Mama Love Papa: Consumption, Love, and Typology in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

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**Abstract**

This essay offers a new reading of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in terms of 1920s gender politics. Since the publication of Loos's *Blondes*, scholars have repeatedly attempted to classify the novel's genre, using traditional literary categories, and the novel's heroine, using traditional female stereotypes. This approach, however, both overlooks and perpetuates the object of Loos's satire: a hegemonic typology of gender identities. Instead, I suggest we look at *Blondes* in dialectical juxtaposition with the poetry and prose of Dorothy Parker. Reading Loos and Parker alongside one another elucidates how *Blondes* satirizes mass consumption, new love models, and oppressive gender expectations in the 1920s. This reading also sheds new light on Loos's sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, a novel that has been more or less ignored in literary scholarship. Ultimately, the Gentlemen series exposes a long-term relationship among consumerism, love, and female stereotypes that continues to inflect contemporary gender politics.

Key Terms: gender, consumerism, conspicuous consumption, typology, capitalism, dialectical juxtaposition, satire, stereotypes, feminism

“Marriage is too much of a compromise. It lops off a woman’s life as an individual. Yet the reunification too is a lopping off. We chose between the frying-pan and the fire – both very uncomfortable.”

Sue Shelton White

Although for many Americans in 1920 the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment marked the end of the women’s rights movement, the figure of the feminist remained an object of public interest. In 1926, *The Nation* magazine capitalized on this interest in a series of seventeen anonymous essays titled “These Modern Women.” In one of these essays, Kate L. Gregg describes how she turned down three marriage proposals: one from “the most desirable youth,” the second a man “who insisted on a nice big kitchen,” and the third a man “who could not build a fire on a camping trip” (77). Gregg’s essay is revealing on several levels. For one, her list of rejected proposals reflects a 1920s culture that attempted to conflate consumption and marriage. Playing consumer, Gregg discards her lovers as quickly...
as *Nation* readers tossed old magazine issues at the end of the week. More importantly, Gregg’s essay and the sixteen that accompanied it represent a national effort to understand the impact of modern consumption and love models on female gender identities. Proud of her refusals, Gregg continues defiantly, “The psychoanalyst will say – but who cares what the psychoanalyst will say?” (77). Many readers, however, did care what the psychoanalyst had to say. *The Nation* concluded its “These Modern Women” series with three psychological reviews that eagerly attempted to rationalize these feminists, diagnosing several as “militant suffragists.” In one review, Joseph Collins conjectures “that the sex coefficient of many of these writers is low,” a conclusion based on conventional expectations for gender stereotypes (145). Moreover, as Gregg’s essay demonstrates, recent changes in consumption and love influenced this 1920s typology of gender identities. In fact, it is almost as if Collins cannot help playing the consumer as he envisions the *Nation* women as a set of female types and debates: “Which of these women should I… lik[e] to companion?” (147).

Two years before Collins fantasized about his ideal wife, *Harper’s Bazaar* published Anita Loos’s first installment of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, in which blonde protagonist Lorelei Lee considers whom she would like to companion. *Blondes* too is preoccupied with the fate of American women in the 1920s and satirizes oppressive female stereotypes along with the consumer culture that produces them. As Lorelei sorts through her gentlemen friends, hunting for an appropriately wealthy companion, Loos reveals how new models of love and consumption in the 1920s were linked to the nation’s (and *The Nation’s*) desire to categorize women within a restrictive system of gender identities. Even in her title, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Loos acknowledges a system of gender typology in which consumers select which lover they prefer. Aware of these commercial models of courtship and marriage, Lorelei challenges gender typology in her husband-hunt by enacting different female stereotypes — insinuating that these gender roles, like the magazines that circulated them, were disposable.

This reading of *Blondes*, then, opposes the idea that consumption is a way for women to overcome pernicious stereotypes, an idea that was rampant in the early twentieth-century and continues to thrive in the twenty-first. Critics of gender in the last ten years have looked to consumerism as a method of freeing women from destructive gender identities, insisting that consumer activities allow women to override outmoded stereotypes with new ones. *Blondes* forces us to reconsider this line of thought, asking whether female participation in capitalism and commodification can actually free women from an oppressive system of gender expectations.

Candace Bushnell interprets consumer culture as a positive force for feminists when she reads Lorelei as a “genuine gold digger” who represents female liberation through consumption (xi). For Bushnell, Lorelei portrays a “female version of a Horatio Alger protagonist,” and her success reveals that even women without brains can marry into the upper class (xvi). Interpreting Lorelei’s marriage as a gold-digger’s success story, however, ignores Loos’s criticism of a 1920s consumer culture that generated harmful gender stereotypes. Ultimately, Bushnell’s reading reflects a branch of feminism that stubbornly insists on practicing gendered consumption to free women from patriarchal oppression — even
though Loos satirizes capitalism’s version of gender identities. At the same time, Bushnell also points us towards Blondes’s history of misinterpretation and stereotyping. To read Blondes solely as a gold-digger's memoir is to fall into the trap of stereotyping Lorelei and to overlook a complex system of 1920s love and gender typologies at work in the novel.

