

THE (MIS)EDUCATION OF “THE AMERICAN GIRL” IN EUROPE IN ANITA LOOS’S *GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES*

Francisco José Cortés Vieco
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
francort@pdi.ucm.es

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ABSTRACT

Set during the “Roaring Twenties,” Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* revisits the myth of “The American Girl,” dyed as a “dumb blonde” and plagued with humor, not only to twist the traditional gender paradigm of female victimization at the hands of a male tyrant, but also to vindicate a unique identity for the United States, eventually released from transatlantic influences. The heroine Lorelei travels to Europe on a Grand Tour to “improve her mind,” but she actually reveals the smart use of her “stupidity” to “educate” men to spend money on her, to hunt the wealthiest potential husband, and to discover that there is no better place than home. Unburdened from the necessity of supporting her creature, this journey is the perfect excuse for Loos to mock the presumed cultural superiority of the Old Continent, its social hierarchies and the appreciation of its artistic treasures.

RESUMEN

Durante los “alegres años veinte,” *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* de Anita Loos revisita el mito de la chica americana, teñido de “rubia tonta” y rebosante de humor, no sólo para subvertir el tradicional paradigma de género de victimización femenina a manos de un tirano masculino, sino también para reivindicar una identidad propia para los Estados Unidos, libre de atavismos transatlánticos. Su heroína Lorelei realizará el Gran Tour de Europa para “cultivar su cerebro,” pero preferirá mostrarnos el uso inteligente de su “estupidez,” educar a los hombres para gastar dinero en ella, cazar un marido rico y descubrir que no hay mejor lugar que su patria. Sin necesariamente secundar sus estratagemas, este viaje será la excusa perfecta para que Loos ridiculice la presunta superioridad cultural del Viejo Mundo, sus jerarquías sociales y la apreciación de sus tesoros artísticos.

*She was very charming, but how deucedly sociable! Was she simply a pretty girl from New York State? Were they all like that, the pretty girls who had a good deal of gentlemen's society? Or was she also a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person? Winterbourne had lost his instinct in this matter, and his reason could not help him. Miss Daisy Miller looked extremely innocent. Some people had told him that... American girls were exceedingly innocent; and others had told him that... they were not. [...] But this young girl was not a coquette in that sense; she was very unsophisticated; she was only a pretty American flirt. (Henry James, *Daisy Miller* 14)*

Young, beautiful, naïve, amiable and unrefined— so is characterized one of the most enduring myths of the US literature: “The American Girl.” Thanks to *Daisy Miller* (1878), Henry James internationally exports this feminine archetype doomed to tragedy and demonstrates that the New World can also coin its own artistic paradigms, at a distance from traditional models manufactured in the Old World. Primarily intrigued by the social intercourse—and confrontation— between elite classes from both sides of the Atlantic, this author does not only investigate the presumed unpreparedness and the lack of education of his American fellow citizens while journeying in the hostile Old Continent, but his works are also permeated with the patriotic anxiety of US letters to be released from the burden of their European ascendancy. Since the war for independence of the Thirteen Colonies from the British Empire during the 18th century, the inhibiting inheritance and influence of the Old World on different spheres of life, including literature, have driven many American writers to vindicate their cultural “self-government,” and to assert their distinctive identity and personality, partly through myth-making in their own works. Embracing Thomas Jefferson’s ideals of democracy and the respect of the rights of man to create a new country, R.W.B. Lewis traces the early emancipatory attempts of US literature during the 19th century to burn away the past and to “communicate the novelty of experience in the New World” (21, 20). Intertwining ancient religious dogmas with a breakthrough political system for the young nation, early Americans understood the New World as a starting up again under a fresh, divinely-granted “second chance” for the human race departing from a corrupted Europe (5). Lewis’s assumptions revolve around the concept of the “American Adam”: an individual free from history, whose moral position, identified with this Biblical character before his Fall, is free from experience, thus “fundamentally innocent” (5). This man turns into a hero—untarnished, self-made, self-reliant and optimistic— thanks to US authors, whereas his “rib” (Eve) becomes a heroine equally guiltless and inexperienced, but excluded from the male “American Dream” of individual freedom, personal identity and material prosperity of her own. In fact, she was forced to embrace antithetical models of traditional femininity which had originated abroad: the immaculate “Angel in the House” or the sinful “Fallen Woman.” So this US “Eve” was

stigmatized with the same patriarchal prejudices against women on both sides of the Atlantic, in life and in literature, until modern times: childishness, fragility, intellectual inferiority and her “innate” affiliation with domesticity, eroticism, evil and lunacy. Looking back to *Daisy Miller* and historical periods when female sexuality was more severely regulated by moral taboos, James’s insouciant ingénue, who incarnates a literary myth, is simultaneously a victim and a spontaneous (or mischievous) seductress, who transgresses the norms born of American Puritanism and European decorousness alike. While touring the Old World, she is courted by an honest compatriot and tempted by a Mediterranean rake: “She showed no displeasure at her *tête-à-tête* with Giovanelli being interrupted; she could chatter as freshly and freely with two gentlemen as with one” (50), but her social errors make her an easy prey of public defamation against her virtue on European soil: “Flirting with any man she could pick up; sitting in corners with mysterious Italians; dancing all the evening with the same partners; receiving visits at eleven o’clock at night. Her mother goes away when visitors come” (44). Daisy’s coquetry and boldness in defying etiquette, together with her ultimately preserved virginity and lachrymose death, are for the narrator “an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence” (41), which debased her only role as a martyr, suggested her faux naivety, and revealed her true flaws: her artlessness and inability to successfully experience Europe. In any case, the downfall of this ambiguously blameless heroine travelling through Switzerland and Italy also problematizes more intricate social issues stemming from the collision between two continents. Firstly, the US *nouveaux riches*, whose economic affluence was based on luck, entrepreneurship and hard-work under the auspices of the “American Dream,” lack the refinement and *savoir-faire* expected in Europe, where money was still tied to nobility and heredity. And secondly, US manners –spontaneous, unembellished and unorthodox– clash against the complexity of life and the rigid social codes of Europe, more inclined to hypocrisy, artifice and deceit. Inspiring enough since Henry James at the turn of the century, the myth of “The American Girl” has also been adapted to newer ideological constructs of girlhood, by male and female hands in more recent times, with multifarious literary purposes and outcomes.

