts as though she is indeed ignorant so that she can use these men to her social and financial advantage. As a result, she need not pay into the commercial market herself. Plainly, it's easier to shop for men than for things because things cost money, but men have money, so why not spend theirs? *Blondes'* readers thus learn how to better themselves and improve their personal finances by not spending a dime. After all, Lorelei earned a ten-thousand-dollar tiara and dozens of orchids when she only had to purchase a single box—an astounding profit! Noël Falco Dolan explains this trick Lorelei plays: “it is important to examine Lorelei’s more immediate audience within the fiction itself: the men with whom she flirts” (Dolan 86). I do not agree that men are Lorelei’s primary audience; rather, I argue that the men are pawns in her game for fame. But I do believe that her interactions with these men should indeed be examined so that readers can recognize the games Lorelei has to play as a lady if she wants to reach stardom. At this point in time, her gender cannot permit her to do so on her own.

Lorelei provides an unconventional take not only on what women’s decorum should consist of, but also on what goals a woman should have. She is very much a modern woman whose concern lies with herself and only herself. Her independent persona clashes with her seemingly dependent performance. Her manipulation is starkly different from the decorum that the nineteenth century stressed for women. Coslovi informs us that “an interest in good manners had been evident in America since the early

days of the Republic, and manuals and articles on how to behave in society had been read by socially insecure members of the rising middle classes of the nation's rapidly expanding commercial metropolises" (Coslovi 110). Americans have been interested in the appropriate way to act in society. As a result much literature came about explaining proper manners for the genders and the classes. Much 'proper' etiquette was exclusive and segregated. Women must act one way, men another, and behavior and appearance determined class status. However, as Coslovi reminds us, some etiquette books, like Mary Sherwood's *Etiquette* addressed the fact that in "American society, no one knew exactly where they stood 'as every one may come from the humblest position can rise to the very highest' (*Etiquette* 32)" (Coslovi 111). Lorelei embraces this notion that anyone can rise the social ladder should they act appropriately. But she shows that just because one acts appropriately, does not mean that they have to respect or comply with the sexist values of the gendered double standard on which the upper class operates. Women for Lorelei are *more* than just a wife or a spectacle, but they *have to act* as such if they want to survive through their limited agency—they can act like the refined, innocent, uneducated, and attractive ladies they ought to be if rich (perhaps even married) men are going to approach them and buy them orchids and jewels. Plainly, for Lorelei, the most successful lady is a lady like herself: a flapper acting as a classy debutant.

### CHAPTER III

#### LESSON TWO: A LADY MUST BE REFINED, RESERVED, AND ROMANTICALLY DISENGAGED

Coslovi explains Lorelei's logic aptly. She notes that *Blondes* takes "a subtle approach" to the "open rejection of etiquette": Lorelei "embraces etiquette rather than rejects it, thus blithely causing the very momentum of good manners to work against their exclusivist foundation" (Coslovi 109). Coslovi here points to the way Lorelei uses compliance as a mode of mockery: the book is a satire because we as readers, when we permit Lorelei with agency, are able to see how she is playing along to humor the upper class and its gendered expectations to reap the benefits of what they can offer her. In doing so, she willfully focusses on her appearance, and promotes herself from small-town dreamer to metropolitan matron, without having to spend a dime. She uses her experience, and shares it so that readers might, as Coslovi so poignantly explains, "re-appraise the social manners that [Lorelei] so skillfully applies" (109).

Plainly, the modern Lady Lorelei performs must act more refined than would a rebellious flapper, but not forget her modern and independent goals which concern herself and *not* the men around her. Lorelei's attitude, representative of the ideology of the New Woman, is very different from that of a nineteenth century woman, which is to display herself as proof of her own *man's* wealth: Carol Mattingly explains "in the nineteenth century emphasis on gender became exaggerated" so much that "women of well-to-do men dressed elegantly and in fashions that demonstrated their leisurely status" (Mattingly 9, 10). These women dressed not only to exaggerate their femininity, but also to depict the extent of their *man's* wealth, and not their own. This is called, as Thorstein Veblen discusses in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, such conspicuous consumption

served as “a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure. As wealth accumulates on his hands, his own unaided effort will not avail to sufficiently put his opulence in evidence by this method. The aid of friends and competitors is brought in by resorting to the giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts and entertainments” (Veblen 63). So, gentlemen with money would shower their friends with expensive treats to demonstrate their wealth and leisure and gloat to their competitors. Lorelei takes up this capitalist ideal and makes it work in her own favor: if men are going to shower women with expensive gifts to show off their own wealth, she will be the woman receiving the gifts. But she refuses to comply to a traditional marriage; rather she takes the luxuries (whether obtained fairly or unfairly), and uses them to flash her own worth, advertising *herself* and not the gentlemen to other members of the elite class. Lorelei thereby demonstrates to her reader how she uses the men for her own social and financial advantage, simultaneously confirming and resisting the gendered expectations. Moreover, Lorelei’s choosing which expectations to accept, and which to toss, proves her own agency despite the period’s gendered conventions of identity and appearance. Her experience with Beekman, for instance, shows how Lorelei acts like an upper-class lady but swindles like a modern flapper when she wants to.