Bushnell is not alone in her attempts to typecast Blondes. Over a decade after Blondes was published, William Empson interpreted the novel’s focus on 1920s love as tragedy. In a poem titled “Reflections on Anita Loos,” Empson describes a world where “Love rules” (l. 7) and women are required to meet love’s standards of “bound feet” and “wasp waists” (l. 14). A generation later, Susan Hegeman would reject Empson’s interpretation, arguing that Lorelei’s status as a flapper allows her to maintain sexual ambiguity in a time period when marriage was being redefined. Hegeman characterizes Blondes as a “modernist narrative” that celebrates 1920s changes in women’s roles, sex, and work (526). Jonathan Silverman optimismistically reads Blondes as a “Cinderella story” (560), believing that Loos’s story upholds the vision that anyone can dream about equality (566). Similarly, for Rhonda Pettit, Blondes is also a success story, but she argues that the dumb-blonde’s happy ending causes Loos’s satire to “backfir[e]” (76). While these analyses shed new light on gender roles in the 1920s, they also reveal a scholarly inclination to pair Lorelei with her appropriate stereotype: tragic victim, heroine, modern woman, flapper, feminist, dumb-blonde, or Cinderella-figure.

Efforts to categorize Lorelei also reflect scholarly attempts to fit the novel itself into a literary typology. Empson describes Blondes as a tragedy; a generation later disagrees, labeling Blondes as modernist narrative, feminist manifesto, success story, and romantic comedy. In fact, the question of Blondes’s genre has become so convoluted that it seems as though Loos’s novel refuses to be labeled with any genre at all, suggesting that genre itself is symptomatically limited when it comes to modern problems of gender. Without placing Blondes in a finite category, I suggest we read the novel as a satire that defies popular stereotypes. When Lorelei flouts typical gender expectations, she asks readers to identify the social history of gender and the power structures at work – the power structures that enforce consumer ideologies, that sort women into gender typologies, and that declare militant suffragettes unfit for wifedom. From this perspective, we can read Blondes as a novel that temporarily disrupts a hegemonic system of gender roles and forces readers to rethink their own expectations.

Examining Blondes’s criticism of a 1920s system of disposable female stereotypes first involves comparing Loos’s work with that of another (in)famous 1920s female writer, Dorothy Parker. Reading Loos in dialectical juxtaposition with Parker demonstrates how 1920s gender typology not only represents a vehicle of satire in Blondes, but also serves as a source of contemporary cultural anxieties about love and marriage. Though Lorelei can manipulate contemporary stereotypes, she cannot escape them, since Lorelei becomes a wife and mother after marrying Henry Spoffard. Marriage offers little closure in Lorelei’s struggle with restrictive gender stereotypes, which is why Loos’s sequel, But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes – a book that is often overlooked as a casual afterthought to Blondes – continues to play with the problem of gender typologies first configured in Blondes.
In *Brunettes*, Loos persists in her skepticism of love, drawing a bleak picture of marriage and underscoring that, for American women in the 1920s, love, like politics or shopping, was a double-bind shaped by patriarchal power structures and oppressive gender expectations.

**Ain’t We Got Fun?: Reading Loos Through Parker’s Female Stereotypes**

The satirical gender stereotypes in Loos and Parker’s work reflect a national culture in transition. Not unlike today’s debates surrounding marriage and gay rights, at the time of Loos and Parker’s writing, conflicting ideas about gender and love challenged conventional definitions of marriage. Changes in love were synonymous with the decade’s unbridled mass consumerism so that many new love models of the 1920s reflected popular consumer ideology, encouraging compatibility and personal satisfaction in marriage. This growing concern for self-satisfaction within love challenged traditional ideas about marriage and female obligations. New love models materialized, aligning marriage with consumer values, so that marrying to achieve personal satisfaction was just as important as marrying to fulfill social responsibility. For example, the Companionate Marriage model restructuring gender roles within a union “that depended... on emotional compatibility, personal happiness, and satisfaction” – similar to the consumer’s preoccupation with desire and choice-making (Koritz 55). Because new love models like Companionate Marriage promoted emotional and sexual congruity within marriage, many believed that they also promoted promising new social identities for women. For Parker, however, these new female identities were anything but promising, and she repeatedly criticized formulaic gender stereotypes in her writing.

In *Making Love Modern*, Nina Miller argues that Parker’s stereotypes participate in a love model called “Modern Love,” a model that opposed optimistic love models like Companionate Marriage that “presupposed that gender equality was an accomplished fact” (109). Instead, Modern Lovers were determined by a “set of common sociological types” (Miller 110). In addition, Miller argues that Parker’s work appealed to contemporary readers because of her refined style, and suggests that the popularity of Parker’s work was in its “daring sexuality and... sophisticated tone (which was feminine bitchiness revealed)” (118). If Parker’s success was to write about repressive gender stereotypes in a sophisticated tone, then Loos’s success was to write about them in a decisively unsophisticated tone. In *Blondes*, Lorelei’s dumb-blonde narrative contains so many misspelled words, sentence fragments, and malapropisms that, after Loos finished her first draft, H. L. Mencken informed her that *Blondes* "mak[es] fun of sex" (Loos xli). For Loos, however, *Blondes* was more than an attempt to deride the female sex. In Lorelei’s character, Loos presents her readers with a melting pot of female stereotypes, forcing them to ask, “What definition of ‘sex’ is required to make Mencken’s statement true?” In other words, in a nation where the consumer market dictated cultural definitions of sex, love, and marriage, both Parker and Loos wrote in styles that challenged commodified gender stereotypes.

Miller goes on to compare Parker’s career as “the most sardonic (and luckless) lover on literary record” (109) with Loos’s career, stressing that the “point is not to reduce [these female writers] to the innocuous and thoroughly appropriated figures that patriarchal power
brokers” used to characterize them, “but rather to try to account for their enormous success and popularity” (118). Although Miller presents a fascinating comparison of Loos and Parker in terms of their status as female authors, she does not explicitly compare their work, which illuminates a surprising image of love and gender in the 1920s.