In the early 20th century, New York, the urban jewel of the United States, capitalizes the hopes and desires of many Americans looking for wider horizons and better life opportunities, escaping from poverty and stagnation in distant, rural communities across this vast country. Apart from this migratory movement and from being still the largest gateway of European immigrants to this prosperous nation, the “Big Apple” also becomes the mecca for intellectual and popular culture in the 1920s, where its prominent magazine industry, with a great geographical expansionism and born to be consumed, incites consumerism, trendsetting and debates on women: their roles, expectations and future. Without relying upon European traditions, disposable periodicals were also the perfect medium for female

literature, still not categorized as serious enough by the literary Establishment to be found in bound books on library shelves. Ideologically, they had to propagate ideals of prescriptive womanhood, but they could also be surreptitiously used by some women authors to undermine misogynist female archetypes, to empower the vulnerable “American Girl,” and further to cultivate the myth or imaginative variants. During the legendary “Roaring Twenties” of Jazz, fun and frivolity, humor turns into a welcome antidote to human failure and the still fresh horrors from the First World War (1914-1918). Whereas the so-called “Lost Generation” of US Modernist writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot or Gertrude Stein, returned to Europe as expatriates, and they advocated for avant-garde to “freely and seriously” produce their own highbrow literature and express their disenchantment with contemporary times, other artists like Anita Loos (1888-1981) chose to remain at home during the interwar period to entertain and please the US masses with wise-cracking, light-heartedness and vernacular themes and characters, far removed from the elitist Old World. Within such a context of magazine culture, humor and popular “Americanness,” this California-born author and screenwriter –known for her innovative intertitles that revolutionized the 1910s silent cinema– carelessly wrote *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). This article intends to investigate how Loos’s novella demythologizes the assumption of the innate superiority of Europe while ridiculing its foundational pillars of class, the past and highbrow culture, so as to unbind her homeland from suffocating transatlantic traditions, as well as to assert a sense of a separate, genuine American identity. First serialized in the magazine *Harper’s Bazar*, this work later became the surprising best-seller of the decade, despite its unconventional conjunction of the comedic, the feminine and lowbrow art of US imprint. In her autobiography *A Girl Like I*, Loos confessed that: “[she] had no pride in authorship because [she] never thought that anything produced by females was important” (181). This writer with no university education was first amazed and, then, proud of the critical acclaim received from scholars and canonical writers of her time (like William Faulkner, Aldous Huxley or James Joyce), despite the prevailing gender prejudices against women writers. The origins of Loos’s novella are documented to have been her attempt to tease the writer H. L. Mencken, on whom she had a crush because of his arresting masculinity, about his personal sexual weakness for blondes, so as to warn him against them and to make fun of men’s attraction to women based solely on looks (Dolan 76). Together with its sequel *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1928), this work reflects contemporary issues of the “Roaring Twenties” in America with parodic purposes: capitalism and materialism, the vanity of the New York upper classes and the rampant rapacity of newcomers from less cosmopolitan regions, the flapper¹ and gender debates,

¹ She was a US female prototype for emancipated young girls in the 1920s, defined as slangy, flighty, cheerful and rebellious, with boyish features and socially deviant habits, like garçon hairstyle, short skirts, smoking, drinking alcohol, promiscuity, dancing jazz and having fun all night long. Contemporary

freedom versus censorship, or the “war” between intellectualism and popular entertainment, like Hollywood motion pictures or female writings. Loos’s fiction also perpetuates the myth of “The American Girl” in US letters, or the embryo of its declension associated with blondness, later embodied by the voluptuous Marilyn Monroe in its loose film adaptation of the 1950s.² To symbolically restore (albeit unconsciously) the “honor” of her compatriot Daisy Miller, fallen abroad, Anita Loos carries out her vengeful war against Europeans, and their decadent traditions of class, past and highbrow culture, thanks to her conquering heroine: the New-York based “siren” Lorelei Lee, with whom she does not necessarily sympathize nor personally identify. At first glance, James’s and Loos’s female characters (the unarmored casualty and the armed “soldier,” respectively), share beauty and similar US virtues that are underrated elsewhere, such as spontaneity, unconventionality, unaffectedness and daring. Nevertheless, Lorelei subverts the obsolete Jamesian myth of “The American Girl” which actually turns into a nightmarish (but comic) version of the bold “flapper” that her creator reluctantly “played” in real life. This ambiguously “dumb” blonde from Arkansas becomes an empowered, funny villain in modern America, who mocks and defeats her European victims while seemingly undertaking the culturally “formative” and self-exploratory Grand Tour through England, France, Germany, Austria and Hungary. Both Daisy and Lorelei alter this learning experience, originally conceived to embrace “beneficial” foreign influences, so that it becomes an enjoyable opportunity of miseducation for each of them. However, James’s defenseless protagonist is doomed to tragedy, because her innate desire for fun and mischief is smothered by Victorian propriety, threatened by dangerous encounters in Italy, and ultimately destroyed by the male literary convention of female death to (un)fairly punish her misbehavior. Beyond the different literary genres contained in these works (whether melodrama or comedy), this article contends that Daisy’s “fair” successor in the 1920s sketched by Loos’s modern and female pen is a renewed version of American girlhood, endowed with more robust and useful personal weapons to fight against adversity or seriousness, and to survive. Therefore, Lorelei will not share the same point of departure, purpose, itinerary and final fate of her Jamesian predecessor during her journey across Europe.

