

Contesting Otherness: Investigating Elle Woods' Position in *Legally Blonde*

Rebekah Linardi

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, Indonesia
E-mail: a11210055@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The film *Legally Blonde* (2001), directed by Robert Luketic, follows Elle Woods, a seemingly stereotypical blonde woman who enters Harvard Law School to prove her worth. This study explores how Elle is othered and how she contests her position as the Other. Using Stuart Hall's theory of stereotyping, particularly the concepts of otherness and contestation, this research reveals that Elle is perceived as a dumb blonde, a superficial girl, and an easy woman, which prevents her from being taken seriously in academic and professional settings. Elle challenges these social biases and the surrounding social hierarchy by using her intelligence, determination, and kindness to reverse the negative assumptions made about her. The analysis shows that otherness is not fixed and can be challenged through agency and resilience.

Keywords: contesting stereotypes, dumb blonde, media, otherness, representation

INTRODUCTION

Hollywood has long led the global film industry, with romantic comedy as one of its most enduring genres. Rom-coms have evolved over time, from screwball comedies to neo-traditional forms since the 1990s, reflecting Hollywood's adaptability (Grindon, 2011). These films combine romance and humor, often ending happily. Their emotional appeal, narrative diversity, and accessibility via streaming platforms have revived their popularity. A 2018 study shows rom-coms are favored by 84% of women and 67% of men (Morning Consult, 2018). Economically, the top ten rom-coms earned \$1.7 billion (BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.). The genre's charm lies in its humor, relatable characters, and emotional depth. *Legally Blonde* (2001), a key example, combines comedy and empowerment, grossing over \$142 million worldwide (Rose, 2023).

Robert Luketic, director of *Legally Blonde*, is known for his work in comedy films and TV. He gained recognition with his short film *Titsiana Booberini*, which won Best Film at Aspen Shortsfest and was featured at Sundance. His feature debut, *Legally Blonde* (2001), became a cultural hit by showing that a woman can be both feminine and smart, earning over \$142 million and two Golden Globe nominations. He later directed comedies like *Monster-in-Law* (2005) and *21* (2008), and worked on shows like *Jane the Virgin*. Luketic has received several awards, including the Young Hollywood Award (2002) and nominations for directing in 2022 (Awards, n.d.).

Legally Blonde (2001) is chosen for this study because it is Luketic's most impactful film, especially in cultural and academic contexts. Unlike his other films focused mainly on romance, *Legally Blonde* explores broader issues like gender roles and ambition. It remains influential in discussions about women's empowerment. Academically, the film offers a

well-structured story and a clearly developed main character. The film's portrayal of Elle Woods as someone who is othered and how she resists that label makes it ideal for analyzing representations of difference in popular culture.

Legally Blonde tells the story of Elle Woods, a fashionable sorority girl whose life changes when her boyfriend Warner breaks up with her for not being "serious" enough for his political ambitions. To prove him wrong, Elle applies to Harvard Law School, where she is underestimated because of her looks and background. At Harvard, she is seen as a stereotypical dumb blonde, but she works hard to prove her intelligence. A key theme in the film is otherness, especially how Elle is excluded in an elite academic setting due to her identity.

This study analyzes how Elle is othered by her peers, professors, and society, and how she contests those assumptions. The film presents Elle through binaries such as dumb versus smart and serious versus superficial, which shape her exclusion. However, Elle resists these labels and proves her capability. Using Stuart Hall's concept of otherness and contesting stereotypes, this analysis explores how identity is constructed and how exclusion can be challenged. The film reveals how stereotypes influence social belonging and shows that contesting otherness can lead to empowerment and inclusion.

THE OTHERING OF ELLE WOODS AND HER WAYS TO CONTEST IT

The Ways Elle Woods Is Treated as the Other

In *Legally Blonde*, Elle Woods is treated as the other due to her appearance, fashion background, and personality, which clash with the traditional image of a serious law student. As a result, she is judged as unintelligent and unqualified by her professors, peers, and ex-boyfriend, leading to her exclusion from academic opportunities. This reflects Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of the construction of otherness, where those who differ from the dominant group are defined through opposites, such as smart versus dumb or respectable versus frivolous. Elle's treatment reveals how stereotypes shape social exclusion. Her othering is especially evident in how she is perceived as a dumb blonde, superficial, and an easy woman.

