

**Between Dreams and Realities: *Romance and Rebellion in Post-War Cinema***

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*This study considers the implications of post-World War II American societal norms and how cultural shifts into the 1960's influenced perceptions of romantic partnerships and dynamics in approaching them, as depicted in contemporaneous historical context of Howard Hawk's "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (1953) and Stanley Kramer's "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" (1967).*

## 1950's Historical Background

Following the United States' involvement in World War II, the country experienced what was known as the “*Golden Age of American Capitalism*,” boasting a gross national product in excess of \$500 billion by the end of the 1950s. This newfound position afforded America with a newfound international stronghold as it established America as the richest—and thus most powerful—country of the time. If this wasn't enough, unemployment rates and inflation remained low, and coupled with the rise of suburbia and a reinvigorated importance on the domestic lifestyle, the newfound comfort of contemporary American living became the main recipient of this fruitful bounty.<sup>1</sup>

Suburban communities experienced a stark 47% increase in inhabitation and thus more people lived in the suburbs than anywhere else for the first time in American history. Homebuilders correspondingly turned to “assembly line techniques” to fill the need for these rapidly growing communities.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this *Golden Age* was marked with mass consumerism and the reemergence of a new, distinct “*American Dream*”, coined with stapled goods such as single family homes and convenience appliances including “cars, televisions, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and the introduction of credit cards” to keep this ideal alive in a newly-structured American middle class.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> History.com Editors, “The 1950s - American Culture & Society,” History.com, June 17, 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/1950s>.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Perry, “National Archives Will Soon Release 1950 Census, Offering a Look at a Defining Time in Modern U.S. History,” Census.gov, December 27, 2023, [https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/03/1950-census-records-window-to-history.html#:~:text=Suburbanization%20had%20only%20recently%20begun%20by%201950%20and%20would%20expand,and%2023.3%25%20living%20in%20suburbs.\)](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/03/1950-census-records-window-to-history.html#:~:text=Suburbanization%20had%20only%20recently%20begun%20by%201950%20and%20would%20expand,and%2023.3%25%20living%20in%20suburbs.)).

<sup>3</sup> 1. “The Modern Consumer - 1950s Products and Style,” The Modern Consumer - 1950s Products and Style | SFO Museum, December 8, 2018, <https://www.sfomuseum.org/exhibitions/modern-consumer-1950s-products-and->

Although women were usually admonished during this time for pursuing careers following WWII, regarded to as “unlovely...ridden with guilt...man hate[rs],” male breadwinners experienced a large increase in wages, and this had a large influence on the problem definition in supporting the family unit, and the responsibilities thereof of the “dutiful wife”<sup>4</sup> Anyone who threatened this coveted American way of life experienced what would be contemporarily known as “political cancel culture” as an accusation of disloyalty from Senator McCarthy’s *House of Un-American Activities Committee* resulted at least “social exile and blacklisting” from high-earning jobs.<sup>5</sup> Additional social pressures kept the laces to American culture sinched, as the booming population—4.24 million births per year—resulting in these “baby boomers” comprising of 40 percent of the population by 1964. Prosperous hopes were held closely as surviving through the Great Depression, desegregation and later Civil Rights movement, and a looming nuclear war were all very real circumstances of this time.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, this conforming attitude towards appropriate gender roles coupled with a stark increase in social mobility grappled Americans in various ways; indeed, the aspect of “putting on a show” became interestingly intertwined with the dynamics of romantic partnerships and destructive repercussions in a larger, broader context.<sup>7</sup>

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style#:~:text=A%20new%20wave%20of%20consumerism,the%20latest%20and%20greatest%20things.

<sup>4</sup> “Women and Work after World War II,” PBS, April 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tupperware-work/>.

<sup>5</sup> “McCarthyism / the ‘Red Scare,’” McCarthyism / The “Red Scare” | Eisenhower Presidential Library, 2020, <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/online-documents/mccarthyism-red-scare>.

<sup>6</sup> “The 1950s - American Culture & Society,” History.com.

<sup>7</sup> “The 1950s Arts And Entertainment: Overview,” Encyclopedia.com, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/culture-magazines/1950s-arts-and-entertainment-overview>.

