

Title: *Why Gentlemen Prefer Blondes is More Relevant Than You Thought*
By Lexi Baty

It is safe to say that most people in America have at least heard of the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* novel-turned-movie adaptation. Starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, this film arguably cemented Monroe's impact on the movie industry forever with her most iconic role as Lorelei Lee. However, most people in my generation and a couple before have not seen the movie itself, despite how ingrained it is in our pop culture. For those who haven't seen the movie, their general understanding of it is based on our understanding of the era it was released in, rather than the plot of the movie itself. Since it was released in the 1950s, a lot of people (including myself) might have assumed on principle that most elements of the movie were really outdated and or problematic. While no movie is perfect, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* being no exception, upon my first and subsequent viewings of the movie, I had trouble finding anything that could be construed as explicitly outdated or problematic. This is not to say that you can't identify certain cultural touchstones and influences from the '50s; you can easily tell it is from that era. It's that a lot of the social commentary and more specifically the depiction of the female leads are not things you would typically expect to be portrayed from something that came from the 1950s. The two primary examples would be the depiction of female friendship between the two female leads and the broader social commentary of women being held to a higher standard than men, a message that still rings true today.

The crux of the story of *Gentlemen* is the bond between Lorelei Lee (Marilyn Monroe) and her best friend Dorothy Shaw (Jane Russell). They are essentially friendship goals in every conceivable way. They have known each other since they were children and work together as showgirls in the entertainment industry. They support each other in every sense of the word, with Lorelei trying to help Dorothy find a viable suitor, working together to obtain and eliminate the incriminating photos of Lorelei and another old, rich man named Sir Francis "Piggy" Beekman (taken by Mr. Malone, Dorothy's love interest), to cheering each other up when they are heartbroken during the number "When Love Goes Wrong Nothing Goes Right" after Lorelei's fiancé cancels their engagement and Mr. Malone betrays Dorothy, to Dorothy going as far as disguising herself as Lorelei during the courtroom scene after Lorelei is accused of stealing a diamond tiara belonging to Piggy's wife. They even have a double wedding at the end of the movie. The amount of loyalty and trust that is evident in their friendship is truly commendable and is something that a lot of people can only dream of having, especially when it's between very different people that manage to get along despite their differences, maybe even because of them.

Also throughout the movie, Dorothy repeatedly defends Lorelei's character whenever it is questioned by Mr. Malone. Mr. Malone and other characters in the movie assume one of two things about Lorelei: that she is a ditzy blonde in distress (what Piggy thinks), or that she is a conniving gold digger that isn't above manipulating unsuspecting men (what her fiancé's father thinks). While some of these assumptions are half true (Lorelei has some oblivious moments, and she does value money when choosing a suitor), she is an intelligent person who does love her fiancé, and Dorothy is the only character who knows that for the entire movie. She tells Mr. Malone

that Lorelei is a wonderful girl once you get to know her, and later remarks on her intelligence when coming up with a plan to steal the photos from Mr. Malone.

There is also a noticeable absence of a love triangle in the movie. A lot of times, writers will throw in a love triangle whether it is necessary or not, especially if there's two leads of the same gender. The title *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* implies a competition of sorts between the blonde Lorelei and the brunette Dorothy. We can infer from the title that the movie is about Lorelei being pursued by several men while Dorothy struggles to win the attention of a man she likes.

However, in this movie, the two leads have their own respective love interests, Lorelei with her rich fiancé Gus and Dorothy with Mr. Malone. Dorothy maintains a strictly platonic, almost business-like relationship with Gus that is evident from the start of the movie and whenever they are on screen together. And Lorelei hardly interacts with Mr. Malone outside of the central conflict of getting the photos back. Whatever interactions between them are filled with fake friendliness or contempt for each other. This is also evident in the lack of concern or competition the girls have towards each other that they would have in a love triangle scenario. The point of all of this is that Lorelei and Dorothy's relationship is so strong that it could not be broken, and by extension, carries the movie.

Another crucial element that truly elevates *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in my eyes is the overall commentary of women being held to a higher standard than men in terms of their character or how they appeal to the men in the story. The first indication of the story's conflict comes from a statement from Dorothy that informs us that Gus's father, Mr. Esmond Sr., does not approve of his engagement with Lorelei for the sole reason that he believes Lorelei is a gold digger only after his son's money. However, Lorelei is leaving for France without Gus, so Gus implores her to be on her best behavior without him to supervise her. And unbeknownst to everyone else, Esmond Sr. hires a private investigator, Mr. Malone, to watch Lorelei's behavior and capture anything that can be construed as scandalous so Gus would cancel their engagement.

This would normally be understandable, if a little drastic, if it weren't for the fact that another character, Piggy was shamelessly flirting with Lorelei despite being a married man. Lorelei has to deal with the repercussions of the mere implication of a scandal whereas Piggy receives a mere slap on the wrist for much worse. Not even his own wife calls him out on his behavior, though it is clear to see that she isn't happy with his conduct around Lorelei.

All of this culminates in Lorelei clearing her name by explaining her logic to Esmond Sr. She points out: "Don't you know that a man being rich is like a girl being pretty? You may not marry a girl just because she's pretty, but my goodness, doesn't it help? And if you had a daughter, wouldn't you rather she didn't marry a poor man? You'd want her to have the most wonderful things in the world, and to be very happy. Well, why is it wrong for me to want those things?" People don't realize that women have to pretend not to want things like money or luxury in order to seem genuine in their affections, not realizing that they can feel both of those things at the same time, as is the case with Lorelei. Lorelei is more straightforward about it, which causes others like Esmond Sr. and Mr. Malone to question her intentions when it comes to Gus.

However, the standard is much lower for men. Men have to be one of two things in order to be seen as desirable: rich or attractive, neither of which have anything to do with the individual character of the man in question. Look no further than Piggy, whose character is more questionable than Lorelei, but doesn't receive nearly as much suspicion or consequences as her.

The reason this message is relevant today is because women are still held to a higher standard than men, particularly in celebrity culture, and especially in the entertainment industry. Women have to be the whole package (attractive, naturally talented, and virtuous) in order to get half as much respect as men, who more often than not aren't held to the same standards. Some time ago, the singer Billie Eilish was body shamed after being seen in revealing clothing, being called fat when in reality she has an average build. Something similar happened to other singers like Lana Del Rey, Adele, and Lady Gaga. I can't think of nearly as many examples of this happening to male singers.

The title *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* isn't what it sounds like at first. It is not a competition between two women to get a man. Why does it say that men prefer blondes? Why not brunettes or redheads? It's because having blond hair is deemed to be an ideal beauty standard, and "blondes" is used as shorthand for the ideal woman, at least at the time: beautiful, submissive to a man, no dreams or desires of her own, and a heart of gold. Perfect. Our two charming female leads subvert this expectation to show us that a woman can be desirable without falling strictly into these rigid standards. Both of them are beautiful, yes, but they're assertive, they have dreams of their own, and perhaps most importantly, they make mistakes, but that doesn't make them suddenly unappealing. That is what *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* can teach us.