In making these choices, Lorelei separates herself from the archetypal flapper, who typically did not value traditional gendered expectations. In fact, a flapper’s apparel and style had strayed from an emphasis on the conventionally feminine: flappers were not typically seen as ladylike, despite their hyper-feminine (often infantilized) performance of character. Conor explains: “The boyishness of the flapper was also seen to indicate flight from the sexual responsibilities of maternity and womanhood proper. But her

androgynous [...] was a dangerous rejection of the social institutions in which that activity should occur” (Conor 248). The unladylike personality associated with the flapper was “seen to indicate flight from sexual responsibilities” meaning that they knew they were a sexualized spectacle and were fine with appearing as such. However, flappers sometimes took on “masculine personality” to balance their contention. They’re fine with being a spectacle because it gets them what they want (materials and money); yet they recognize that they are also rebelling against gendered expectations, and an unladylike personality and over-sexualized appearance is a part of that rebellion. Moreover, this rebellion and the tensions within it are a symbolic reference to the indeterminate social positionality of the New Woman. In *Blondes* Dorothy seems to be the example of how a caricatured flapper may actually act and appear. Lorelei does not approve of Dorothy’s behavior most times, which can demonstrate Lorelei’s resistance to rebellion against refinement and traditional femininity. For instance, Lorelei comments on the “masculine” tongue on Dorothy, and how Dorothy needs to become more refined if she wants to be taken seriously by the upper class. While in “the Central of Europe,” Lorelei comments on Dorothy’s new German love interest:

Dorothy said she had been punished for all her sins last night, so she is going to begin life all over again by going out with her German gentleman friend, who is going to take her to a house called the Half Brow house which is the worlds largest size of a Beer Hall. So Dorothy said I could be a high brow and get full of kunst, but she is satisfide to be a Half brow and get full of beer. But Dorothy will really never be full of anything else but unrefinement. (Loos 114)

Here, the “Beer Hall” is equated to a middlebrow setting, literally called Half Brow. Of course, this is word play on the term “hofbrau,” a German style tavern or pub, and here Lorelei is deliberately calling it “Half Brow” to express how this is an unrefined setting where the ladies would not be exposed to “kunst” (art). Lorelei’s choice to write the story this way simultaneously makes her sound uneducated because she cannot spell “hofbrau” *and* works as a way to avoid such ‘Half Brow’ settings such as these because they are no place for a lady to gain cultural capital. In the same way Lorelei discusses the importance of educating “improving my mind” and not wasting time “with gentleman who do not have anything” (Loos 26); here, she uses Dorothy as an example of what-not-to-do when trying to move socially upward. Successful ladies do not sin and ignore their own minds as Dorothy does, and definitely do not go to taverns with gentleman and get “full of beer.” A lady is better off at the Ritz or a highbrow setting where she can “get full of kunst” and seek out potential financial and social gains (i.e. gentleman who *do* have things like money and jewels). Dorothy is content in a middlebrow setting. As a result of her contentment, according to Lorelei, Dorothy will never amount to anything else but “unrefinement,” meaning she will never successfully climb the social ladder. Not only has she partied too hard and is being “punished for all her sins” (probably with a hangover), but Dorothy is also too flirtatious and unrefined to be approved by Lorelei’s standards and understanding of social relations.

Lorelei thereby uses herself as example how best to *act*, and Dorothy as an example of how not to act in order to successfully move up the social ladder efficiently and effectively. Again, it is *acting*: Lorelei cannot speak German and she does not know much about “kunst” or high art; yet, she advertises and speaks as though she does to

emphasize the fact that the way to get to the top is to fake it until you make it. This message satirizes the superficiality of the upper class and, more broadly, the social relations of the time, especially in terms of class and gender. Women in particular had to paint themselves to be whatever they had to be in order to be qualified as a member of the upper class. Remembering period anxieties around social failure, we can recognize that Loos created Lorelei not simply for entertainment, but also to critique this superficiality that surrounds social interactions and statuses of women at this time. Lorelei demonstrates that women should work the system to take care of their own finance and success because, when focused on oneself, in the end, everything “will turn out for the best.”