The “myth of the blonde” from dominant white cultures perpetuates the idea that fairness, identified with happiness and purity, is superior to darkness (Day 13). In such white civilizations, “the power and value reside in men, who have the prerogative to prefer blondes, in those races that are naturally fair and in the people

American readers often identified Anita Loos and her fictional character Lorelei with this “flapper” stereotype.

² The commercial success of 1953 musical film version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* directed by Howard Hawks, as well as the status of its protagonist Marilyn Monroe as a cultural icon and a sex-symbol, made Loos’s novella fall into oblivion in later decades.

who profit economically by supplying the means for fulfilling this dream” (13). This female archetype has turned into a cultural obsession of ideal beauty, especially in the United States where its cinema, fashion and magazine industries have propagated that genetically blonde women –or others urged to dye their hair in this platinum color– are more sexually attractive, socially accepted and “marketable” to men than less appealing (but smarter?) darker-haired females. A brunette herself, Loos surely resented not only Mencken’s attraction to blondes, but also their undeserved power over all gentlemen’s wills. Annette Kuhn has divided this desirable stereotype into three sub-types. First, she identifies the “ice-cold blonde” with the chilly exterior of a *femme fatale*; second, the “blonde bombshell,” whose sexuality is explosive and available to men; and last, the “dumb blonde” who relies on her beauty as opposed to intellect (47). The protagonist of Loos’s novella could embody this third archetype:

A gentleman friend and I were dining at the Ritz last evening and he said that if I took a pencil and a paper and put down all of my thoughts it would make a book. This almost made me smile as what it would really make would be a whole row of encyclopediacs. I mean I seem to be thinking practically all the time. I mean it is my favorite recreation and sometimes I set for hours and do not seem to do anything else but think. So this gentleman said a girl with brains ought to do something else with them besides think [...] So here I am writing a book instead of reading one. (*Gentlemen*³ 3)

This first entry of Lorelei’s diary reflects the main traits of the stereotype of the “dumb blonde,” which circulated in Loos’s time and can be inserted into the larger myth of “The American Girl.” Although she is equally dependent on her suitors, surprisingly the heroine is not as defenseless or wretched as Daisy Miller. Her presumed asininity would confirm that she does not understand elementary facts of everyday life, or that she is determined to pursue a serious literary vocation, only thanks to the adulations of her Chicago admirer, Gus Eisman, who appreciates a dubious talent in her. However, this excerpt with bidirectional messages rather discloses the seduction performance of a smart girl looking for financial security and the feigned discourse of a wealthy man who uses his economic power to make his dream come true: to possess Lorelei as his witless, fair fetish of erotic consumption. In more egalitarian terms, this fictional woman and man would share the same foundational discourse of Americanness: self-confidence, individualism and the pursuit of their ambitious goals in life. Moreover, this work also unravels the typical *modus vivendi* of the dumb blonde in the 1920s, (un)aware of her sex-appeal: a happy-go-lucky *demimondaine*, who needs men’s protection to satisfy her needs for luxury, amusement and idleness. Aside from overdoses of idiocy, nonchalance and

³ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) is hereafter referred to by the abbreviation *Gentlemen*.

sexual commerce within the narrative, Loos also endows Lorelei with humor, irony and popular wit as her main assets to sophisticate this cultural cliché of femaleness with several satirical purposes, including the plan of “assaulting” Europe and its conventions. The author would not only criticize the irrationality of men who commodify young girls, the hypocrisy of society that disregards the inappropriateness of such sexual relationships between men and women, and the frivolity of rival fair girls, but she also uses her heroine’s supposed naivety and feeble-mindedness to turn upside down who is the real villain and idiot of the story: the “fragile” US girl, sexually exploited, or the patriarchal figure of the mighty “sugar daddies”? There is enough textual evidence of irony and resentment to demonstrate that an independent Loos could have been jealous of financially dependent women resembling Lorelei, both because of their unearned beauty and their social prominence –taken together by male authors and producers– to consolidate and widely distribute harmful stereotypes of femininity through popular cultural trendsetters of her country: movies and periodicals. Instead, this article chooses to consider *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as an act of empowerment intended to assert a new (and victorious) model of American womanhood, because Loos’s protagonist succeeds in ridiculing a wide spectrum of traditionally powerful male characters who helplessly fall into her trap: European and US businessmen, lawyers, judges, intellectuals and aristocrats.

Childishness defines the myth of “The American Girl.” In line with the new blonde version of the Jamesian paradigm of simplicity and audacity she incarnates, Lorelei calls her older suitors, Gus Eisman, or her future husband Henry Spoffard, “daddy.” She also confesses or invents past traumas to entice them with her vulnerability and foster the protective instinct of these male victims: “the world was full of gentlemen who were nothing but wolfs in sheeps clothes, that did nothing but take advantage of we girls” (92). Moreover, the author reproduces the patriarchal treatment of men as caretakers and women as infants, intellectually and emotionally inferior to them. Although this gender pattern of misogyny makes men feel invincible, Loos subverts that power with a comic purpose to secretly allow her creature to emasculate her admirers and, simultaneously, to obtain her main objective: a generous credit line to purchase clothes, perfumes and jewelry. Lorelei’s wish to improve “her brains” and Gus’s “generous” act of instructing her build a father-daughter relationship between them, but these socially acceptable interactions are euphemisms to mask the sexual dimension of their affair: “[he] spends quite a lot of money educating a girl” (5). It requires that the girl from rural Arkansas is thankful with her body: “you like to show that you appreciate it” (6), whereas the old man from industrial Chicago is thankful with his wallet: “he always has something quite interesting to talk about, as for instants the last time he was here he presented me quite a beautiful emerald bracelet” (6). However, Lorelei’s liaisons in New York are not exclusive. Although she meets Gus whenever he is in town, she

dates an English novelist, Gerry Lamson, because, according to her: “he had taken quite an interest in me, as soon as he found out that I was literary” (8). She does not only believe the male lies about her extraordinary artistic skills, but she also refuses to marry this new suitor so soon and prefers instead to accept her sugar daddy’s proposal: a voyage to Europe, because: “there is nothing so educational as travelling [...] to broaden out and improve my writing, and why should I give it up to marry an author?” (11,17). Having established her ability to prosper in her “business” in America (“loving” men), Lorelei is prepared to undertake a grander new venture: crossing the pond. Her stubborn pursuit of dubious self-improvement abroad,⁴ required for upward mobility, will be Loos’s perfect excuse to deride the Old Continent, the instructive purpose of such journeys, and to choose humor as the vehicle for the United States to disengage itself from its cultural cradle and to empower or make fun of its own myth: the once helpless and defenseless American girl.