In 1921, Parker published a series of poems called “Figures in American Folklore” in Life magazine that satirized common gender identities. This series consists of short, snappy poems on different social stereotypes including: The Tired Businessman, The Actress, The Author (who is unsurprisingly male), and The Society Leader. Similarly, a year later, Parker published a series in Life on “Figures in Popular Literature” that includes: The Sheik, The Flapper, The Drab Heroine, The Western Hero, The Glad Girl, and The Boy Savant – again describing each Popular Figure with playful rhymes and caustic wit. In these poems, Parker satirizes a 1920s typology of pre-packaged gender identities that would be similarly ridiculed by Loos two years later in Blondes. In fact, reading Blondes in dialectical juxtaposition with the “Popular Figures” poems reveals how Lorelei impersonates and manipulates these stereotypes to her advantage, ultimately challenging reader expectations of love and its corresponding gender roles.

“The Flapper”

To many, Lorelei is the paragon of the 1920s flapper figure – a figure that Parker describes in her “Popular Figures” series as a sharp-tongued, headstrong girl who is “not what Grandma used to be” (l. 3). Attributing the popularity of The Flapper’s formulaic stereotype to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Parker observes that The Flapper is always “The fairest of the fair” (l. 2), although her “manners cause a scene” (l. 6) and “All spotlights focus on her pranks” (l. 11-13). The poem is coupled with a picture of The Flapper giggling alongside two young tuxedoed men – presumably the males who believe her to be “the fairest of the fair.” Parker’s Flapper presents a standardized gender identity for young girls who wished to defy traditional gender expectations and assert their independence. At the same time, The Flapper was also a frivolous, promiscuous, and harmless prankster seeking public attention.

Lorelei’s bobbed hair, collection of wealthy male admirers, and fascination with Parisian evening gowns suggest that she embodies Parker’s Flapper figure. Not only is Lorelei constantly treated as “the fairest of the
fair” by her gentlemen friends, but she also has manners that “cause a scene,” which Mr. Eismen hopes to remedy by sending Lorelei to Europe with a thick “book of Etiquette [sic]” (Loos 23). Also like Parker’s Flapper, Lorelei adores playing pranks. In France, she mischievously schemes to tease two French lawyers with an imitation diamond tiara and decides to let Lady Francis Beekman pay the bills. Lorelei also uses her pranks as an excuse for her outrageous spending. After her fiancé, Mr. Henry Spoffard, hops a train, ready to break off their engagement because of Lorelei’s overspending, Lorelei informs him that it was all “a little test that [she] and Dorothy had thought up, more in spite of fun than anything else” (119). However, though Lorelei excuses her overspending as a harmless prank, her obsessive shopping indicates that her ideas about consumption, heterosexual love, and gender roles are very different from “what Grandma’s used to be.” In her diary, Lorelei writes about her visit to the Eiffel Tower, explaining to her reader that “if you turn your back on a monument they have in the middle and look up, you can see none other than Coty’s sign” (52). Thus, during her time in Paris, Lorelei plays The Flapper and turns her back on history, tradition, and Grandma so that she can admire an advertisement for a perfume company.

Whether Lorelei is, indeed, a flapper continues to be a source of controversy for readers, and critics disagree whether this particular female stereotype accurately suits Lorelei’s character. On the one hand, Patricia Raub believes that Lorelei is “a flapper through and through” (117), Hegeman argues that Lorelei is “a quintessential example of the archetype of ‘20s femininity: the flapper” (536), and Silverman describes the blonde as “an empty headed flapper” (549). On the other hand, Jason Barrett-Fox argues that Lorelei is neither “flapper nor suffragette” (221), and Pettit and T.E. Blom suggest that even though she has bobbed hair and practices conspicuous consumption, Lorelei is not a flapper. The critical disagreement over whether Lorelei plays the flapper stereotype reveals the extent of Loos’s satire. Throughout Blondes, Lorelei performs one artificial female stereotype after another, ultimately making herself unclassifiable. As a result, Blondes confounds reader expectations for gender and satirizes the performativity of conventional gender roles in the 1920s.

“The Drab Heroine”

Two months after The Flapper made her appearance in Life, Parker published a poem describing another female stereotype: The Drab Heroine. If The Flapper was characterized by her sexual liberation in mass culture, then The Drab Heroine, in contrast, was characterized by her inability to enjoy her female sexuality outside of the home. Pictured as an exhausted-looking woman surrounded by piles of dirty dishes and laundry, Parker’s Drab Heroine is “A kitchen drudge, whom
all ignore/ Who leads a life entrancing/ As Cinderella’s was before/ She took up ballroom dancing” (l. 14-17). Parker aligns The Drab Heroine with domesticity, far from the sex and glamour of The Flapper. She describes The Drab Heroine as a Cinderella figure confined to the home and unable to participate in public, heterosexual activities like ballroom dancing.

While it is hard to imagine Lorelei denying herself a dance, she does frequently imitate the domesticity of The Drab Heroine to manipulate her male suitors and their mothers. Just before her meeting with Mrs. Spoffard, Lorelei purposefully dresses in “quite a simple little organdy gown that [she] ha[s] ripped all of the trimming off of” in order to appear “old fashioned” (Loos 93-4). She then informs the older woman “that [she] d[oes] not seem to like all of the flappers... because [she] was brought up to be more old fashioned” (94). In this manner, Lorelei quickly discards her flapper clothing and characteristics to present herself as an old-fashioned Drab Heroine, underscoring the performativity of both gender stereotypes in the process.

