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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Katie Reese, B.A.  Law student at the University of Alberta     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  **My Cousin Vinny:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0104952/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:34008)  **Legally Blonde:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0250494/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:246684)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |         Her image of the Italian-American bimbo and then subsequent brilliance exposes assumptions about "the bimbo" and presents us with a new ideological view of the female Italian-American, that of the brilliant and empowered woman beneath the ditsy façade. | |  | | --- | | **Revenge of the Bimbo: *Legally Blonde* and *My Cousin Vinny***  by Katie Reese  In one of the Picturing Justice [articles](http://docs.google.com/blonde_papke.htm), author David Papke, a law professor, submits a conversation with his teenage daughter about the first *Legally Blonde* film. Essentially, the conversation argues whether or not the film actually has anything to do with law. It appears that the daughter wins and *Legally Blonde* is really just a cute chick flick, but I think that it is impossible that the meaning of the movie stops there. Certainly the film gives a poor showing of legal realities but there is substance there. Whenever a text engages conceptions and depictions of society ideological assumptions emerge from the discussion either advertently or inadvertently. More commonly, ideology appears in the text inadvertently but its presence is inevitable in popular culture since ideology encompasses dominant world-views. An analysis of popular culture then becomes incredibly revealing of a culture, and specifically, of our North American culture in how we see the world and ourselves. *My Cousin Vinny* is another lawyer comedy that, while seemingly merely funny and easy to watch, is also indicative of popular ideology. Like *Legally Blonde*, *My Cousin Vinny*'s humour centers around a "fish out of water" story where characters from one well known social locale are displaced into a foreign, and equally known locale. Both films use cultural stereotypes blatantly to expose some of our ideological assumptions about these cultures and stock characters and to present their own messages. What these films have to say about women and law is telling of social ideologies and dominant views.  *My Cousin Vinny* presents us with cultural stereotypes of North and South that are inevitably exposed as erroneous ideological assumptions. When Stan and his friend drive into Alabama, the scene is set in an entirely rural community where manure is for sale on the side of the road and where farmers chew on wheat out of the sides of their mouths. The two soon-to-be accuseds for murder reveal in their nervousness the stereotypes about Southern justice and inbreeding that the North has of the South. The very formalistic rules of court and the extensive training of Judge Haller at Yale University contrast these Northern expectations of Southern justice and undermine the audience's same expectations of the South. Similarly, the well briefed eye-witness testimonies in the preliminary inquiry reveal a polished and well researched prosecutorial team. It is still a place where everyone eats grits, but it is also a place where murder trials are prosecuted with an incredible amount of professionalism and thoroughness.  Similarly, the film reveals stereotypes about Italian-American Northerners through Mona Lisa Vito and Vinny. When they pull up in their enormous car and step outside in gaudy apparel, the audience is at once expectant of the cultural clash that will ensue and knows, even before they begin speaking, that these are characters with little education, Brooklyn accents, terrible swearing, domestic disputes, and limited knowledge of the country. Lisa and Vinny seem to be stock characters, characters who have a wide understanding of American-Chinese food but have never heard of grits or mud ruining the alignment of car wheels. In the end, both are shown to be incredibly intelligent, intuitive people and the stereotype is turned on its head.  This is particularly true of Lisa who inevitably steals the show. Her image of the Italian-American bimbo and then subsequent brilliance exposes assumptions about "the bimbo" and presents us with a new ideological view of the female Italian-American, that of the brilliant and empowered woman beneath the ditsy façade. Lisa is an out of work hair dresser who wears stilettos, sequins, has huge hair, and worries about the domesticity of her future married life and ticking clock. This is an image of a cultural woman that is common to us and we know what to expect from the stereotype: cattiness, and superficiality combined with limited literary ability. However, Lisa is not what we expect. When Vinny cannot get through the first few pages of the book on rules of procedure over a number of days, Lisa sits down with the book and nears the middle almost immediately. Similarly, she plays pool better than the sharks in the tavern, really does know more about cars and torque than anyone else in the world, and calls the shots in the courtroom as well as the bedroom.  We initially see Lisa as an extension of Vinny's otherness in the South and do not expect much narrative force from this type of character. However, Mona Lisa Vito steps outside the stereotype and reveals a new ideology of the cultural Woman, one who commands attention and respect. Her brilliance is revealed to us slowly, and culminates in a dazzling display in the courtroom where the audience understands that she single handedly solves the entire case by taking pictures of the tire tracks and then identifying the perpetrators' car to be one different from the accuseds'. She out performs, out speaks, and dismisses the testimonies and authority of the entire male prosecutorial team (McDonald Carolan, at 157).  *Legally Blonde* attempts the same kinds of inversion with ideological assumptions about place and stock characters, but is not as successful at displacing old ideologies with new ideologies about place and women as is *My Cousin Vinny*. Elle's arrival at Harvard, the quintessential legal institution, is illustrative of popular culture's assumptions about law school, and, in particular, Harvard. In a small group discussion on the first day, we meet three very typical law students: the absolute geek with numerous doctorates who has been de-worming orphans in eastern Europe for the past few months, the scary lesbian with a phD in women's studies and a focus on the history of combat, and the arrogant but inept genius who enjoys telling people his IQ and assumes that famous philosophers take their ideas from his fourth grade papers. Elle contrasts these bleak stock characters with her own stock character and brilliantly coloured clothing against the grey that surrounds her. She introduces herself and her dog by their astrological signs and is universally rejected by this group because she is not the typical law student. Later we meet Vivian Kensington, the competitive and ruthless bitch. With her, the stereotypes of law students are complete: no one who is dynamic, interesting, or welcoming can be found at law school, nor can you get in unless you have an obscene amount of unpractical education.  