The Grand Tour was a traditional trip through Europe initially undertaken by English young men from the aristocracy during the 18th and 19th centuries. It was an educational rite of passage for intellectual refinement and *savoir-vivre*, as well as a public sign of prestige and wealth for those who could afford it. Catherine Cocks documents that American elite gentlemen also embraced this old custom to become familiar with the great art, history and architecture of the Old World, while making contacts with the polite society of other countries (10). During Loos’s interwar period, US cities were not picturesque enough, their still dangerous wilderness incited no “romantic” pleasure in its contemplation, and this young nation had no past, but only future. Therefore, Europe was “the” tourist destination. Even today, crossing the Atlantic is a dream for many young Americans. Encouraged by US universities, these students enroll in study-abroad programs across Europe to look for self-knowledge and formal education. Returning to the literary, Henry James also cultivated this same search for the roots of Western civilization, and *Daisy Miller* proves that women, although always accompanied by a chaperone, were also allowed to learn good manners overseas or demonstrate grace under social pressure. In later times of laxer sexual mores and understanding love/marriage as related to money/consumerism, Lorelei also wants to profit from this chance for personal growth and wisdom. Faye Hammill identifies discourses of self-improvement and positive thinking in this character (“Brains,” 57), deeply founded in the American mentality, but Loos seems to prefer to stress the comic dimension of her work: her non-autobiographical creature reinvents this opportunity abroad to reject European standards and show her real taste for (mis)education. The narrative shows that she only wants to see culture when she can translate it into economics or the good time

⁴ Since the Enlightenment and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791), self-help books or stories of self-improvement (including those that mock its conventions, like Loos’s novella) have become a true American literary genre with a huge, lucrative market in the USA.

money affords (Tracy 130). Together with her friend Dorothy, whom she wants to reform and teach (im)proper behavior for a modern girl, the heroine reproduces the typical itinerary for US travelers: London, Paris and some continental countries, like Germany or Austria, but she will not go to Italy although it was fashionable. On board ship or already in Europe, she encounters prominent men eager to entertain the American girl and take her with them. However, it is not up to them to set up her route or make her fall into tragic plots of deceit and ultimate death, like Daisy Miller. Exhibiting the innate US talent for entrepreneurship and not being the one to be hunted, Lorelei takes the lead, deliberately interrupts her journey in Budapest and returns to New York, once she has hunted the prey she was really looking for in Europe: An American bachelor –Henry Spoffard–, wealthier and from a more august family than her other available choices (Mr. Lamson or Mr. Eisman).

Before, during and after her Grand Tour, the protagonist of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* purposely shows off her lack of erudition regarding European culture and her misuses of the English language to transform these mistakes into ironically valuable assets, thus forging a unique US identity of her own invention. Even Anita Loos acknowledged decades later in “The Biography of a Book” that her heroine was a symbol of “the lowest possible mentality of our nation” (xxxix), Little Rock, Arkansas, being her suitable hometown as the “nadir in shortsighted human stupidity” (xl). As she also stated, this choice was not accidental, but an homage to H. L. Mencken. This 1920s guru had written the essay “The Sahara of the Bozart”⁵ as an indictment of the American South, “almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert” (157-158), and particularly to criticize the absence of scholarship and literature in states like Arkansas. Loos probably opts for a tactical alliance with her heroine, however unsympathetic and dissimilar to herself, to maximize the comicality of her novella, and thus to satirize both cultures –from the fruitful Old Continent and the fruitless New World–, as well as to depict how the most unlettered American “silly blonde” manages to challenge the most cultivated Europeans. In addition, Daniel Tracy argues that the author adapts to the US literary tradition of vernacular humor⁶ that, in previous centuries, chose uneducated, rural white men as narrators that wrote for equally unschooled male readers (118). These writers exploited congenial comic plots and their characters, who fool others, are endearing because they are harmless and their “bad” actions simply contribute to the fun expected from these stories (125-126). Unlike such authors of picaresque novels “made in the USA,” Anita selected a dangerous woman, who speaks a white regional dialect from the South, not only to laugh at and distance herself from such illiteracy, regarded by her New York readers to be located in “uncivilized” territories far from the metropolis, but also to celebrate the American vernacular, including its

⁵ “Bozart” mockingly refers to the French term *beaux arts* (translated as fine arts).