In other scenes, Loos suggests that Lorelei’s imitation of Parker’s Drab Heroine succeeds only because it feeds into societal expectations and male desires that associate women with domestic spaces. Just as The Drab Heroine is confined to a kitchen full of dirty dishes in Life’s illustration, Lorelei is constantly returned to the space of the home by her gentlemen friends. Shortly after he meets Lorelei, British author Gerry Lamson plans for the blonde “to go home to papa in Arkansas,” assuring her that “he will send [her] books to read so that [she] will not get lonesome there” (15). Likewise, two months later, Lorelei rides through a Viennese park with Henry while the song “Mama Love Papa [sic]” is “playing in the distant [sic]” (93). Lorelei tells us that the 1923 song had “just reached Vienna and they all seem to be crazy” (93) about it, demonstrating how mass culture – what Roland Barthes calls a “machine for showing desire” – determines and regulates domestic gender roles based on 1920s love models (136-7). At the end of their romantic ride, Henry takes Lorelei “home to the hotel” (93, emphasis mine). The popular song not only envisions how the couple will practice appropriate heterosexual desire but, coupled with Mr. Spoffard’s actions of seeing Lorelei “home,” also foreshadows Lorelei’s future as a wife and mother. Lorelei thus successfully manipulates her suitors by modeling her character on consumer ideologies and male desires that religiously associate females with domesticity. Loos underscores the absurdity of these gender expectations in an extreme example when, after shooting her boss Mr. Jennings, Lorelei escapes charges for murder with the defense that “practically all [the jurors] had had either a mother or a sister” (25). Once again, Lorelei plays The Drab Heroine, this time to distance herself from the character of “murderer,” and her performance is so convincing that the judge not only acquits Lorelei but invites her to meet his sister – another attempt to coax the blonde back into the home.
senators in Washington are reading which really cheers you up” (27). Loos satirizes the fact that many of Lorelei’s gentlemen friends demand that she be happy all the time and the idea that happiness itself can be achieved with a book. Even with Henry, Lorelei maintains extreme cheeriness and repeatedly tells us in her diary that Mrs. Spoffard “seems to think that [she] is so full of nothing but sunshine” (98, 111). In fact, Lorelei claims that “bringing sunshine into the life of Henry… is all a girl had ought to try to do” (123). What’s more, like the smiling girl beneath the automobile, Lorelei’s constant cheerfulness seems to be inherently linked with mass consumption. For instance, after her terrible date with Willie Gwynn, Lorelei plans to “order some new evening gowns to cheer [herself] up” (14). Likewise, when Lorelei is dissatisfied with Mr. Eisman’s birthday present, she develops a headache but is “quite cheered up” when he returns with “a very very beautiful bracelet of square cut diamonds” (8). It is clear, then, that Lorelei not only regularly plays The Glad Girl to adhere to 1920s gender expectations and maintain a cheerful disposition but also roots this cheerfulness in 1920s consumer values.

Lorelei was not the only blonde to play The Glad Girl in popular literature in the 1920s. In Parker’s short story “Big Blonde” (1929), Hazel Motes must regularly play The Glad Girl, even after her failed attempt at suicide. In fact, the contrast between Hazel’s inability in life to succeed at anything, even committing suicide, and Lorelei’s constant success, has led Pettit to argue that Parker’s story is a response to the inaccuracies in Blondes. Moreover, for Pettit, one of the only similarities between the two stories is the fact that both authors attempt to “reify an offensive stereotype – the dumb blonde” (82). Yet, to read “Big Blonde”
female stereotypes both criticizes commercial gender identities and disrupts the hegemonic system that circulated these identities. Throughout Blondes, Lorelei constantly switches from one social stereotype to another – The Flapper, The Drab Heroine, The Glad Girl – and in doing so, disallows herself to be placed in any one female stereotype. In this manner, Blondes satirizes the irksome durability of gender typologies, just as critics today use these typologies to categorize Lorelei in her appropriate historical stereotype. The incongruent analyses of Lorelei's character suggest that the blonde protagonist refuses to be stereotyped, defying readers' expectations. Barrett-Fox claims that the success of Loos's satire is that “To fight Lorelei, men would need to fight their own expectations, their own visions of female potential” (240). Yet, in light of the ongoing disagreement over Lorelei's character, it appears that Lorelei challenges all “visions of female potential” – men's and women's alike from both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

It is also significant to note that although she can perform and manipulate The Flapper, The Drab Heroine, and The Glad Girl, Lorelei cannot escape the typological system she exploits. In Blondes, Lorelei can defy a rigid, commodified system of social typology by manipulating different female stereotypes, but she cannot escape the gendered demands of each stereotype she takes on. As a result, Lorelei’s narrative also reveals contemporary anxieties surrounding these gender stereotypes and new love models in the 1920s.
Orchids Really Make a Girl Think of a Funeral: Anxieties Surrounding 1920s Love

If we continue to read *Blondes* in dialectical juxtaposition with “Big Blonde,” the differences between Hazel and Lorelei illuminate not only a stubborn system of 1920s love and gender typologies, but also a deluge of contemporary anxieties linked to these typologies and the consumer ideology that regulated them. Consumer-driven models of love like Companionate Marriage challenged traditional gender roles so that if it was important for the modern woman to marry, it was equally important that she choose the right lover. For many women of the 1920s, “their marital success ...[wa]s measured... by their emotional and sexual compatibility with their chosen mates” (Ross 277). However, if this was the case, then there was also an older generation that questioned whether women practicing new models of love would be able to conform to traditional gender roles. In other words, could modern women make “faithful and frugal wives” (Koritz 38)? As a result, anxieties surrounding conspicuous consumption, choice-making, unrealistic marriage models, and infidelity accompanied the rise of 1920s love typologies. Moreover, these anxieties can be seen as central themes of Parker’s “Big Blonde” and Loos’s *Blondes* when the two works are read in dialogue with one another.