As a Dumb Blonde

First of all, Elle Woods is perceived as a dumb blonde by a complete stranger while she is in a commercial space. From the start, people judge Elle because of how she looks, dresses, and acts, thinking she's not smart enough for law school, even though she is. For example, early in the movie, a saleswoman sees Elle's fancy clothes and her dog, Bruiser, and immediately thinks Elle is a dumb blonde who knows nothing about fashion. Because of this, the saleswoman tries to trick Elle into buying an expensive dress by removing the sale tag, even saying, "There's nothing I love more than a dumb blonde with daddy's plastic." This shows how the saleswoman uses the dumb blonde idea to control the price and justify her unfair actions, making Elle seem less valuable just because of a wrong idea about her.



Figure 1. The saleswoman expressed her assumption of Elle to her colleague.

Linardi: Contesting Otherness: Investigating Elle Woods' Position
in *Legally Blonde*

Elle Woods faces even stronger judgment and othering from her peers in academic space, where her unique style clashes with the traditional academic environment. Her grand entrance, dressed in bright pink and accompanied by her chihuahua and pink belongings, immediately sets her apart from the more serious and conservatively dressed students. This leads her Harvard classmates to mock her, seeing her appearance and cheerful attitude as signs of being shallow and unintelligent. Despite these early negative reactions, Elle proudly continues to wear pink, which represents femininity, fun, independence, and confidence, and maintains her glamorous appearance. However, in the male-dominated law school, such expressions of femininity are often seen as weaknesses, unlike her peers' darker clothing that suggests seriousness and professionalism. Elle soon realizes that her blonde image acts as a barrier, preventing others from taking her seriously, as she tearfully tells her friend, "All people see when they look at me is blonde hair and big boobs. No one's ever gonna take me seriously." This reinforces the dumb blonde stereotype, positioning her as an outsider who is seen as unintelligent and superficial. Her social exclusion is evident when she admits, "The people here are so vile. Hardly anybody speaks to me," leading her to seek connections outside her immediate academic circle.



Figure 2. Elle Woods wearing pink.

Elle's struggle to fit in at Harvard also includes being seen as dumb blonde by her groupmates in a learning setting, leading to her exclusion from a study group. When Elle tries to join a study group, Warner's fiancée, Vivian, and her friend reject her, with Vivian's friend bluntly stating, "No, it's like a smart-people thing." This moment clearly shows how Elle is treated as an outsider because her blonde appearance is wrongly linked to being dumb, not smart. Throughout her time at Harvard, Vivian and her friend repeatedly underestimate and exclude Elle, seeing her as the typical dumb blonde, shallow, unintelligent, and not serious enough for academic work. These rejections are clear acts of othering. Elle's experience at Harvard is a stark contrast to her previous comfortable life, as the unfriendly and elitist culture of Harvard Law School puts her at a disadvantage just for being blonde.



Figure 3. Elle wants to join a study group but is then rejected.

Even in her most personal relationship, Elle Woods is seen as a dumb blonde by her ex-boyfriend, Warner, highlighting how deeply ingrained this stereotype is. When Elle, dressed

in a bunny costume after being tricked by Vivian, tries to discuss her ambition for a prestigious internship with Warner, he quickly dismisses her. He tells her, “Come on, be serious. You can do something more valuable with your time,” implying she is not smart enough for the internship, despite them attending the same law school and taking the same classes. This interaction demonstrates Stuart Hall's idea that stereotyping often occurs when there's a power imbalance, targeting those already marginalized. Warner's belittling words, though seemingly gentle, treat Elle as a dumb blonde for serious academic pursuits, reinforcing Hall's concept of splitting. Warner places himself in the group of serious, capable people while pushing Elle into the group not taken seriously, thus denying her opportunities and upholding a system that excludes feminine and expressive individuals from fields like law. This moment becomes a turning point for Elle, as she realizes Warner will always view her through the dumb blonde lens.



Figure 4. Elle meets Warner to talk about the internship.

As Superficial

Elle Woods is also perceived as superficial by people her age and with the same level of education, particularly by her ex-boyfriend, Warner, even before she starts Harvard. Elle initially decides to go to Harvard Law School to win Warner back, believing that becoming a law student will make him take her seriously instead of seeing her as superficial. Warner confirms this perception during their breakup, stating he needs to marry a Jackie, not a Marilyn for his political career, implying Elle, like Marilyn Monroe, is too superficial to be his wife. This comparison reveals Warner's traditional views and reinforces the idea that blonde women are only good for fun, not serious roles. He sees Elle's looks and personality as unfit for a politician's wife, showing how society often links beauty with shallowness. Warner reduces Elle to a simplified stereotype, someone attractive but not smart enough for his future. Elle's confusion, asking, “You’re breaking up with me because I’m too blonde?” highlights how deeply ingrained this judgment is, where being attractive and blonde is seen as incompatible with being taken seriously. Warner's choice of partner is influenced by his family's high expectations and political background, showing how traditional ideas can also limit men. Despite Warner's repeated put-downs of Elle's abilities, it is later revealed that he only got into Harvard because of his wealthy father, which hides his own insecurities. He tries to protect his fragile status instead of recognizing Elle's potential, further othering her as superficial.