⁶ An example is the Southern regional flavor and faux-naïve voice of the hero in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).

colloquialisms, misspellings, repetition of words, malapropisms, bad grammar and simple diction. Despite academic controversies about the use of casual speech as a token of popular culture or Modernist elitism,⁷ this idiomatic language also symbolizes the author's glorification of a separate US identity, her deprecation of British linguistic appropriateness and her careless treatment of a still prevailing Eurocentric culture. In fact, Lorelei could intentionally pretend to be unlearned to show her disdain for the Old Continent. Whereas her baby-talk helps her nurture her father-daughter relationship with Mr. Eisman, this academically unschooled girl from rural Arkansas shows a great intelligence and a mastery of the English language that confirm her superiority and precociousness in terms of life education. For the sake of the novella's purpose of fun, she creates persuasive narratives, whose euphemisms and ellipsis veil episodes of sexual commerce as a *demimondaine* in New York that would be unfavorable to her search of male sympathy, security and tutelage; but simultaneously, she unveils other tragic (fictional) incidents back in her hometown, where she is the victim of male sexual depravity, that are favorable to captivate these admirers. The best illustration is when she tells Major Falcon, whom she met during her sea voyage, how she murdered her boss in Little Rock⁸ out of jealousy, but she verbally avoids the responsibility of the crime perpetrated against her lover: "the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings" (*Gentlemen* 25). Occurring prior to the narrative's onset, this tragedy reflects how Lorelei is not condemned to the stigma of self-destruction, mortal disease or accidental death, typically reserved for the "Fallen Woman" and easily ascribed to the Jamesian myth of "The American Girl," because she committed a double sin: sexual transgression and homicide. But it also demonstrates her talent as a raconteur of sentimental fiction of dubious veracity: she was acquitted by a paternal judge who helped her go to Hollywood, where she changed her name to Lorelei and became an actress until Mr. Eisman took an interest in "educating" her. In any case, her previous success-story, plagued with understatement, humor and artifice, enables her to weather future adventures in Europe, and to deflate the elitism of its inhabitants. This strength is in stark contrast to Daisy Miller's intrepid yet unconscious maladroitness.

If the heroine's ambiguous use of the English language and storytelling demonstrate her smartness beneath the "dumb blonde" stereotype, her (intended) ignorance of European culture is also strategic to ridicule those who treasure it as an "absurd" heirloom that must be preserved. While she is sojourning in London, Dorothy tells Lorelei that her accent is now very "English," and she replies: "I often

⁷ Susan Hegeman views Loos as a highbrow writer. She equates the simple diction and deliberate depthlessness of Anita's prose with Modernist experiments, such as the materiality of language and the cubist fascination with the surface (527).

⁸ Lorelei was hired as a stenographer by Mr. Jennings due to her beauty. They started an affair with or without his coercion, but when she discovered that he was a womanizer, she murdered him.

remember papa back in Arkansas and he often used to say that his grandpa came from a place in England called Australia... no wonder that the English seems to come out of me sometimes" (44). Her "mindless" lack of familiarity with her family tree can be translated into her "mindful" lack of interest in her British ancestry and the celebration of her "Americanness" as the cradle of the world that she boldly exhibits in Europe. This ethnocentrism, that pays no heed to the advantages of a worldwide approach, might be understood as the expected reaction of a daughter of colonial settlers from the Old Continent. She is proud of descending from generations of a now rootless plant, which after some centuries, does not need to be "irrigated" by the highbrow culture of any distant motherland. Her lack of knowledge of international geography can be often observed; for instance, when she does not want to "leave London without going to see England" (49); when she does not know that "a place called Buda-pest" (96) is the capital of Hungary; or why it takes six days to travel from New York to Great Britain while the journey from there to France is reduced to one day. Sometimes, the multicultural peculiarities of the Old World are simply too complex for a girl with no curiosity to explore the rich differences among countries. Typically these difficulties are related to money and language. Lorelei is confused by the real value of the currencies from the places she visits, she does not understand that Munich and München are the same city in different languages, or she uses the term "*Kunst*" (art in German) to refer to anything (cultural or not) from which she can learn something without knowing the meaning or translation of the word; so everything is "*kunst*" for her: visiting the taverns or the museums of the capital of Bayern. These clues of simple-mindedness, insinuating that the overuse of traditional words like "art" or "culture" have lost (or should lose according to Lorelei) their original semantic meaning, exaggerate common situations that American tourists may encounter during their Grand Tour. They are not only necessary for the author to build the "dumb blonde" stereotype or to enhance the humorous overdose of her novella, but they also confirm that cultural instruction is not part of Lorelei's curriculum in Europe to build her own self. Developing a deeper understanding of transatlantic literature, folktales, myths and historical figures is not her educational priority either. Throughout the narrative, she (intentionally) does not comprehend why her suitors compare her with "evil" *femmes fatales* of Western origin: the ancient Greek Helen of Troy (who triggered a bloodthirsty war between men); the Biblical prostitute "Magdellen" (first, fallen and later, redeemed); Madame Récamier (the flirtatious *conspiratrice* in political circles of post-revolutionary France), and Lorelei. She describes this legendary Rhine maiden, who bewitched shipmen and after whom her stage name was selected, simply as a faultless "girl famous for sitting on a rock in Germany" (26). In short, she does not allow men to provide their perspectives in her story or to define her personality and behavior based upon their unflattering characterizations. Such portraits represent old European stereotypes of deviant womanhood that aim to

divert Lorelei to their traditional models of female virtue and to inhibit the assertion of a contemporary “American” identity of her own. However, the heroine tactically uses her “dumb” silence to gracefully ignore this male meddling in her search for a true self. Although she calls herself a “literary” person, the English narrative tradition provokes in her either apathy or indifference. Before the Grand Tour, Gerry offers her the stimulating adventure books written by the acclaimed Joseph Conrad, but instead of reading them to cultivate her “brains,” she asks her maid to read them and tell her their plots, because she already plans to write about her own expeditions without any male disturbances or potential expansion of her aesthetic horizons overseas. And she succeeds. After she returns to New York, she proves that she was not been artistically enlightened in the Old Continent, and that she does not integrate any European lessons to become a (pseudo-)writer. As an act of US “civil disobedience,” she remains mute while maintaining a “literary conversation” with the attractive scenario writer Gilbertson Montrose, who is devoted to Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. In fact, this presumed gender inequality between the silent/silly woman and the academically eloquent man seeking female admiration is twisted by Loos, who urges Lorelei to harshly reassess the genius of canonical writers: reading “Europe” means being indoctrinated by them and imitating them – thus, she discards this–, whereas writing her own diary means uttering a distinctive American voice –even if it sounds preposterous, lowbrow and vulgar– without cultural interferences to her singular viewpoint from the dogmatic Old World. She even deflates icons of Western science like “Dr. Froyd”⁹, whom she had met in Vienna. While talking with him, she hilariously concludes that his therapies of psychoanalysis and interpretations of dreams, unknown to her, are useless for American girls who always do what they want and never frustrate their desires: “everybody seems to have a thing called inhibitions, which is when you want to do a thing and you do not do it. So then you dream about it instead [...] 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” (90). With one single blow of healthy US commonsense and humor, Lorelei placates the earthquake provoked by Freud’s theories and clinical praxis that medicated the psyche of hypochondriac elites from both sides of the Atlantic.