Part of Hazel’s inability to escape The Glad Girl stereotype stems from her failure to practice conspicuous consumption: consumption of appropriate quality and in appropriate quantity. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen proposes that individuals practice conspicuous consumption, or the “consumption of the more desirable things,” in order to distinguish themselves as part of the leisure class (50). Veblen also warns that the “failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes the mark of inferiority and demerit” (53). As consumerism increased in the 1920s, the need to consume not only class-appropriate goods but also class-appropriate romances was vital to the social success of the modern woman. In the marriage market, love was a commodity that signaled class and, if consumed in correct quality and quantity, also promised happiness. However, throughout “Big Blonde,” Hazel remains uninterested in conspicuous consumption. In regards to money, Hazel never “plan[s] ahead of any day” and “her wants [are] few” (Parker, 288). Of the money she does receive, Hazel decides that she “might as well put money in the bank as have it lying around” (288). Hazel’s savings further symbolize her disregard for conspicuous consumption, as Veblen tells us that “savings are a less effective means of advertisement” of social status (62). Moreover, Hazel not only fails to advertise her class through material commodities but also flounders when it comes to conspicuously consuming love. At the start of “Big Blonde,” we learn that Hazel has had “Other offers of marriage” from “serious men who had visited the dress establishment as buyers” – obviously men with money – but she turned them all down because she does not wish to leave New York (Parker 276). Hazel disregards the ideology of conspicuous consumption, rejecting financially-advantageous marriage proposals, and as a result, begins her steady decline from consumer to commodity as she passes from one boyfriend to the next, always longing for “one man, permanently, to pay the bills” (290).

Hazel’s poor conspicuous consumption makes Lorelei’s success all the more immediate. In fact, throughout *Blondes* Lorelei...
regularly conflates romance and consumerism to manipulate love as if it were a commodity. Aware of the fact that material goods reflect class, Lorelei practices conspicuous consumption through the gifts she receives from her lovers: diamonds from Eisman and a tiara from Piggie. The crafty blonde even scolds her friend Dorothy for “travel[ing] all over Europe” and coming “home with... [only] a bangle” (Loos 102). Later on, Lorelei tells Dorothy, “kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and saffire bracelet lasts forever” – as if the kiss and the bracelet are both two separate products to choose from and Lorelei wants to ensure that her choice will retain its retail value (55). In addition, unlike Hazel who laughs off marriage proposals that require her to leave New York, Lorelei repeatedly applies the ideology of conspicuous consumption to her own marriage proposals. Roland Barthes identifies the love letter as a standard object of love “charged with longing to signify desire,” arguing that “for the lover the letter has no tactile value” (157-158). On the contrary, Lorelei believes that a love letter holds considerable material value for the recipient, and after Henry’s marriage proposal arrives in the mail, Lorelei immediately takes the letter “to the photographers and... ha[s] quite a lot of photographs taken” (Loos 97). She adds that she has “not wasted all of her time on Henry” because she has “some letters from Henry which w[ill] come in very very handy if [she] d[o]es not marry Henry” (99). Running off copies of the love letter like the paste copies of her diamond tiara, Lorelei turns the letter – and the love it signifies – into a marketable object with significant financial value. If women of the 1920s were preoccupied with consuming conspicuously, they were also worried about whether their consumption of commodities and of lovers would ensure the kinds of marriages that new love models promised. Amy Koritz argues that the rise of consumption in the 1920s made a woman searching for a husband susceptible to “manipulation by unscrupulous advertisers,” requiring her to “constantly exercise careful judgment in the face of vast numbers of commodities” (54). Similarly, through Hazel and Lorelei, Parker and Loos warn the modern woman to be suspicious of love models that are too perfect. After she marries Herbie, Hazel realizes that her own expectations for an ideal marriage are unrealistic. As time goes by, Hazel becomes “completely bewildered by what happen[s] to their marriage. First they were lovers; then, it seemed without transition, they were enemies” (Parker 279). Furthermore, as her marriage becomes less and less ideal, Hazel becomes more confused and frantic. She only “want[s] a sober tender husband, prompt at dinner, punctual at work” (280). When Hazel recognizes that Herbie will never be her ideal husband, she becomes disgusted with marriage models that promise personal happiness and cannot bear to look at magazine “accounts of neat, companionable marriage and living happily ever after” (280).

Where Hazel places too much faith in new love typologies of the 1920s, Lorelei places hardly any – if any at all. Lorelei’s perspective of 1920s love and marriage again reflects the modern woman’s unease about making the right choice in a marriage partner. After she accepts Henry’s marriage proposal, Lorelei contemplates her “choices,” comparing the utopian aspects of 1920s models of love with contemporary anxieties over choice-making. As Lorelei debates whether or not to marry Henry, she worries about novelty, personal happiness, and the unrealistic expectations of
Companionate Marriage – similar to Hazel’s fears after her vision of a perfect marriage crumbles. As Lorelei imagines marriage with Henry, she despises the fact that Henry is “a gentlemen [that] is always on the verge of coming in and out of the house” and dreams about her ideal companion, “a gentleman who knows how to look and act like Count Salm and who has got money besides” (Loos 98). She complains that “when a girls mind gets to thinking about such a romantic thing, a girls mind does not seem to know whether to marry [sic]” (98). As Lorelei dreams about romance, she acknowledges that her ideal marriage companion is not a realistic option, suggesting that models of love like Companionate Marriage that promote consumerist values and conspicuous consumption are unrealistic “romantic things.” Lorelei also implies that the only way to sustain these idealistic visions of love, marriage, personal happiness, and gender equality is to guarantee that Henry is not always coming “in and out of the house” (98). That is, Lorelei wishes to find a companion who satisfies her sexually (to whom she’s not married), and a second companion who satisfies her financially (and who does not unexpectedly interrupt her and companion #1).