Again, Lorelei is never one to consider men as romantic partners; rather men are only assets to her eventual goal of social success. For instance, with Beekman she never acted romantically on her flirtation, but rather used her sexual appeal for her own fiscal and material benefit. As Dolan notices, most if not all of her heterosexual relationships, even her marriage to Spoffard, are not a result of actual affection but of ploy, so much that when she notices Spoffard actually loves her Lorelei “is faced with the question of whether or not she [actually] wants to marry him. While she muses about how irritating he can be, she must also be contemplating the extended run of her success” (Dolan 87). She never engages romantically, whether its innocent romance or sexual encounter. Rather she flirts her way to the top of the social ladder, while acting refined and proper without even opening her legs. Her mentality merges nineteenth century gendered etiquette and twentieth century flapper rebellion. The rebellion must remain hidden underneath the ladylike behavior; according to Lorelei, if society is going to continue to

tell women that they are nothing more than uneducated ornaments, then women may as well act as such and trick men out of all they can give and then some.

Lorelei, however flirtatious, strongly suggests that women be refined if they want to reach social success—acceptance as a member of the upper-class. Lorelei contests the hyper-sexualized spectacle, and rather asserts that women need to be subtle when flirting to get what they desire. We get this sense when she talks about Dorothy’s excessive flirtation: “So Dorothy and I had quite a little quarrel because I told Dorothy that she was wasting quite a lot of time going with any gentleman who is out of a job, but Dorothy is always getting to really like somebody and she will never learn how to act” (Loos 56). Here, Lorelei points to the fact that Dorothy “was wasting quite a lot of time” flirting with men who do not have much money. A key personality trait to a woman’s social success for Lorelei is to *strategically* flirt: to scope out a wealthy gentleman to whom a girl can link herself and attain financial status. By saying Dorothy “will never learn how to act” Lorelei sneaks in her lesson: social success comes from acting—a girl must act innocently and flirty but should not truly become vulnerable. On the surface, the word *act* can be understood as ‘behave.’ But if we consider *act* as ‘performance,’ then we can understand how a girl must tone down her sexual desires and perform as spectacle so that she can fulfill her own fiscal desires. This way no time is wasted. In addition, we should also note that the term “waste” itself is financially charged or inspired. Lorelei sees actual engagement in romantic love as a missed opportunity for financial gain.

If we read Dorothy as exemplifying stereotypical flappers, and we read Lorelei as the voice of reason for middlebrow modern women who want to socially succeed, then we can see how Lorelei includes Dorothy’s quotes to explain how even the most

rebellious flappers notice that she is actually a very smart lady manipulating her social image to her own benefit. For instance, after their encounter with Lady Beekman regarding the tiara, Lorelei narrates,

Dorothy looked at me and she really said she thought my brains were a miracle. I mean she said my brains reminded her of a radio because you listen to it for days and days and you get discouraged and just when you are getting ready to smash it, something comes out that is a masterpiece. (Loos 87).

Dorothy's comment on Lorelei's "miracle" of a brain is interesting rhetorically because Lorelei is relaying what Dorothy said. Lorelei chooses to include Dorothy's quote to show readers that even the most rebellious of flappers can take Lorelei's example seriously, noticing that sometimes after you "listen to [her] for days and days"—literally, as we are reading days and days from her diary—you get "discouraged"; you may even lose faith in Lorelei's logic. However, once you take the time to look into Lorelei's social success and consider her ability to manipulate each situation by exaggerating and executing the etiquette that is expected of her, then even the most radical and boyish flapper can recognize that Lorelei's actions and deceit are truly "a masterpiece." Lorelei uses Dorothy to appeal to her readers skeptical of compliance to dated rules of decorum to show them that if they do comply to expected etiquette, even if their attitudes towards those social codes is sarcastic and disingenuous, they can use those limitations as leverage for social mobility

## CHAPTER IV

### LESSON THREE: NEVER SAY WHAT YOU REALLY MEAN

In order to achieve social and financial success, a lady must never reveal but always use her intellect. Lorelei relays this message through her deliberate wordplay; we can notice, as Dolan does, that Lorelei's innocent rhetoric "is not the voice of the real Lorelei. Yet, to succeed, she must continue to speak in it" (Dolan 87). The only way to *hear* Lorelei's voice is to *read* her diary. But when we read Lorelei as a character of Loos', we are constantly tempted to read the grammatical errors and misspellings of Lorelei's distinctive dialect as evidence of her ignorance, assumes Lorelei's ignorance. Thus, readers can note how Loos incorporates these errors to portray Lorelei as a 'dumb blonde' who is "the lowest possible mentality of the nation." (Loos xxi). However, when we consider that Loos is also questioning whether blondes such as Lorelei are as dumb as they appear and give Lorelei agency and autonomy, we can recognize that her choice misspellings function to express how a lady should keep financial gain at the top of her radar, but never express that desire outwardly or obviously. Since she knows her diary is going to be publically *read* and not *heard*, Lorelei intentionally misspells words to incorporate hidden messages to her readers: her misspellings work to represent how women need to *perform* ignorance, but always remain very aware, so not to "waste" any time. This way, the text itself becomes performative, allowing readers to see this performance exemplified in *both* Lorelei's actions and diction.

