

Critical Media Analysis of *Legally Blonde*:  
**The Historic Portrayal of Gender, Sexuality & Class  
involving Women as Lawyers**

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Gender, sexuality and class pertaining to women is considered to be a very controversial topic when portrayed within the work-sphere, especially in the career of law. In the film *Legally Blonde*, the main character Elle Woods is represented as a very feminine and stylish woman who is caught up in a world full of beauty, fashion and fitness. However, due to a breakup with her boyfriend who would be attending Harvard Law School, she decides to break those stereotypical barriers as a ‘dumb blonde’ and decides to pursue a career in law. The representation of gender, sexuality and class is represented in a positive but also negative connotation within the film. Not only is this relevant in the film, but in real life women experience the inequalities faced within such a career due to many classifications. It will be mentioned that the portrayal of the protagonist Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) invokes an inspiring although sometimes a contentious message to viewers. However, it will be further discussed as to how as a character, she experiences many injustices as a woman similar to those in history who have struggled with constant discrimination in a more male-dominating career.

While some may argue that the 2001 film *Legally Blonde* depicts a strong female lead who overcomes specific barriers, Gordon Alley-Young argues in his article *Celebrate Diversity, Even If That Includes the Hopelessly Superficial: Lessons on Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality in “Legally Blonde”*, the misrepresentation featured within the film pertaining to gender, race, class and sexuality. For example, he states that the representation of femininity and her stylish approach to educational success distracts viewers from the film’s problematic politics.”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, he disputes the way Elle Woods is portrayed as a caucasian woman and the privilege

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Alley Young. "Celebrate Diversity, Even If That Includes the Hopelessly Superficial: Lessons on Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality in "Legally Blonde.", 14.

she possesses is ambiguous to her, as his main argument is the advantage Elle has but does not take notice to such as she is “unreflective of her whiteness and privilege.”<sup>2</sup> Young addresses the contradictory unrealistic messages Elle Woods portrays compared to real life situations. For example, he states that it is questionable as to what the film teaches us about learning, sociocultural diversity and marketing of educational images of women.”<sup>3</sup> However, it is arguable that although her race and class benefit her in the long run, woman who are lawyers also benefit from such designation.

Clara Brett Martin known as the first female to practice law in Canada in the year of 1897, experienced many hardships according to Constance B Backhouse in her article, *To Open the Way for Others of my Sex*. She surmounted to “opposition and insult from classmates, teachers, fellow students at law, benchers, politicians and the press,”<sup>4</sup> which is overtly quite similar to what Elle Woods experienced. Nonetheless, Clara was described to have Hungarian and Irish ancestry which presumably created more privilege than those of different backgrounds.

Martin’s choice to become a lawyer was quite unprecedented back in the 1890’s and continues to be for woman to this day. Similar to the efforts made by Elle Woods to fight for her equality and rights, in 1891 at the age of seventeen, Clara “submitted a petition to the Law Society of Upper Canada to permit her to become a student member.”<sup>5</sup> It is mentioned that historically, a law was passed by the Law Society stating that “women were not empowered in

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon Alley Young "Celebrate Diversity, Even If That Includes the Hopelessly Superficial: Lessons on Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality in "Legally Blonde.", 23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup> Constance B Backhouse. "To Open the Way for Others of my Sex"; Clara Brett Martin's Career as Canada's First Woman Lawyer.", 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 7.

Canada or Great Britain under any circumstances, to be entered as Members of the Legal Societies.”<sup>6</sup> This historic law was created based on the assumption that women would not apply to Law School during that era. This assumption is similar to *Legally Blonde* as she is a woman with “stereotypical attire”<sup>7</sup> and would be assumed to work in a domestic workplace rather than a more professional position based wholly on her gender and femininity.

When expanding on the idea of gender, Elle Woods faces many hardships due to her opinions and lifestyle choices. Elle tends to “juxtaposition her own unique performance of femininity with a male identified learning environment.”<sup>8</sup> With that said, controversial ideas spark by Gordon Alley Young as this type of behaviour is problematic as it is “limited to superficial aspects of female identity”<sup>9</sup> His points are credible as it shows that women may have “sacrificed their femininity and thus sisterhood, to the old boy’s club of Harvard Law.”<sup>10</sup> With this idea in mind, it is evident that the majority of women have conformed to male standards due to competitive acceptance. Albeit Elle Woods is pro-woman and encourages women to be brave and trust their instincts, her behaviour towards them is quite ambiguous according to Young as he mentions “Elle’s belief in sisterhood allies her with a feminine style of education that emphasizes collaboration and support.”<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, Young makes credible points relating to the controversial ideas illustrated within the film as the appearance of both Elle Woods and Clara Brett Martin play a role in their

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<sup>6</sup> Constance B Backhouse. "To Open the Way for Others of my Sex"; Clara Brett Martin's Career as Canada's First Woman Lawyer.",8.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon Alley Young "Celebrate Diversity, Even If That Includes the Hopelessly Superficial: Lessons on Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality in "Legally Blonde.", 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

succession. It is noticeable that Woods is a beautiful blonde bombshell who is quite concerned with her presence. Such a conspicuous factor is similar to Clara as she was an “attractive woman with exquisite facial features. Her large, dark eyes [were] prominent, highlighted by well-defined eyebrows [as] she wore her dark hair gracefully tied up in a fashionable knot on the top of her head.”<sup>12</sup> It is disheartening but relevant that the appearance of women is what benefits them within their career, as “women have always been judged by their appearance and never more so than in times when they were restricted from entering most masculine pursuits.”<sup>13</sup> This is a very noteworthy quote pertaining to Elle’s appearance in *Legally Blonde*, despite the fact that she is willing to prove she can execute the work needed to be done in order to be taken as seriously like everyone else.