Lorelei’s hope that Henry will stay out of the house, suggests that new 1920s love models promoted personal satisfaction by implicitly encouraging infidelity – another anxiety surrounding the changes in 1920s love and marriage. Both Hazel’s unsuccessful marriage and Lorelei’s (potentially) successful one underscore problems with novelty and infidelity in 1920s love. For the conspicuous consumer, novelty was a way to avoid the unfavorable consequences of Veblen’s “failure to consume.” However, the consumer’s obsession with novelty also produced a culture that was “both ‘in love with love’ and unable to prevent [itself] from ‘outgrowing’ any particular love” (Coontz 178). As a result, coupled with the anxiety of practicing conspicuous consumption and making the right choice in a marriage partner was the ominous threat of infidelity – a sense that the marriage would lose its novelty and partners would seek love elsewhere. For Hazel, the threat of infidelity becomes startlingly real shortly after she and Herbie tie the knot. Hazel dreams of a husband who will come home on time for hot dinners and comfortable evenings, but instead, “there [are] longer and longer intervals between [Herbie’s] leaving his office and his arrival at the apartment” (Parker 279). In fact, at one point, Herbie gets so angry with Hazel that he “rushes out [of the apartment] and is gone for two days” (282). Hazel is constantly left waiting in her apartment for her unreliable and unfaithful husband to come home; however, she refuses to practice the kind of infidelity that Lorelei imagines in her daydreams about Count Salm. Ironically enough, it is Hazel’s faithfulness – her willingness to wait for Herbie to come home to dinner and her refusal to find intimacy with another man – that causes her marriage to fall apart.

Unlike Hazel, Lorelei eagerly seeks opportunities to be unfaithful to Henry, suggesting that infidelity was one way to compensate for the impractical expectations of new love models like Companionate Marriage. Lorelei’s devious schemes speak to contemporary fears that consumerist values, like novelty and personal satisfaction, produce women who are “unable to prevent [themselves] from ‘outgrowing’ any particular love” (Coontz 178). Lorelei’s obsession with novelty is evident in the countless times she breaks her promises and keeps men waiting. Even though she
promises “Piggie that [she] would always stay in London” (Loos 49), Lorelei leaves England and admits that “Piggie does not even know we have gone,” but she has grown tired of Piggy and the fifty orchids he has sent her make Lorelei “think of a funeral” (Loos 50). Although she is initially satisfied receiving Piggie’s orchids, the romance has lost its novelty and Lorelei keeps Piggie waiting in London while she searches for another male suitor. Lorelei also leaves Gerry waiting for her in New York and keeps Mr. Bartlett waiting for her on the deck of a steamship. Where Hazel must play the faithful wife in her marriage and wait for Herbie to get home, Lorelei exercises power over her male lovers by keeping them waiting. As a result, Lorelei manages to play consumer and choose her marriage partner; however, like Hazel, she is unable to marry her ideal companion and, therefore, enters into a marriage in which she is sure to be unfaithful. In fact, Lorelei’s feelings about meals at the Spoffard house foreshadow problems in her marriage. She is displeased when dinner is “practically the same thing” as lunch and admits that “by supper all the novelty seemed to wear off” (112).

When put in dialectical juxtaposition with one another, *Blondes* and “Big Blonde” construct a more complete picture of changes in love and gender for women of the 1920s. On the one hand, this juxtaposition reveals how Lorelei plays The Flapper, The Drab Heroine, and The Glad Girl to temporarily disrupt power structures that enforce rigid gender typologies. On the other hand, it also exposes the growing unease surrounding 1920s love models and the modern woman’s ability to achieve the nuptial success that these models promised. Both Lorelei and Hazel must negotiate the demands of conspicuous consumption, their concern over making the right choice, the false promises of new marriage models, and the looming danger of infidelity. In both works, the blonde protagonists recognize that 1920s mass-produced models of love, for the modern woman, were unrealistic, bleak, and certain to disappoint. From this perspective, Lorelei’s marriage at the end of *Blondes* is not a happy ending, but rather a dismal one that presents a darker view of marriage in the 1920s wherein women are trapped within the performative demands of paradoxical gender expectations.

**Haply to Wive and Thrive: Love and Marriage as Performance in Brunettes**

Although Lorelei’s diary entries ended in 1925, Loos’s criticism of 1920s gender conventions did not. Loos continued to write on love and marriage, and two years after *Blondes*, Loos published *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*. *Brunettes* revisits the problem of gender typology first constructed in *Blondes* and demonstrates how marriage remained a formidable obstacle for the modern woman.

*Brunettes* emerged in 1927 with the same clever wit and satirical humor as *Blondes* but continues to receive little critical acclaim. Among the few scholars who have examined *Brunettes*, Faye Hamille mentions the novel in her analysis of how Loos’s work comments on low and highbrow culture, Miller investigates how Brunettes depicts the Algonquian Round Table, and Silverman briefly acknowledges Lorelei’s desire for a career in *Brunettes* to argue that, after marriage, Lorelei “still harbors dreams of self-fulfillment outside of her husband” (563). Silverman also argues that the fact that *Brunettes* is “not a further exploration of... [Lorelei’s] story, but a retelling of Dorothy’s story” indicates that “Lorelei has tried to keep her modernity, but her new husband’s identity has subsumed
it” (563). Yet, although Silverman interprets Brunettes’s focus on Dorothy as a sign of Lorelei’s shrinking modernity, in its own light, Dorothy’s story significantly adds to Lorelei’s previous critique of modern love and marriage. If Blondes, in dialogue with Parker’s work, reveals how the modern woman might manipulate love and gender stereotypes in the 1920s, then Brunettes dismally reminds us that the marital expectations for modern women remained unchanged.