***"Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (1953)***

In Howard Hawk's 1953 American musical comedy film, "*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," the tale of a woman scorned stars renowned film actresses, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell. The film opens with both Lorelei and Dorothy not only on the hunt for a husband, but conveniently employed as showgirls while performing enthusiastic, witty numbers written to discuss their intentions as beautiful women in a world full of luxury, status, and access to extremely wealthy men.

The film's narrative loosely follows a central plot and strings its scenes together with comedic plotting and subsequent musical numbers to tell of the ladies' resolutions in their various schemes and reactions to their "super-objective": *to ensnare*. Indeed, when not shopping overseas designer labels or capturing the unsuspecting male gaze, Lorelei and Dorothy use their wits to navigate their circumstances and focus on the *best* gentleman prospect that may suit their preferred values in partner selection— either for money, physicality, or even true love. Nevertheless, even as their preferences seem to morph and individualize over the course of the film, the themes introduced here seem to suggest an "ideal" romantic partnership of this time period, as dangerously-beautiful, singing women with an unshakable charm and animal-like magnetism as the model for this rather *particular* frame.

This Siren-like archetype shines through when the character is clearly motivated to adjust her behavior to match the needs of a particular moment's tactic, as we see Lorelei's behavior easily traverse feigning *full receptivity* with her alluring, innocent female gaze to her assuming a focused, sharp persona when making necessary calculations such as bribing waitstaffs and even drugging a private detective to ensure her plans, honorable or not, remain in order. The broader context of women exploiting themselves and their entire personhood being reduced to an "object

of desire” for the male gaze is a problematic message in the film’s narrative, especially given the historical context of the film. And although written satirically, the ladies are thus painted in a somewhat heroic arc once they have attained their preferred romantic partner while maneuvering through a more prosperous, but clearly still largely patriarchal post-WWII social scene.

Correspondingly, in the opening and closing scenes of the film, the infamous numbers “*The One Who Broke My Heart in Little Rock*” and “*Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend*” include many insights that reflect the same siren-like themes as expressed in their character arcs. For instance, the opening number “*The One Who Broke My Heart in Little Rock*” is positioned as a reaction to the reason the ladies are even attempting to assume such sirenous qualities like being “young and determined to be wined and dined and ermined”, because after someone breaking her heart in a small town, she “up and left the pieces there...[and] like a lost lamb...roamed to New York”.

Moreover, her main goal after doing “very well on Wall Street” is to go “back home and punch the nose” of the gentleman who broke her heart in the first place. Although this film was of the top ten highest grossing films of its year, audience members would be remiss to not consider this grossly constricted frame of life experience in relation to the glamour, heavy marketing and highly digestible content for the average American nickelodeon-goer and seemingly innocent comedic narrative. Realistically, these characters comprise a very narrow situation in society as dangerously-beautiful showgirl entertainers, and thus their values as single working women should be adjusted upon viewing, appropriately so.

### Further Analysis: "*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*"

Similarly, Marilyn's iconic performance and later marriage scene featuring the song "*Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*," her lyrics share various enticing attributes that a potential suitor may offer, yet she responds always with the same rebuttal of *diamonds*— and only diamonds— owning paramount value of her heart, and thus all spoils that may come with it, once attained from said male suitor. Again, while the number seems to comically embody vices such as greed and materialism on the surface, quoting brands such as "Tiffany, Cartier, and more," the Cinderella-sounding score seems to penetrate even the most sardonic of scorned hearts by enthralling women with a renewed promise of social security through marriage and in an unorthodox manner, empowerment and assertion of female agency itself in the timeless American pursuit of happiness.

While these themes within the individual character frames seem to be quite logical, and ultimately realized, the film's messaging takes another tone within its contemporaneous 1950's historical context on the procurement of romantic partnerships. Indeed, amidst a propaganda war against communism, "the idea...of the nuclear family was what made Americans superior [over] Communists."<sup>8</sup> Images such as "Russian women... dressed in gunnysacks... toil[ing] in drab factories while their children were placed in cold, day care centers" seemed to serve as targeted *positive punishment* for any lingering "wayward girls" considering alternate ways of life following the woman's short lasting, rugged (indebted) role in American World War II labor force. Instead, images with American women often with their families and "feminine hairdos and

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<sup>8</sup> "Mrs. America: Women's Roles in the 1950s," PBS, accessed April 10, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-mrs-america-womens-roles-1950s/>.

delicate dresses... tending to the home” paints a real narrative of women accepting their flexible role as dutiful wives, “enjoy[ing] the fruits of capitalism, democracy, and freedom.”<sup>9</sup>