In *Defining Moments for Women as Lawyers: Reflections on Numerical Gender Equality*, Mary Jane Mossman discusses the succession of female lawyers and the type of impact Clara Brett Martin has had on such an achievement. Mossman asks the reader as to “what impact will the advent of a significant number of women in the legal profession have on the practice of law, on legal rules and concepts, on the roles lawyers play in our society?”<sup>14</sup> This begs the question as to if women have truly made a new dimension for themselves as lawyers or if they seem to follow the male attorney patterns. Mossman would argue differently as she explains in May 1986, years after the time of Brett Martin, it was “an optimistic time for women lawyers.”<sup>15</sup> She

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<sup>12</sup> Constance B Backhouse. "To Open the Way for Others of my Sex"; Clara Brett Martin's Career as Canada's First Woman Lawyer.", 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Jane Mossman. "Defining Moments for Women as Lawyers: Reflections on Numerical Gender Equality.", 16.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

maintains her argument by mentioning “the Canadian Journal of Women and the Law had made its first appearance, and, just one year earlier, the equality guarantees of section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms had become effective.”<sup>16</sup> In the 1980’s, it was rare to have multiple lawyers who gendered as women. However, according to Mossman “there was a buzz of real excitement, even a sense of history—for the first time in Canada, [in 1986] we saw nearly two hundred women, all of whom were lawyers, assembled in one place at the same time.”<sup>17</sup> To any reader, it is evident that such a number is quite small, but the huge impact it had on the progression of acceptance of female lawyers was astounding.

Thereafter, controversy arose due to “the steady but not significant increase in numbers as only forty-eight women in 1941-50, sixty-four in 1951-60, and ninety-eight in 1961-70,”<sup>18</sup> were commissioned as lawyers. These facts are nonetheless contentious, especially when Mossman mentions that “most of [those women] would probably have agreed with Margaret Hyndman, an energetic and accomplished Toronto lawyer and one of Canada's first women KCs, when she suggested that women lawyers should "forget [their] sex and expect no quarter.”<sup>19</sup> Also mentioned, Margaret Hyndman always "insisted on being judged as a lawyer, not as a woman lawyer.”<sup>20</sup> With these ideas in mind, not only is there little acceptance by males within this career, but it becomes additionally challenging when women themselves do not want to be acknowledged as who they are based on continuous stereotypes towards their gender.

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Jane Mossman. "Defining Moments for Women as Lawyers: Reflections on Numerical Gender Equality.", 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Nonetheless, when comparing Mary Jane Mossman research to the character of Elle Woods, she breaks those barriers of non acceptance based on her gender. As it's been discussed, Elle experienced many hardships relating to her choice of lifestyle as she "[wore] stereotypically feminine attire while taking notes on a pink heart shaped pad in contrast to her classmates who wear business attire and use laptops."<sup>21</sup> However many challenges Elle struggled with, she didn't let the opinion of others dictate her self worth as a not only a law student, but as a woman. According to Mossman, women were "once banished from the nation's law schools (and from Harvard Law School until as recently as 1950) they now make up nearly half of this year's entering class.

In conclusion, as Elle in *Legally Blonde* attends Harvard Law School, she inspires others to think outside the box and not be afraid to be themselves, as she "entrenched male partners to open their minds"<sup>22</sup>, that being her ex-boyfriend Warner and her derogatory Professor Callahan. With the guidance of being told by Emmett "being a blonde is actually a pretty powerful thing. You hold more cards than you think you do. And I, for one, would like to see you take that power and channel it toward the greater good, you know?"<sup>23</sup>, Elle ends up graduating top of her class as valedictorian. Without a doubt, women have succeeded tremendously as lawyers and with the help of the historic Clara Brett Martin, she has shaped the way for women in that career. As Elle Woods mentions, "it is with passion, courage of conviction, and strong sense of self that we take our next steps into the world, remembering that first impressions are not always correct.

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<sup>21</sup> Gordon Alley Young "Celebrate Diversity, Even If That Includes the Hopelessly Superficial: Lessons on Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality in "Legally Blonde.", 17.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Jane Mossman. "Defining Moments for Women as Lawyers: Reflections on Numerical Gender Equality.", 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Legally Blonde*, directed by Robert Luketic (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2001), DVD.

You must always have faith in people. And most importantly, you must always have faith in yourself.”<sup>24</sup> This may be significant to some, however, many women have been discriminated against and still continue to be on a daily basis within the workplace, wholly based on their gender. There are ever-lasting challenges to achieve positive change in the legal profession and it is clearly time to mobilize female lawyers in achieving innovation. Moreover, the issues of discrimination against women are far more bigger than the actual success of an individual; thus it is indisputable that it is time for lawful careers to be more gender-neutral rather than having men commanded industries.

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<sup>24</sup> Legally Blonde, directed by Robert Luketic (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2001), DVD.



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