While sojourning in several European capitals with her male *cicerones*, Lorelei underrates the grandeur of their artistic and architectural heritage, the admiration of which is traditionally the main educational purpose of the Grand Tour, together with encountering the local upper classes. In fact, her itinerary fails to fill in these two perceived “civilizing” gaps of America: traditional “good manners,” and a rich and long history. Faye Hammill states that the heroine turns her back on their solid monuments of history and culture to admire the depthless icons of

⁹ Reference to Sigmund Freud, the father of the school of psychoanalysis who described hysteria as a pathology exclusively found in women.

consumerism and luxury as a means to enhance her social rank (2005 37). Thus, the development of her mental and literary faculties is not a priority; instead she prefers to pursue money and the cult of self-idolization. For instance, in Paris she is blinded by the exclusive brand names of perfume and jewelry boutiques, like Coty or Cartier, at Place Vendôme, so her overexcitement makes her overlook its prestigious Haussmannian buildings. The French capital is the paradise to purchase cosmetics, gems and gowns, therefore “Paris is devine” for Lorelei (*Gentlemen* 51). She prefers this city to London, even before landing: “I feel that it must be much more educational” (50), because it conforms and reinforces her US identity according to prevailing standards of her country during the 1920s: mercantilism and consumerism. In fact, she confesses that she finds there what her voyage is for and what she is really looking forward to: “Shopping really seems to be what [Paris] is principally for” (63). In contrast, from her arrival in the English metropolis, she finds trouble and disappointment, because it is tiring to find a suitable transport from its port of disembarkation to the city, whereas this same type of journey is comparatively easy in New York. Throughout her Grand Tour, Lorelei applies an American-centric view of the world that constantly compares the two continents, and concludes that the United States offers her a more comfortable lifestyle and is superior to Europe in all aspects that are important for her: men, entertainment and shopping. She loves places that resemble her mother country, like the Parisian neighborhood of “Monmart” because she finds US jazz bands there, or she enjoys the Viennese Prater because it reminds her of Luna Amusement Park in Coney Island. Although she relishes social gatherings with the high classes, cocktails at cafés, fancy restaurants and cabarets like “Foley Bergere,” her favorite establishment in Europe is the Ritz Hotel, no matter what country she is visiting. There, she feels at home because she can meet (and beguile) American men, and she is happy to jump from one city to the next, as long as this brand of fashionable accommodation (and its loyal guests) is available. This anecdote also unveils her untraditional and pragmatic preference for serial copies, easily found in her own country, against the prestige of European originals. Returning to her stay in the British capital, Lorelei claims “London is really nothing at all” (40), when her male admirers solicitously show her and her friend the most historically emblematic sights, like the Tower of London: “[He] wanted us to get out and look at [it] because he said that quite a famous Queen had her head cut off there one morning and Dorothy said ‘What a fool she was to get up that morning’... So we did not bother to get out” (40). Lorelei is not enraptured by the past times of English monarchs because she cannot be the protagonist of such chronicles, and she chooses humor to avoid identifying herself with their female victims, like the second wife of Henry VIII. Therefore, she seems to care nothing for the tragedy of Anne Boleyn or the Tudor intrigues, but above all, she feels she herself is the only “majesty” to be contemplated and revered. Whereas she does not share her impressions while

visiting French palaces, like “Fountainblo” or “Versigh,” she is bewitched by the most iconic silhouette of Paris: “The Eyefull Tower is devine and it is much more educational than the London Tower, because you can not even see the London Tower if you happen to be two blocks away. But when a girl looks at the Eyefull Tower she really knows she is looking at something” (54-55). Apart from the comic misunderstanding with the French language, Lorelei shows that she does not appreciate the cultural value behind the “small” old stones on the Thames, but she prefers the colossal dimensions, the geometry and the iron lattice of the Eiffel Tower, as a symbol of modernity and technological progress, which she identifies with familiar US buildings: the skyscrapers. Paradoxically, the emblem of Paris, that arouses feelings of admiration in Lorelei, would imitate the architectural breakthrough of her own country, which uncommonly was first famous at home and, later, exported abroad.

When the heroine continues her voyage to “the central of Europe” (55) on the mythical Orient Express and meets Henry, all her “educational” efforts exclusively focus on capturing her future husband, because he is one of the most eligible bachelors in America. Still in Munich, she visits its museum without much enthusiasm. However, once she sojourns in the two capitals of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, she is not interested in their buildings, “*kunst*” or men at all: she only exhibits her most attractive (fake) virtues and tactical intelligence to win over the heart of Henry’s mother, receive the marriage proposal from her beau, cross the Atlantic to meet his father, choose the right Cartier ring, and seal the marital deal with her target prey. Thus, Lorelei’s Grand Tour revolves around men and seduction, but in a rare alliance between this creature and her uncongenial creator, she derides the romantic conventions of female acquiescence, courtship and love before marriage. Her credo is that a nice admirer is the one who is rich and gladly spends money to satisfy all her desires, whereas a bad gentleman, who requires to be chastised and “reformed” by her, is the one who does not. The most important life lesson ultimately self-taught during her exploratory trip abroad, not thanks to any erudite wisdom grasped in its destination (Europe), is that her compatriots are the best, because they are generous with girls, compared to English lords or French dandies. Intertwined with the discovery of such a male diversity across nationalities, the heroine is confronted with misunderstandings and conflicts between the two continents in the prestigious social circles she frequents. Men are not only the vehicles to pay for her prodigality, but they are also instrumental to allow her to enter the soirées of the European high classes. Lorelei decides to be under the protection of Major Falcon in England because he “knows all the sights in London including the Prince of Wales” (32), which results in hilarious episodes of cultural clash, disenchantment and mockery of the Old World, that stress her distinctive US identity regardless of old ties of ancestry. Americans come from a classless country where they have never had any aristocracy based on heredity, which still in the