This dissonant messaging is also exists in the same context of De Beers’ “A Diamond is Forever” campaign, spearheaded by advertising company N.W. Ayer, essentially appealing women to request diamond rings as a requirement in completing the courtship process and embodying both “romance and legitimacy” Within the agency’s annual strategic review, they found that even despite their widespread success, “millions of brides are faced with at least two important pressures that work against the diamond engagement ring...Among the more prosperous, there is the sophisticated urge to be different as a means of being smart [while]...the lower-income groups would like to show more for the money than they can find in the diamonds they can afford.”<sup>10</sup> This is almost exactly reflected in the characterizations of both lead female characters, with Lorelei more likely reflecting her Little Rock roots in pursuit of diamonds, and cunningly smart Dorothy keeping the two in check and ultimately choosing love over potential prospects of money, and later adaptations of the blonde and brunette aesthetic of women—ditsy and smart, a spectrum of women not only on desirability but now also with intellect.

Nevertheless, the company decided it was “essential that [such] pressures be met by the constant publicity to show that the diamond is everywhere... and recognize the diamond as one material object... which can reflect a man’s success in life... and devotion in a very personal way.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, while entirely plausible for women to search for true love or security through tangible resources while doing so, the film’s narrative certainly seems to lean towards Ayer’s

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “A Diamond Is Forever,” Diamond Source of Virginia, 2020, <https://www.diamondsourceva.com/education/diamondindustry/diamonds-diamond-is-forever.asp>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



strategies of “exploit[ing] the psychological need[s] of Americans to conspicuously display symbols of [their] wealth.”<sup>12</sup>

And while the acclaimed “oldest advertising agency” established in 1867 seems to help reinforce such American ideals such as marriage, sugary snacks, coffee breaks, and even slogans for powerhouses such as AT&T and the US Army, the satirical sloganing fits seamlessly with the logic of such actions while being behaviorally unaware and yet psychologically manipulated by the ushering in a seemingly unsuspecting and curious direction. The film follows suit and prompts women to conceive siren qualities as the main basis of attaining agency in your life’s direction, especially to the vulnerable and the scorned.

This overlay is interesting as although it prompts women to act in a particular direction, authentic intentions are seen in women “putting the husband through” college as institutions themselves recognized the phenomena by “congratulating women for supporting their husbands getting an education... by [awarding wives with] a separate diploma ceremony [and receiving] their PhT (Putting the Husband Through).”<sup>13</sup> Unlike Hawk’s or Ayer’s attempts to illustrate the hearts of women, the truth seems to lie moreso in the desire for social and emotional security though strengthening of the institution of marriage itself, rather than finding strength through nefarious and glamorous plots of larceny.

Indeed, according to the Journal of Labor Statistics, “In the golden era of the post-Second World War and there’s a huge American middle class... housing became very cheap, which explains early marriages because younger people could afford it. And suddenly, the education

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jaxon Parker, “In the 1950s, Many Wives Financed Their Husbands through College,” Colorado Arts and Sciences Magazine, March 20, 2023, <https://www.colorado.edu/asmagazine/2023/03/20/1950s-many-wives-financed-their-husbands-through-college-1>.

premium for men rose.” Additionally, “on the flipside, financial returns for women receiving college degrees remained lower than for men...[as] discrimination kept the returns to schooling for women lower than those of men in the 1950s, ’60s and even the early ’70s.”<sup>14</sup>

In all, there seems to be overwhelming evidence suggesting the ideals of this time valued marriage and the binding of the nuclear unit, which is directly reflected in the narrative of this film. While not practically glamorous, the reality for most middle-class American women reflected an effort to secure the home, have the popular, major conveniences to do so, and attain happiness from early, dutiful marriages.

And although satirical, Hawk’s musical comedy does introduce risky themes that have contribute to larger issues in gender dynamics and the manners in which obtaining romantic partnerships is presented in their pursuits to fulfill individual preferences within their own versions of experiencing “true love”. The industrious approach thus arguably sent a shockwave through golden age American minds, updating our mental frameworks to awareness of the types of romantic partnerships that could *now* exist, and the derivative rules and dynamics that could exist within them.