This wordplay and deceiving behavior is most prominently in Lorelei's relationship with Mr. Spoffard, whose money makes it possible for Lorelei to gain her time in the limelight. But since a lady must not express outwardly her true

intentions, Lorelei feigns loving Spoffard because she knows that eventually she can get what she wants out of him: fortune and fame. The Lorelei notices first about Mr. Spoffard not his looks, but his money:

I mean it was quite a co-instance, because we girls have always heard about Henry Spoffard and 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. I mean Mr. Spoffard is one of the most famous familys in New York and he is not like most gentleman who are wealthy, but works all the time for the good of others. I mean he is the gentleman who always gets his picture in all of the newspapers because he is always senshuring all of the plays that are not good for people's morals. (Loos 102-103)

Lorelei only takes interest in Mr. Spoffard because he is rich and could make her rich. She teaches her readers that they need not choose the men in their lives based on anything other than money and status. Her repetition of "very" surrounds fame and fortune, demonstrating her deliberate emphasis on these goals. On the surface, the repetition seems childish in style and uneducated in tone. But, when Lorelei gets a little more credit for her words, then we can see how she repeats to encourage readers to read between the lines. She repeats "I mean" in this passage to help guide our thinking. The first sentence begins "I mean it was quite a co-instance"; not only does the misspelled co-instance perform her assumed lack of brains, but it also secretly alludes to the reader that there are two results that come from meeting the famous Mr. Spoffard: fame and fortune.

We may be inclined to think Lorelei's word choice is intentionally careless to emphasize her ignorance. But if we assume Lorelei chooses her words carefully, then we

can see that her diction works to relay a message to her readers: men are useful for their money and connections and men are not worth money unless their families are worth money. So, when Lorelei conflates Spoffard absolutely with his family—“the famous Henry Spoffard, who is the famous Spoffard family”—she lets the reader know that she is less concerned with Spoffard as a person, more concerned with his familial and financial connections. Lorelei’s use of first-person plural in the first sentence (“we girls”), too, reminds us that she is talking not only of Dorothy, but also to all female readers to pay attention and notice the opportunity at hand. By speaking in first person and not second, she simultaneously identifies with her reader, constantly emphasizing that if they play the part of the ignorant beauty, they can reap the benefits of any wealthy American gentleman they happen to desire. Moreover, Lorelei reminds her readers never to get caught up in the details of a man unless those details will aid the ladies themselves. Thus, we know that Lorelei is attracted to Spoffard not because he has morals, but because she can use his connections, money, and easily persuaded male brain to help her. She can make him producer of photoplays and call the shots in the acting world so that she can reap fame and fortune for herself. Her spelling errors again add to her innocent, bubbly tone that (rich) men, as she demonstrates, apparently cannot resist. She cleverly masks her affection for his money with an appeal to Mr. Spoffard's care for “people’s morals” because she does not want to reveal to him her true fiscal intentions, reminding her readers that they should do the same.

To hide her intentions, Lorelei plays with informal rhetoric by incorporating coded spelling errors and double entendres. Like “waste,” words like “intreeged” and “thrilled” are used for example when talking about a financial profit. After she comments

on Mr. Spoffard and his riches, she states, “So when I saw no one else but the famous Mr. Spoffard, I really became quite thrilled. Because all of we girls have tried very hard to have an introduction to Henry Spoffard” (103). Here, “thrilled” can be read as a thrill to win money, essentially the same thrill someone may get when they gamble and are feeling lucky. Further, Lorelei speaks to her readers in this moment, noting that “all of us girls” (American flappers aspiring upward social mobility) “have tried very hard to have an introduction” to one of the most rich and famous men in New York. Lorelei takes advantage of this serendipitous moment, and notes, “it was quite unusual to be shut up on a train in the central of Europe with [Mr. Spoffard] [...] So I thought I would sit at his table. So then I had to ask him about all of the money [...]” (103). Lorelei teaches by example and is thus teaching her readers that when they see an opportunity for profit, they should take it.