The kind of love Dorothy practices is very different from that of Lorelei. Dorothy neither practices conspicuous consumption nor understands love as a commodity, and Lorelei even scolds Dorothy for falling “madly in love with the kind of gentlemen who were born without money and have not made any since” (Loos 146). Dorothy’s childhood experience in “the ‘Greater Pacific Street Fair and Carnaval Company’ [sic]” (147) has made her deeply suspicious of idealistic models of love and marriage; she believes that if love is a commodity, then it is “over-advertised [sic]” (161). When Dorothy moves in with the Le Vinos, a married couple who performs for the carnival, she is apprehensive about their happy marriage and “ideal” home life (155). She detests that the Le Vinos “still tal[k] baby talk to each other” and “wonder[s] if she w[ill] ever reach the point of falling in love with somebody, and be just as disgusting as Pearl Le Vino” (161). When Dorothy moves in with the Le Vinos, a married couple who performs for the carnival, she is apprehensive about their happy marriage and “ideal” home life (155). She detests that the Le Vinos “still tal[k] baby talk to each other” and “wonder[s] if she w[ill] ever reach the point of falling in love with somebody, and be just as disgusting as Pearl Le Vino” (161). Dorothy seems just as dismayed with the romantic ideals of 1920s love as Lorelei, who believes that her ideal companion does not exist. Therefore, it is no surprise that when Charlie Breene “shower[s] her [Dorothy] with orchids, and delightful love notes,” instead of playing along, Dorothy promptly rejects him (208).

Though she does not practice love like a conspicuous consumer and refuses to perform different stereotypes like Lorelei, Dorothy’s constant skepticism of love further satirizes the shortcomings of 1920s love, marriage, and gender expectations that Lorelei exploits. From watching her father’s carnival act, “The Lover’s Leap,” Dorothy understands courtship and marriage as public performances. During each Lover’s Leap, a “Blonde Girl” performs a “loop-the-loop” in a small automobile and then takes “quite a long jump” to meet her lover – Mr. Shaw – waiting on the landing (151). The most ironic part of the act is that, while Mr. Shaw is the star, it is the Blonde Girl who is required to make the leap and, moreover, the carnival must constantly replace its Blonde Girl “because after... [she] ha[s] made a few Lover’s Leaps her backbone... start[s] to collapse” (151). It is clear then that not only must the disposable Blonde Girl do all the work in love, but she must also take all the risks and suffer serious injuries. Therefore, from the early years of her life, Dorothy’s understanding of a woman’s role in love is one of skillful performance and extreme pain. As the novel progresses, Dorothy continues to learn more about love from her father’s carnival acts. When Dorothy is fifteen, her father remarries and has “quite a novel wedding in a lion’s cage,” indicating that, in his wedding, Mr. Shaw demands the same spectacular performativity from his new wife as he did from the Blonde Girl (152). Moreover, after his new wife prohibits him from performing anymore Lover’s Leaps, “all Mr. Shaw c[an] do to amuse... the public [i]s to take out a marriage license in every town they [go] to, and be married in public, in a baloon [sic], or a cage full of tigers, to Mrs. Shaw by the local minister” (153). Following in her father’s footsteps, Dorothy’s marriages in Brunettes are similarly staged as performances to please
crowds. In her first marriage, although she no longer wants to marry Lester, Dorothy does anyway because “she could not spoil the whole afternoon for... [her friends], for they had their minds all made up to see a wedding” (212).

While Dorothy deeply distrusts 1920s models of love, she recognizes that courtship and marriage are performances that women are required to make in society. Thus, for Dorothy and Lorelei, marriage symbolizes a trap for the modern woman. Just as Dorothy’s stepmother is married in a lion’s cage, and then later a tiger’s cage, marriage for Dorothy becomes a cage. Dorothy is unhappy in her married life with Lester, but when she tries to get a divorce, Charlie Breene’s mother worries that Charlie will try to marry Dorothy. Mrs. Breene pays her lawyer Mr. Abels to “pretend to help Dorothy get a divorce, but in reality, keep her within the bounds of matrimony” (215). It is not until after Dorothy travels to Paris, attends the funeral of her husband, spends a night in prison, and sues the Breene family that she can truly escape the “bounds” of her first marriage – so that she can speed-walk right back down the aisle and marry Charlie Breene. Lorelei justifies Dorothy’s second marriage by telling us that “Dorothy fell in love” and suggests that true love and egalitarian marriage are possible for women of the 1920s (241). If, however, we interpret Dorothy’s second marriage as a successful representation of Companionsate Marriage, then it is also important to note that the only other successful marriages in Brunettes are represented by the Le Vinos, traveling carnival performers, and Mademoiselle Dupont, who idolizes the “lavatoire” left to her by her dead husband (227). In other words, if Brunettes celebrates Companionsate Marriage, it does so in the triumph of a divorced woman, bizarre carnival performers, and a strong-minded female janitor.

**A Girl Always Pays: Conclusion**

Placing Blondes in dialectical juxtaposition with Parker’s “Popular Figures” series and “Big Blonde” unveils the object of Loos’s satire: a hegemonic system of 1920s love and gender typologies, which included new marriage models and their gender stereotypes. At the same time, Loos’s satire speaks to ongoing discourses on gender equality in the twenty-first century.