As a thought experiment—if Lorelei truly desired *only* money or “material goods”, the narrative would reflect a harder emphasis on her securing her geriatric diamond-mine billionaire, Mr. Piggy. Yet she marries the man who will always fulfill her doe-eyed requests for diamonds, rather than a man who owns the resource outright. Arguably, this discrepancy suggests there lies a broader, more influential factor over money itself that makes the prospect of marriage desirable and ultimately fulfilling; indeed, amidst changing times of societal values and beliefs, perhaps *empowerment*—or even the ability to simply *SHOW* power—is a new social environment of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

strength showing up microcosmically in daily lives of the American people following the US's assertion as the richest and most powerful to date.

### **The Vietnam War and 1960's Counterculture**

Despite the economic boom of the previous decade, it's important to recognize that not everyone experienced the same level of prosperity and well-being. The postwar period had varied effects on the population, with some enjoying higher wages and better opportunities. However, according to the US Census Bureau, “13% of the poor had lost a wage earner in the war, leading to losses in property and aged care”.<sup>15</sup> And although the rise of suburbia was a legitimate push for securing the nuclear unit following WWII, this movement left “cities to face financial strains due to shrinking tax bases, [and were] hindered in their ability to maintain infrastructure and public services”.<sup>16</sup>

The decade witnessed significant social legislation, including the War on Poverty, Medicaid/Medicare programs, and The Civil Rights Act of 1964. While these programs have had a substantial impact over time, there remained criticism towards President Johnson's Great Society and America's subsequent involvement in the Vietnam War in 1965. By 1968, out of 60 million Americans owning a television set, every one in three tuned into the Hunter-Brinkley Report on NBC for their nightly news, regularly viewing “film of airplanes flying, dropping [of] bombs, and troops on patrol, sometimes [even] in combat”.<sup>17</sup> This visceral engagement with the realities of war on the home front led to numerous unintended consequences, as even President

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<sup>15</sup> US Census Bureau, “The Extent of Poverty in the United States 1959 to 1966,” Census.gov, October 8, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1968/demo/p60-54.html#:~:text=Notwithstanding%20the%20general%20decline%20in,for%20families%20of%20different%20size>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> 1. Michael Mandelbaum, “Vietnam: The Television War,” JSTOR, 1982, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024822>.

Johnson abandoned his re-election due to public criticism, stating that “if previous wars had been televised, the United States would not have persevered in fighting them”.<sup>18</sup>

However, as the horrors of war entered the living rooms of 60 million Americans, it sparked a psychological reflection on what truly defines "American" values. This intense scrutiny extended into broader movements of the time, giving rise to a *Counterculture* that questioned norms of “family unit, sexuality, dress, and the arts.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Professor Rina Bousalis from Florida Atlantic University noted that this “was a time when youth rejected social norms and exhibited their disapproval of racial, ethnic, and political injustices through resistance, and for some subgroups, revolt”.<sup>20</sup>

During America's era of Anti-war protests and the Civil Rights Movement's quest for equality, technological advancements like the television offered a clearer and more accurate depiction of the current objective reality. And with a growing acceptance of diverse perspectives, achieving clarity was crucial for the collective to stand on moral ground, given the historical consequences of war and the responsibilities they believed they bore for unimaginable horrors. Indeed, it was a time of significant reflection and evolution in new societal norms, and the simultaneous push for Black American rights was no exemption from this fateful *reckoning*.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Rina R. Bousalis, “The Counterculture Generation: Idolized, Appropriated, and Misunderstood,” *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*, 2021, [https://thekeep.eiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=the\\_councilor](https://thekeep.eiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=the_councilor).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

### Case Study: "*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*" (1967)

The 1967 American romantic-comedy film 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,' directed by Stanley Kramer, depicts the journey of a newly-engaged interracial couple navigating social acceptance in the late 1960s. Starring Katharine Houghton (as Joanna) and Sidney Poitier (as John), the couple quickly gets engaged after meeting on separate vacations in Hawaii. Joanna then decides to seek the blessing of their respective families before getting married and moving to Geneva the following week. The film guides the audience through a tumultuous period of psychological and emotional adjustment, culminating in a dinner scene where members of all backgrounds—black, white, and even a pope—come together to break bread.