Lorelei’s behavior simultaneously aligns with and counters the overt rebellion to gendered expectations of the time. Some New Women were more outward about their rebellion, and, as Historian Mickey Moran notes, “American women contested traditional views of the female [...] and challenged the nation to accept their egalitarian beliefs” (Moran 1). Yet, they still needed to organize their ethos (their delivery or performance) so that they would appeal to the pathos (emotions/desires) of the male gazer. Lorelei wants to succeed financially by manipulating her way to high social status but would not like to do so under the hand or name of any man—unless that man is “one of the most rich and famous men of New York.” Lorelei’s eventual marriage to Mr. Spoffard is ironic: she is willing to succumb to social expectation, but only to exercise her own self-betterment. Significantly, Lorelei is never concerned with love or human romantic

connection. Loos creates Lorelei as an ironic character, one who believes in but does not exercise overtly social freedoms that were at the forefront of feiminist movements of the time. Loos' contemporary, Dorothy Parker writes poems and stories correlated with the idea of modern love and sexual freedom out-of-wedlock, similar to Lorelei's friend Dorothy, also a flirtatious being, unafraid to flaunt her sexual desires. Nina Miller asserts that Parker uses modern love as a way of morphing such a private affair into a "social identity" (Miller 49). Lorelei too plays with the private and the public in that her diary, which might be assumed to be private for any other person, is actually a public referential text for female readers.

However, by abstaining from sex, Lorelei counters the idea of modern love as rebellion. Her behavior suggests that entertaining in sexual encounters will only 'waste time.' Lorelei disconnects herself from emotions that are not connected to finance or materiality because modern women are increasingly able to focus and control what finance and material they can obtain for themselves. For Lorelei, if some rich gentleman happens to be in near proximity, and he is willing to hand over his fortune to a pretty blonde girl 'like she' just in hopes of intercourse, then a lady should take the money and run, collecting all of her winnings and protecting her body and heart.

Lorelei decides to accept Mr. Spoffard's eventual marriage proposal because she knows it will lead her to fame and fortune:

So Henry brought me to the apartment in his Rolls Royce, and while we were coming to the apartment he said he wanted to give me my engagement ring and I really became all thrills. So then he says that he has gone to Cartiers and he had

looked over all the engagement rings in Cartiers [...] So then he took a box out of his pocket and I really became intreeged (135).

Significantly, Lorelei identifies particular high-class brands to confirm that she is now living lavishly; she even repeats “Cartiers” to emphasize the quality of the jewelry, teaching her readers where their priorities should lie if they too want a life of luxury like her own. Her use of “thrills” again registers her excitement about wearing an expensive ring. Further, she becomes “intreeged” when she sees the box. This misspelling does two things: on the surface it stresses that innocent and naïve tone that Lorelei uses to alleviate herself from any blame or problems; deeper, this term signals her primary (and only) interest in profit. If we think of “tree” as a symbol for money (as money is made of paper and paper comes from trees), then we can see that this misspelling is intentional in that Lorelei becomes “intreeged” or sees an opportunity for profit when she receives her ring.

The tree symbol for money can also stand when thinking about how Lorelei uses the term “devine.” For instance, thinking back to her time in Paris and her experience at the Eiffel Tower, she says, “I mean the Eyefull Tower is devine” (73). Looking at this tower is also not allowing her to profit in any way. Hence, it is an “eyeful” that is “devine”: her time spent looking at this tower is de-vine, or chopping down a vine on her money tree. In other words, it is a waste of her time. It is important to notice that these misspellings are all only noticeable because they are written down. If we were to listen to Lorelei’s diary and not read it, then we would not have heard the error. So, because Lorelei intends her diary for publication, she decides to exemplify her lessons not only symbolically through her actions, but also formally through her rhetoric and diction.

‘Wasting time’ makes Lorelei very depressed— both emotionally and financially depressed, which Lorelei tends to equate. There are plenty of times throughout her diary when Lorelei uses the term “depressed” to exaggerate sadness and express financial concern. For example, when in the Central of Europe, Lorelei comments on the rural life: “So I am going to get dressed and go to the dining car and look for some American gentleman because I really feel so depressed. I mean Dorothy keeps trying to depress me because she says I will end up in a farm” (102). Here, Lorelei seeks American men to spend money on her so that she will feel rich again, while living on a farm, without the lavish life she lives (Ritz visits and men buying her flowers and diamonds all of the time), would mean moving downward on the social ladder, that is, causing her financial “depression” due to the lack of profit. She will lose money if she wastes any more time, or god forbid, “ends up in a farm.” In search of an American man, she finds Henry Spoffard, and ultimately achieves the posh Hollywood life she has always desired. So, this novel satirizes the conventional marriage plot because informal, innocent rhetoric, and *not* romantic love, catalyzes the marriage. Lorelei’s diary teaches American flappers how they can get practically whatever they desire by feigning innocence, concealing their motives, and utilizing their beauty to their own social and fiscal advantage.