Like the wave of Americans who believed that the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment marked the end of the women’s rights movement, many today believe we live in a post-feminist world where gender equality has already been achieved (Dicker 3). For others, the idea that feminism is a thing of the past undermines the current fight for female equality. Rory Cooke Dicker and Alison Piepmeier stress that “even thirty years after the start of the women’s movement [of the 1970s], the lack of women in power is one sign of a deeply patriarchal culture that perpetuates sexist ideologies and systems” (5). In 2010, women in the US outnumbered men 157.2 million to 153.2 million; yet, in the same year, only 18.3 percent of the members of Congress were women. With these numbers in mind, it is not surprising that, as of November 2013, Barack Obama had played 145 rounds of golf since becoming president, but only 2 percent of these rounds were played with a woman (“Harper’s Index”). Susan Estrich claims that “at the rate we’re going, it will be another 270 years before women achieve parity as top managers in corporations and 500 years before we achieve equality in Congress” (Qtd. in Dicker 4).
on gender equality associate manipulative patriarchal power relations with modern consumer ideology. In The Aftermath of Feminism, Angela McRobbie scrutinizes a new “girlie” feminism that supposedly empowers women through “pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity from the goods made available by consumer culture” (3). McRobbie’s skepticism of a capitalistic “girlie” feminism that promotes empowerment through the consumption of commodities forces us to question if today’s gendered consumption is all that different from Loos’s satiric target: a harmful 1920s consumer ideology that threatened to reduce women to commercial stereotypes. This question also forces us to consider if gender identities will ever be able to exist uncontaminated by commodification. Michelle Fine suspects that one of the only true “spots where self-consciously gendered...politics can pollinate among strangers, unencumbered by the suffocating grasp of commodification,” are women’s restrooms (xi-xii). It is fitting then that one of the only females in Loos’s novels to succeed in love and to squelch capitalistic endeavors to tear down her own public restroom is a female janitor.

Revisiting works from the 1920s illuminates an ongoing relationship among American consumerism, love, and gender typologythat continues to constructcommercial female stereotypes. Nation writer, Sue Shelton White, may have said it best when she described marriage as a double-bind that is “too much of a compromise; it lops off a woman’s life as an individual. Yet the reunification too is a lopping-off” (17). White finishes by declaring, “We chose between the frying pan and the fire – both very uncomfortable” (17). Reading Blondes and Brunettes correctly – that is, alongside one another in the context of existing patriarchal typologies (that still exist today) – reveals how these novels not only satirize but also potentially disrupt the double bind White describes. The true success of Loos’s satire is Lorelei’s ability to manipulate disposable female stereotypes to defy hegemonic systems of love and gender in the 1920s (at least temporarily) so that ultimately the blonde confounds reader expectations by refusing to be psychoanalyzed. But then again... who cares what the psychoanalyst says?
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(Endnotes)

1 White, 52.

2 Elaine Showalter argues that 1925 is the “turning point” (9) in the women’s movement where feminism in America started to become “irrelevant” (12).

3 Judith Butler explains that “naturalized heterosexuality” (22) is achieved “through the practices of heterosexual desire” (23). Thus, it makes sense that 1920s consumer culture advertising new models of heterosexual desire influenced changes in female gender roles.

4 For more on recent female stereotypes, see Angela McRobbie’s comments on consumer-driven, “girly” feminism in the twenty-first century (157).

5 The critic who comes the closest, I believe, to correctly categorizing Blondes’s genre, a term that is ambiguous in itself, is Laura Frost, who describes Blondes as a “transitional novel,” neither modernist nor postmodernist (32). For Frost, Blondes opposes traditional literary conventions by experimenting with the language of silent cinema.

6 In 1925, Beatrice Hinkle published “The Chaos of Modern Marriage” in Harper’s Magazine wherein she acknowledges “a violent revolt against the former ideals and customs affecting marriage relations” (Qtd. in Celello 22). Kristen Celello emphasizes that Hinkle’s article demonstrates that by the 1920s “many white, middle-class Americans... had stopped thinking of marriage as a duty and saw it instead as a path to personal happiness” (22).

7 See Stephanie Coontz for more on the consumer attitude that accompanied the rise of mass consumption in the 1920s.

8 Amy Koritz argues that Companionate Marriage became a model in which the “cravings of the style-driven consumer merge[d] with
the rational decision making of the free and autonomous individual” (56).

9 Other love models include what Miller calls “Free Love” and Stephen Sharot’s “Disinterested Love.”

10 In a preface that describes her inspiration for Blondes, Loos illustrates the kind of gendered typology that her novel will go on to satirize. She recalls her time in the silent movies with “a blonde [an early prototype for Lorelei's character] who was being imported to Hollywood to be Doug[las Fairbanks’s] new leading lady” (Loos xxxvii). As she debates the “radical difference” between this blonde actress and herself, Loos categorizes “blondes” in a comical typology of hair color and pokes fun at her male friends who, playing the consumer, choose blondes over brunettes (xxvii). Even Lorelei recognizes that “Gentlemen always seem to remember blondes” (6).

11 Jason Barrett-Fox argues that Loos’s work “helps define sex” (221), but her language is neither that of the “flapper nor suffragette,” leaving us to wonder what type of female her language does belong to (222).

12 In 1929, Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd published Middletown: A Study in American Culture, a study that showed that many working class families would sacrifice necessities, like food, to keep up with car payments.

13 Laurie J. Cella proposes that the “arguably most important” difference between “Big Blonde” and Blondes is that Lorelei narrates her own story (52). Unlike Hazel, Lorelei can perform as a blonde spectacle and master her own narrative.

14 In her time, advertisers even made Lorelei into her own “type.” Katy Peiss describes a 1929 ad for Armand Complexion Powder that asks viewers “Which alluring type are you?” The ad displays eight different types of powder, including the “Lorelei Type” that reads “Blonde and aggressive, she ‘gets her man’” (325).

15 These facts were taken from the United States Census Bureau and the Eagleton Institute of Politics.