1920s held the economic authority, polite manners and the political power on the other side of the Atlantic. According to T. E. Blom, this novella is a “classic send-up of the American myth in which a nobody from nowhere defeats the old European values of class and education and wins all that is thought worth winning: money and fame” (40). Although Mr. Eisman recommends her reading a manual of etiquette, Lorelei eventually does not know and is shocked by the rigid social codes and perversions with which the European elite conducts itself. However, she is not a helpless girl in male hands like the faux-naïve Daisy, but a grown-up woman empowered by her beauty, tears, flirtations, practical mind and the smart use of her “dumbness” to get what she wants. As soon as she interacts with the European aristocracy, she is confused because she cannot recognize the differences between a countess, a lady or a regular woman, and she does not understand either why some British lords hide their German origins for more English names. Nevertheless, this teutophobia, the political complexity of the interwar Old Continent, and the vestiges of high status in England based on nobility are irrelevant to her, because they do not rule her world at home. Furthermore, she soon learns that the economic reality of Europe differs from its external cues of opulence: British families have distinction, estates and antiques, but they have no money because, in current times, cash is mostly in American hands. Therefore, material necessity forces English hosts to invite (un)desirable US visitors on their Grand Tour as “guest stars” to their soirées, where they beguile them with their heritage and sell them their precious, old family treasures, like jewelry, furniture or canvases. Although initially amused by this novelty, Lorelei is soon tired of these “exclusive” social encounters. First, she notices that the familiarity with which British ladies embrace, kiss or praise her are only signs of feigned public affection that mask their jealousy and mercenary purposes. These married women surreptitiously hate the economic power of American *nouveaux riches* visiting or “buying” Europe, and they scorn the lucky recipients of this new “colonial” conquest: unwed flappers who flirt and rob their husbands. And second, Lorelei feels irritated by the repetitive charlatanism that turns these chic gatherings into “Arabian bazaars,” and their glamorous hostesses in financial bankruptcy into bargainers who sell their expensive belongings to girls from nowhere. In fact, she prefers the authenticity of her blatant plunder to the fake script of these “good-mannered” (but hypocritical and furious) English ladies in distress. Beyond this new map of European decadence and American prosperity as the world’s new industrial power at the dawn of the 1920s, the “dumb” blonde falls in love not with a man, but with a diamond tiara on sale. Rooted in her US value of individualistic pursuit of her ambitions, it becomes the “educational” obsession of her voyage to buy this piece, and she will need to hunt a “sir” who can satiate her thirst for luxury. Sir Francis Beekman will be her target victim, but Lorelei soon understands that this is not an easy task because “gentlemen in London have quite a quaint custom of not giving a girl many presents” (*Gentlemen* 40). Then, she

confesses the newly revealed purpose of her Grand Tour: “I think it would be nice for an American girl like I to educate an English gentleman like Piggie” (41). She fully adopts the identity of the “mistress”: the US instructors who teaches her admirers –so she is not the pupil to be taught by them–, and who makes fun of men by calling them pejorative farm animal nicknames. This reflects her indifference towards social hierarchies and how much she dislikes the European *crème de la crème*. To prove that she is a good performer that learned acting in Hollywood, from a typically American industry, she uses clever stratagems and “innocent” flatteries to entice Beekman and get the necessary funds to eventually purchase the tiara. After she gets the prize of her seduction game, she abandons London and her new unconditional –but married and boring– lover, because she cannot “learn” anything else or does not want to “teach” any longer in the English capital.

Lorelei is powerful because she has nothing to lose; she turns the world upside down and she can create a moral havoc that changes the lives of others, while her own existence remains untouched (Barreca xv). This is the case of Lady Beekman. She and her wounded pride travel to Paris to defame the flapper and get back the precious booty: the diamond tiara that symbolizes her husband’s indecorous prodigality with an American girl, who carelessly continued her Grand Tour. But the heroine is not Daisy Miller: she has no spotless reputation and knows that this *contretemps* will not end in tragedy. This breakthrough revision of American girlhood represents Loos’s radical departure from the 19th-century Jamesian myth, because she would believe that this female archetype should not be permitted to live on in modern times stamped by sexual laxity, individualism and capitalism. Consequently, Lorelei does not hesitate to tacitly admit that she is a *demimondaine* or a fortune-hunter, willing to violate social mores and to exploit the outspokenness of Dorothy, who verbally attacks the physical appearance and the outfit of this high-born woman when she threatens to drag this conflict into a court: “If the judge gets a good look at you, he will think that Sir Francis Beekman was out of his mind 35 years ago [...] if we hurt your dignity like you hurt our eyesight I hope for your sake, you are a Christian science” (*Gentlemen* 59). This confrontation proves that Lorelei glorifies the classless US nation against the rigid stratification of the European countries: she does not care whether her rival is a countess or a maid, she ridicules her anyway, laughs at public scandals and, ironically, concludes that the manners of Piggie’s wife are “too unrefined” for her taste. Therefore, she overlooks traditional patterns of respect and civility from Europe based on seniority, social rank and nobility. Loos further uses the literary conventions of the vernacular picaresque from her country, applied to the now empowered myth of “The American girl,” to allow her creature to win the next battle. Her “dumb” blonde tactically seduces the French lawyers sent by Lady Beekman. These men finally bring back an imitation tiara to their customer but deceive her into thinking that they have rescued the real one –intelligently kept by the heroine in the safe at the Hotel Ritz–, and they