Lorelei’s pragmatic approach to performing etiquette is not all that uncommon for her time. Coslovi informs us that another etiquette book of the period,

Lillian Eichler’s *Book of Etiquette* (1921), also replicated, without critiquing them, the rules sanctioned by the older social arbiters. [...] She did not question etiquette’s larger significance, nor worry about the tensions between egalitarian

principles and codes of social distinction. In stark contrast to [earlier etiquette books] Eichler concentrated on the signifier of manners and unperturbedly passes over the signified: this resembles Loos' heroine's approach. (Coslovi 112-113)

Lorelei is more concerned with practicality and social betterment than with the ethics of the social system and its process at all. She would rather just reap the benefits from the system than critique it or question its ethics. Eichler's *Book of Etiquette* "replicated, without critiquing," the rules of etiquette, very similarly to Lorelei's behavior: Lorelei plays the part but in the back of her head, underneath her spelling errors and dialect, are the true practical intentions to her actions. Like Eichler, Lorelei focuses "on the signifier of manners and unperturbedly passes over the signified" meaning that she is most concerned with the consequence of those actions, and not the connotations or stigmas attached to her actions. This is why she can make light of swindling a ten-thousand-dollar tiara or acting like she loves someone just to earn some clout. As I explain further below, she can even make light of traumatic events and crimes like rape and murder.

That said, Lorelei does not dwell on the suffering and abuse she endures, but rather focusses on how she can come out winning. In this respect, perhaps Lorelei is ignorant: not ignorant in the sense that she is a moron with no agency, but rather in the sense that she is not able to fully fathom the trauma and crime around her *as* trauma or crime; she can only endure these experiences by convincing herself that social classed and gendered positioning is a game about winning—and winning is getting away with grand larceny and murder, and becoming the actress she always wanted to be. Her attractive face, hair, and figure already gives her a head start in this game anyhow, so she may as well flaunt them.

## CHAPTER V

### LESSON FOUR: INNOCENCE IS BLISS

Lorelei's informal rhetoric carries an innocent tone, insinuating that she refuses to take responsibility for her actions and urges readers to do the same. Her innocence, and not a devoted romance, allows her story to yield a fairly predictable marriage plot. Her eventual marriage to rich Henry Spoffard results solely out of her love for materials, money, and status. To relay this lesson, Loos carefully crafts Lorelei's rhetoric so that it interweaves sentiment and satire. Lisa Mendelman comments on this rhetorical combination of sentiment and satire: "Chronicled in Lorelei's vernacular, the trajectory of this marriage plot and its apparently chaste romance adopt the tropes and discourse of sentimental 'education,' wherein intellect, morality, sympathy, explicitly trump the physical exterior that is implicitly Lorelei's biggest asset" (Mendelman 41).

In other words, Mendelman reads Lorelei's "intellect, morality and sympathy" as didacticism: she's acknowledging that Lorelei has knowledge to bestow, this "discourse of sentimental 'education,'" which is stronger than her "physical exterior." Plainly, Lorelei's informal speech and sexless romances demonstrate her belief that intellectual strategy is as useful as physical beauty in terms of social mobility. But for Lorelei, it is imperative that this intellect be utilized and *not* exhibited. In other words, Lorelei feigns ignorance while expertly and quietly dodging consequences for the criminal actions she will never admit to committing.

For example, returning Mr. Jennings' death scene, we can notice how Lorelei's rhetoric alleviates her of any involvement in the act other than as an innocent bystander:

So Mr. Jennings helped me quite a lot and I stayed in his office about a year when I found out that he was not the kind of gentleman that a young girl is safe with. I mean one evening when I went to pay a call on him at his apartment, I found a girl there who was really famous all over Little Rock for not being nice (32).

Lorelei says that Mr. Jennings helped her but never tells us how. This should make the reader suspicious, but her tone so clearly directs the reader's focus on Mr. Jennings' wrongdoing, and takes the spotlight off Lorelei. Here, she exemplifies to readers how an innocent tone can remove focus on oneself, and place focus on the subject of conversation. When re-reading this scene, we can notice how Lorelei and Mr. Jennings' relationship might surpass the professional realm. After all, *she* went to *his* apartment in the *evening*, where she found another girl in his bed. Her after-hours house call to her employer sounds suspicious and may allude to sexual assault, prostitution, or an affair. But readers are not able to grasp what exactly happened. The innocent tone takes focus away from the suspicious behavior, and Lorelei uses this innocence to her advantage, exemplifying to the female reader how she, too can get away with just about anything should she perform as Lorelei does.