The film's cinematographic style intriguingly mirrors the feel of a public broadcast or a commercial, offering relatable insights into the characters' experiences and potential thought processes as they navigate self-understanding during the changing times of 1960s counterculture. The film's narrative implies a broader theme where love is depicted as a means of power and social maneuver. While one might expect this power to be safeguarded against any potential threats to *a pursuit of happiness*, Joanna's actions directly reflect her individual values of true love, boasting “his confidence... [and how he] knows where he’s going” to her mother, Ms. Drayton. Moreover, Joanna's father begins to mentally accept John as a prospect *only* after recognizing his extensive qualifications and career as a Peace Corps Surgeon, considering them to be worth the “social cost” so long as his daughter is prepared and aware.

Historically, white society strongly discouraged interracial relationships due to concerns about racial purity and family honor, which were reinforced by laws dating back to the slave era

and later codified as eugenics theories and miscegenation laws in the late 19th century.<sup>21</sup>

However, in the film's historical context, the narrative emphasizes Joanna's *individual preference being fulfilled*, reflecting the counterculture shift in romantic norms that now allow her to exercise that choice.

And while this time was still characteristically rigid for Black society in terms of social acceptance and mobility, there were still significant milestones that marked progress, such as the desegregation of public schools following the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.<sup>22</sup> The desegregation of education arguably had a significant impact on how people perceived social acceptance, especially in their interactions with peers of different races. By learning and interacting with each other in integrated settings, individuals experienced a more nuanced and practical understanding, both physically and emotionally, compared to the previous era of public segregation and enslavement.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, there is evidence supporting the evolution of this dynamic, indicating that students were likely open-minded about interracial dating at the time. For example, at Syracuse University, the administration initially "sent letters to the parents of white students who dated Black [however, this] practice was discontinued by 1958" due to growing student opposition, signaling a shift in societal attitudes of younger generations.<sup>24</sup> Desegregation likely fostered an environment that was equipped to challenge deep-rooted racial attitudes and prejudices through experiential interactions with people of other races.

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<sup>21</sup> Paul A. Lombardo, "Miscegenation, Eugenics, and Racism: Historical Footnotes to *Loving v. Virginia*," College of Law Reading Room, 1987, [https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1246&context=faculty\\_pub](https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1246&context=faculty_pub).

<sup>22</sup> David F. Sly and Louis G. Pol, "The Demographic Context of School Segregation and Desegregation," JSTOR, June 1978, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2577511>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

In its simplest form, assuming authority over one's subconscious leads to the assumption of power, exercised as individual choice in the procurement of desires using situational resources. This shift in mindset not only liberates people to act according to their desires but also empowers them to think creatively when establishing new boundaries and exploring possibilities in their personal endeavors. As individuals and American society continue to evolve, this empowerment also extends to how individuals approach romantic partnerships. Indeed, from the 1950s into the following decade, there's a noticeable increase in openness to diverse perspectives and preferences. This openness enables a more authentic exploration of individual desires and a greater awareness of all available options. This dynamic serves to be a positive step forward, granting both women and men the agency to make choices that align with their desires, within the patriarchal context of 20th century America.



### Concluding Thoughts

In tracing the narratives and character dynamics of "*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*" and "*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*," a complex web of social constructs and power dynamics emerges. Both films, albeit from vastly different contexts, converge on the theme of *societal expectations, gender roles in romantic partnerships, and the exploitation of beauty in patriarchal structures*. In "*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," the Lorelei's transformation from heartbreak to a siren using her beauty for wealth and male favor reflects this exploitation, highlighting how **sadness and vulnerability can be leveraged into a form of power** within certain contexts. On the other hand, in "*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*," Joanna's character challenges these norms by **embracing her new beliefs openly and choosing strength through adversity**, which in turn inspires a sense of heroism in her family as they adjust into the new counterculture paradigm of acceptance and psychological vulnerability. This contrast illustrates the nuanced ways in which emotions and agency are portrayed—and manipulated—in these narratives, reflecting broader themes of power and identity within societal structures.

In a broader sense, these films serve as mirrors reflecting developing societal paradigms and power structures. The narratives of these films, while fictional, resonate with their contemporaneous historical struggles and highlight the ongoing need for challenging ingrained beliefs and advocating for equality and agency across all genders and races.

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## Appendix A

*“The One Who Broke My Heart in Little Rock” opening scene performance and closing marriage scene.*



*Characterization of Dorothy and Lorelei, (respectively) as depicted in scenes from “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” (1953).*





*Below are scenes from "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner", as referenced in the text above.*



*Final scene Reaction shots where all characters accept Joanna and John's soon union.*