The film is similarly damning and revealing of popular notions of law professors and admissions committees. Professor Stromwell begins her class with an exercise in intimidation and then what ensues is a hyperbolic portrayal of the Socratic method. The effect is that law school is a horribly competitive, stressful environment. In Elle's first criminal law class, Professor Callahan acknowledges the ruthlessness of law school by announcing four summer spots in his firm with the declaration, "let the blood bath begin." Similarly, the admissions committee lacks any sense of humour or knowledge of life outside of academia, illustrated by their interpretation of Elle's fundraising campaign of a line of faux-fur panties as being "a friend of the animals" and of her frivolous undergraduate degree as "diversity."  From these stereotypes, and from Elle's conquering of the legal world with her perkiness, we see a dominant ideology that law is a ruthless, competitive and hostile environment. Even though Professor Stromwell comes to the salon and encourages Elle to stay in school, Vivian Kensington becomes her best friend, and her absolutely horrible classmates vote her as their favourite for the position of convocation speaker, this transformation in welcome to the bimbo only occurs because of Elle's genuineness and persistence and not from a hope that the legal profession can have compassion. The change in attitudes at the legal institution does not have the powerful inverting effect that appears in *My Cousin Vinny* where the South's legal system shows its own merit. Harvard's redemption is reluctant and only through Elle's overwhelming goodness and influence. The inherent potential evilness of the system remains.  Despite affirming a malicious undercurrent to the entire legal profession, there is a contrary and very real ideology legitimizing law throughout the film. The mere fact that Elle must prove herself in the legal forum gives legitimacy to the profession as a place of prestige and authority. The film gives credence to law school as a place for smart people when Elle can no longer identify with her Californian friends whose news about bangs and lip liner interrupts Elle's story of emotional crisis and rejection. Likewise, the audience is glad that Elle rejects the empty life of beauty pageants and martinis that her mother and father embrace. Their gross frivolity makes even Harvard desirable. This idea that law school is a place of prestige and respectability is an underlying ideological assumption confirmed through decades and centuries and remains unchallenged by this film.  The entire purpose of the film attempts to underscore assumptions about the blonde bimbo. From a woman who cannot continue to walk home because of a threat to her shoes, we get a woman who wins a murder trial in her first year as a law student and then receives a prestigious offer in a large Boston firm. The attempted message of the film is that the bimbo is really brilliant. This is the same ideological message that *My Cousin Vinny* presents about Lisa but it lacks the same poignancy because the outcome is so transparent from the opening scenes of the film. Similarly, there is a question if this is even really the ideological message or is it merely that a girl has to do anything to get a great guy? The actual evidence that Elle is smart is fleeting. She makes some observant comments in class and has clearly read but then her behaviour on Callahan's legal team is embarrassing (for example: "I just don't think that Brooke could have done this. She exercises a lot. Exercise creates endorphins and endorphins make you happy. Happy people just don't kill their husbands"). The film does this to extend the bimbo joke, and Reese Witherspoon is incredibly charming, but by extending this bimbo-ness, the film actually undermines if Elle really is smart.  Everything in this film centers on the creation of utopian romance and not on inverting conceptions about the bimbo. Elle's help to Paulette, the white trash manicurist, is in helping her to connect with the UPS guy. Similarly, she does a great service to the de-worming law student by making him look desirable in the face of rejection. Elle's entire purpose in going to law school stems not from ambition to do something greater with her life, nor from a passion for justice, but is rather a function of marital conquest. When she rejects Warner and then subsequently gives a relatively intelligent speech at their graduation, we wonder if Elle has transcended this marital quest. The musical score with the lyrics of "Perfect Day" is the same as in the initial scene of her getting ready for her date with Warner when she expects him to propose. We think that now her perception of the perfect day has changed to career success and recognition of hard work and of coming to terms with self but then a subtitle under her new boyfriend, Emmitt, reverses this inclination. The subtitle indicates that this is really the perfect day because he will propose that night. Now she will marry the perfect guy. Law school was worth it.  As a blonde who uses an ibook and who saw *Legally Blonde* on the day of receiving an acceptance to law school, I really like Elle Woods. However, the ideological message fails to present women as autonomous, competent individuals deserving of respect. *My Cousin Vinny* does a much better job of this through using Bohdan Dziemidok's Contrast Theory to create a gap between our expectations of Lisa and what actually ensues. Both films, however, use obvious stereotypes and force reflections on cultural assumptions that we make. A good trend for feminism is that Hollywood film has changed to make the ideological assumption that bimbos are more than they have traditionally been seen to be. Let's just hope that there are more Mona Lisa Vitos than there are Elle Woods.  Works Cited:  Mary Ann McDonald Carolan, "Italian American Women as Comic Foils: Exploding the Stereotype in My Cousin Vinny, Moonstruck, and Married to the Mob" (2002) 13 Literature Interpretation Theory 155.  Bohdan Dziemidok, The Comical: A Philosophical Analysis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993).  David Papke, "[Legally Blonde](http://docs.google.com/blonde_papke.htm)" (October 2001) Picturing Justice.  Posted January 21, 2004 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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