Lorelei's descriptions of Jennings and the other woman are suspicious, especially when we consider Lorelei's intentional wordplay. This woman was known for "not being nice," and Jennings "was not the kind of gentleman a young girl is safe with." Safe could either mean that a young girl is not physically/sexually safe, or Lorelei could be taking about money: safe as in she cannot make money from this man because he is giving his money to this other lady. At any rate, we get almost no information on Lorelei herself and why she is at this man's apartment in the first place. Her ambiguous language is

suspicious yet inconclusive—intentionally, of course, to take attention off her seemingly ‘not so nice’ actions. So, when Lorelei says, “when I found out that girls like that paid calls on Mr. Jennings I had quite a bad case of the hysterics and my mind was really a blank,” she frames her irrationality in a way that makes it seem as though she is ill (32). She does not “go mad” but rather “had quite a bad case of the hysterics” which causes her mind to go blank. In her account, she is not culpable for her actions, and cannot be held responsible; her “hysterics” caused her mind to stop thinking. The misspelling of hysterics further stresses her ignorant and innocent tone, causing the reader to ever so slightly pity her. Further, her misspelling reforms the word to include the male pronoun *his*, putting further blame on Mr. Jennings for causing her “*hysterics*” in the first place. Poor Lorelei, too ignorant to have committed any crime with intent.

Lorelei bashfully asserts that her actions were accidental and should be forgiven and forgotten. After she recovers from her “hysterics,” explains Mr. Jennings death: “it seems that I had a revolver in my hand and it seems that the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings (32). Her “hysterics” thus disconnects Lorelei’s mind and body. Lorelei’s phrasing plays a key role into how the situation is understood by the courtroom. Her use of the word “seems” intentionally implies ambiguity and takes the blame away from her and the crime she commits, which now only “seems” to have happened. As a result, she distances herself away from the entire event, blaming it all on her hysterics (which in turn blames Jennings for causing her madness), and as a result, she is free to escape the situation without a single consequence. In this scene, Lorelei teaches readers to choose their words carefully and play the dumb damsel card, especially if you are a beautiful blonde such as she. Lorelei teaches readers that they need not place any blame on

themselves, but act innocent should they want to have everything “turn out for the best,” thus improving their lives altogether in the most practical and efficient way. Lorelei explains her success in the courtroom: “So the jury [...] came back and acquitted me and they were all so lovely that I really had to kiss all of them and when I kissed the judge he had tears in his eyes. I mean it was when Mr. Jennings became shot that I got the idea to go into cinema” (32). Lorelei is able to encourage the court to feel sorry for her by utilizing an innocent tone, and lightly flirting with the court. By example, she teaches readers how rhetoric can be used to manipulate others and careful diction and actions can be used to improve one’s status. With different more direct words, Lorelei very well could have lost that court case and ended up in prison; however, her innocent and ambiguous language set her free. The ambiguity in the diary entry acts as example of ambiguity’s manipulative for the reader to perhaps execute in her own life.

From this point of view, we can better recognize Lorelei’s whole persona as performance. She even admits to using her acting name that Judge Hubbard himself offers to her, one that “ought to express her personality” (33). Just as she gets away with conning a married man out of well over ten thousand dollars, she gets away with murder by playing the, as Mendelman puts it, “witless blonde [...] whose allure derives from apparent sincerity, sympathy and naïveté combined with a hint that she may not be as innocent as her exterior suggests” (36). Lorelei’s story advises its readers that to remain calm and feign innocence if they experience financial insecurity or problems with their social security or reputation, because innocence and physical beauty are what lead to social success, and thus self-improvement. After all, “it was when Mr. Jennings became shot that [Lorelei] got the idea to go into cinema” (Loos 32)—something she is

well suited to do since her whole social experience is a performance that she is inadvertently encourages her readers to learn from. This court scene paired with the novel's ending with Lorelei's marriage to Mr. Spoffard, the rich producer in the film and theater world, teaches readers that feigning innocence will lead to fame.

But we can also consider, as I hinted to earlier, that perhaps Lorelei uses her innocence as a coping mechanism to ignore the trauma and corruption around her. Perhaps her limited agency (limited, but not non-existent) as a woman of the twenties urges her to lean into the stereotypes of a blonde to get paid to be pretty because that is practical. This point of view makes sense considering that Loos' text includes the plot of a decline narrative. In fact, Lorelei even visits psychologist—the famous “Dr. Froyd,” of course:

So it seems that everybody seems to have a thing called inhibitions, which is when you want to do a thing and you do not do it. So you dream about it instead, and So Dr. Froyd asked me, what I seemed to dream about. So I told him that I never really dream about anything. I mean I use my brains so much in the day time that at night they do not seem to do anything else but rest. But Dr. Froyd was very very surprized at a girl who did not dream about anything. [...] I mean I told him things I really would not even put in my diary and he seemed very very intreeged at a girl who always seemed to do everything she wanted to do. (Loos 118).