charge her large bills for their services during this mission, actually spent to entertain two “*sharmani*” foreigners: Lorelei and Dorothy. Thus, it would not be coincidental that such a congenial affinity grows between the US flapper and French workers, at the “disloyal” service of an English employer, because of the traditional friendship between their “more democratic” countries since the late 18th century against the colonial authority of Great Britain (in the case of the Thirteen Colonies of America) and against blue-blooded lineages (in the case of revolutionary France). To bring home the jewel symbolizes the ultimate gender and social victory for Lorelei against Europe: she demonstrates her intelligence to objectify its wealthy men, to abuse its aristocracy, and to destabilize its conventions of high birth, social rank and power, in part thanks to her tactical but also historically-based Franco-American alliance. And yet, she sarcastically returns to James’s conventions of female victimization: “it would teach Lady Francis Beekman a lesson not to say what she said to two American girls like I and Dorothy, who were all alone in Paris and had no gentleman to protect them” (65). This hilarious ruse intends to justify her (mis)demeanor, and to conceal that she is the one who is really dangerous to men and to rival women, whether genteel wives or single brunettes like Loos who could, nevertheless, envy the lucky star of the “dumb” blonde.

Lorelei is not tempted by continental admirers either. In Munich, she only judges them according to her American-centric stereotypes: they are fat or “unrefined” because they eat sausages all the time. In Paris, some are friendly only if they are tipped: “every time a French gentleman starts in to squeal, you can always stop him with five francs, not matter who he is” (51), whereas others are handsome and polite, but their gallantry does not satisfy her “understandable” financial needs: “kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever” (55). This immortal aphorism does not only encapsulate the consumerism and materialism of the US nation, but also the instructive lessons of a more down-to-earth and practical (mis)education for an American girl towards a more literarily realistic female empowerment, survival and success: not to fall into Daisy Miller’s dreams of romantic love or her tragic ordeals of social downfall, martyrdom and death. Lorelei loses her interest in both ridiculing and instructing Europe, and she does not scrutinize other continental victims, once she encounters her target prey on the Orient Express: Henry from Philadelphia. But, while contemplating rural Germany from the train, she observes that countryside women are working hard in the fields, whereas their husbands “sit at a table under quite a shady tree and drink beer” (75). This seemingly irrelevant remark has a paramount influence on Lorelei’s resolution to return home. First, it confirms to her that US girls have achieved a certain degree of gender equality compared to their European counterparts, because they have the power to take advantage of men. And second, it breaches her bond with Mr. Eisman, because she does not understand why he thinks that the Grand Tour through the Old Continent is “educational” for her when, across

the pond, women are exploited by their male partners, and not the other way round as she is accustomed to such relationships in New York. This dissonant note in Lorelei's melody of financial dependence on men may echo Loos's own speculations on women's oppression in the 1920s and the American advances towards an unorthodox version of gender equality compared to a more traditional Europe.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes portrays a heroine who chooses to go on a trip where she expects to achieve self-improvement and self-knowledge by exploring an itinerary of European capitals, but she discovers that the most valuable teaching from travelling is to prefer home: The United States and its men. Lorelei does not only deflate the conventions of female subordination and obedience of social hierarchies in Europe, but she also subverts its allegedly "superior" highbrow culture and the instructive purpose of the Grand Tour through its countries. She demonstrates that she can "educate" men to spend money on her, satisfy her desires, and ask her for marriage, instead of being educated or victimized by them. To catch his interest, Lorelei lies to her moralist future husband by telling him that she chose Dorothy as her travel companion to reform her dissipation. But when she disregards her friend's warnings: "why should I listen to the advise of a girl like [her] who travelled all over Europe and all she came home with was a bangle!" (102), the heroine fully confesses that what it is important after the trip is not what she learned in the Old Continent, but what she got from there: in her case, a diamond tiara and a rich compatriot as a husband. In fact, the novella develops "a fantastic economy in which women parlay their (albeit male-defined) assets of sexual attractiveness into what they truly want" (Hegeman 545). Apart from this female triumph within the still reigning patriarchal capitalism, Lorelei proves that, after a "formation" period abroad that turns into a lucrative (mis)education, she can become an author while still unfamiliar with the foreign literary canon and European culture, because they are "unnecessary" to write her diary about her voyage and, later, its sequel: a narrative on Dorothy's life.¹⁰ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is a daydream of female empowerment and "heroism" based on Lorelei's control over her own destiny, her smartness to dare, her innocence to question the given, and her survival instinct to transgress the forbidden. Thanks to this character (or in spite of her), Anita Loos enters the gender war of her time. She recreates and denounces the clichés of the gold-digging flapper and the irresistible blonde in the Roaring Twenties, who use their "stupidity" and eroticism for their own benefit, but they do not reflect her own values. Unlike Daisy Miller, Lorelei is not a martyr to social judgment to be pitied because Europe ruins her life, but a comic villain, a social animal and the caricature of a mercenary who actually ruins Europe. She does not allow herself to be commodified by wealthy men seeking youth, beauty and blondness, although she

¹⁰ This became Loos's later novella *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1928), where Dorothy is its heroine and Lorelei its narrator.

possesses all these qualities. Instead, this heroine succeeds in manipulating these gentlemen, while subverting the Jamesian myth of the vulnerable, unsophisticated US girl in a tale that celebrates Americanness: the economic prosperity of her mother country and the genuine identity of its citizens free from transatlantic influences. And behind the scenes, Anita Loos also dreams of (or attacks) the fortunate entrepreneurship of “dumb” women like Lorelei and, simultaneously, she satirically ridicules the assumed sociocultural, historical and literary superiority of Europe.

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