There are a few implied messages that come through the rhetoric in the above passage. For one, Lorelei (and Loos) uses repetition and misspellings to invoke an implied innocence. If we read it as Loos' implementation, then we are only able to see how Loos

is making Lorelei seem ignorant as any ‘dumb blonde.’ But if we consider, as Loos might have, Lorelei’s autonomy, then we can see how Lorelei’s wordplay works to explain to the reader that psychotherapy is just a way for psychotherapists to make money, and that women should have no inhibitions because any pretty lady can achieve what she wants and be socially successful should she listen to Lorelei. When we consider misspellings like “intreeged” and “surprized” we can see how, from Lorelei’s perspective, when Freud infers she is having problems expressing emotions to him, he defines her as a ‘prize’ from whom he can gain a lot of revenue. The word ‘intreeged,’ as I explained earlier, also carries a financial connotation when we think of ‘tree’ as a metaphor for money. Lorelei includes misspellings to make her reader aware that ‘Dr. Froyd’ just wants to take advantage of a woman who claims to be ‘*histerical*’ because he doesn’t believe that a woman is able to “always seemed to do everything she wanted to.”

I am implying is that Lorelei incorporates subtle sarcasm in this scene to explain or teach her readers how they can do the same. When she says she does not dream because “her brains” are at work “so much in the day time” she implies that a woman is actually thinking all day and not ‘dreaming’ because she is ‘doing.’ Dreaming would imply wishing for something rather than working to obtain it. In other words, a woman need not feel limited despite her limited social standing, because there is a practical way around that limitation: to lean in to and perform the manners of the upper class, but never reveal her true and self-concerned intentions so that she can reap the material and financial benefits of being a beautiful lady of the 1920s.

But Lorelei’s lack of dreams can also be seen as repression. Erin Holiday-Karre asserts “The absence of dreams suggests that Lorelei has no latent sexual desire. Indeed,

she denies both sexual repression and desire for masculine power” (336). I push back on this; Lorelei’s lack of dreams does suggest she “has no latent sexual desire.” But I do not think it is out of repression per se. Rather, this can be read as a rhetorical move Lorelei intentionally makes because she does not want to share with her readers her repressions; this is not the purpose of her diary. Again, I contend Lorelei knows her writing is public; she tells her readers that they should not waste time in therapy or in dream worlds because they can actualize their dreams by performing innocence as she does. With Holiday-Karre in mind, we understand Lorelei’s asexual lifestyle as innocent. But I urge us to focus on the innocence of her words rather than her actions because this is a text that is *written* for a public eye, both by Loos and by Lorelei. I do not think that Lorelei denies sexual repression or desire for masculine power. I rather suggest that Lorelei uses sexual repression to her own advantage, teasing the rich gentleman she encounters so that she can actually obtain what can be considered “masculine power” and social excellence. Innocence and deceit catalyzes her social success.

## CHAPTER VI

### LESSON FIVE: EVERYTHING TURNS OUT FOR THE BEST

Once she achieves what we can assume for her is ultimate success, Lorelei ends her diary: “I really think that I can say good-bye to my diary feeling that, after all, everything always turns out for the best” (165). Her conclusion really means that any girl who acts the way Lorelei does can achieve the best possible life she can lead. In her article, “Taking Blondes Seriously,” Susan Hegeman comments on the book’s ending: “Its resolution [...] is in the development of a fantastic economy in which women can actually parlay their (albeit male-defined) assets of sexual attractiveness into what they truly want” (Hegeman 545). The resolution of the novel insinuates that the sexualized female body can be used as a tool for a woman to climb the social ladder, so long as she is aware that she is *partially* giving into the patriarchal objectification of women for a practical and self-concerned result. Lorelei knows where she stands in society as a woman and uses her gendered limitations as a tool to manipulate the men around her.

When we consider Loos’ own consideration of Lorelei’s autonomy, then we can see how the misspellings, innocent and repetitive tone, and incredible victories together represent Lorelei’s own rewriting of etiquette. As Loos herself notes in *The Biography of a Book*, “much of the plot of *Blondes* contains a plot, which is “dire.” (Loos xx). Contemporary authors such as Hemmingway or Fitzgerald “would have curdled his readers’ blood with massive indignation,” yet Loos manages to write a similar story in a light-hearted tone so that we can see Lorelei as victorious. In this light, it is easy to read Lorelei’s tale as a bildungsroman: a story about a young girl who manages to make her way to social success. However, this reading assumes that Lorelei had no premeditated

goals; that she rather just happened upon each gentleman and just so happened to be lucky enough to get away with murder. Such a reading reduces Lorelei's skillful and rhetorical deceit. She is able to play with words, with ambiguity, with sarcasm and first-person narration, like many modernists would. As a result, she shows readers how they too can achieve social success by complying to the manners that are expected of them, only with a much more practical, financial, and independent goal in mind. Unlike the nineteenth century's women who were more concerned with acting appropriately to find a suitor and settle down at home to flaunt their well-to-do man's or husband's money, New Women like Lorelei are more interested in immediate gratification and claiming a luxurious status of their own so that they too can make "everything always turns out for the best."

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