Figure 5. Warner is breaking up with Elle.

Linardi: Contesting Otherness: Investigating Elle Woods' Position
in *Legally Blonde*

The perception of Elle Woods as superficial extends beyond her peers and ex-boyfriend, as even older and more educated figures, like her college advisor, dismiss her based on this stereotype. When Elle announces her plan to apply to Harvard Law School, her advisor immediately shows doubt and belittles her goal. The advisor reacts with shock and a mocking expression, suggesting that Elle's ambition is unrealistic. Her comment that Elle's major, Fashion Merchandising, will not impress Harvard, along with her sarcastic mention of History of Polka Dots, clearly implies that anything related to beauty, style, or femininity is not considered intellectually serious or suitable for a rigorous academic path like law. This doubt is not about Elle's grades or Harvard's difficulty, but about the kind of person Elle is. The advisor cannot imagine someone who looks and acts like Elle fitting into a serious academic environment. Her suggestion that Elle apply to backup schools, despite Elle's perfect GPA, shows her lack of faith in Elle's potential. Instead of supporting Elle's dream, the advisor talks down to her, reinforcing the idea that Elle does not belong. This scene highlights how people in power often make judgments based on narrow and biased ideas, especially when someone does not fit the expected image of a serious student.



Figure 6. The advisor belittling Elle.

As an Easy Woman

Throughout *Legally Blonde*, Elle Woods is also unfairly seen as an easy woman, a perception linked to how she is othered for not fitting the traditional image of a serious law student. With her blonde hair, fashionable style, and confident personality, Elle is constantly treated as someone who uses her looks rather than her intelligence to succeed, and is wrongly assumed to be easy or seeking attention. This is clearly shown during her internship at Callahan's law firm. After praising Elle's intelligence and ability, Callahan inappropriately places his hand on her knee. This act reveals his admiration was not professional, despite Elle believing her hard work had finally earned her respect. When Elle pulls away, shocked, Callahan responds, "You're a beautiful girl. I'm a man who knows what he wants." This makes it clear that Callahan never saw Elle as a capable legal mind. Instead, he others her because of her appearance, reinforcing the idea that a woman who embraces femininity is an easy woman and cannot be taken seriously in a professional setting. This othering places Elle outside the boundaries of what is considered respectable in the legal field, regardless of her proven abilities. Elle later expresses her disappointment to Paulette, saying, "Callahan never saw me as a lawyer. He just saw me as a piece of ass just like everybody else," showing how deeply this unfair perception affected her.



Figure 7. Callahan places his hand on Elle's knee.

The Ways Elle Woods Challenges the Othering

In an environment that associates professionalism with traditional seriousness and often devalues feminine traits, Elle is treated as an outsider. However, by succeeding without changing her identity, she challenges these limiting views and reshapes what intelligence and professionalism can look like. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1997) theory, her journey reflects how dominant stereotypes can be contested from within and how meaning is never fixed. Elle disrupts the existing social biases and hierarchies by confronting the assumptions that exclude her, ultimately inspiring a broader understanding of success.

By Challenging the Social Biases

Elle Woods challenges the dumb blonde stereotype by demonstrating that, despite her fashionable appearance, she is sharp and assertive in social situations. In a boutique scene early in the film, a saleswoman tries to deceive Elle into buying an outdated dress at full price, assuming she is unaware because of her appearance. However, Elle confidently exposes the lie using her detailed fashion knowledge, leaving the saleswoman embarrassed. This moment highlights Elle's intelligence and attention to detail, traits often overlooked due to stereotypes about attractive, fashionable women. As Stuart Hall suggests, Elle contests the stereotype from within by reversing expectations and offering a positive image of someone who is both stylish and smart, showing that femininity and intelligence can coexist.



Figure 8. Elle does not believe the saleswoman's lies.

Elle also shows that aside from being a fashionable blonde, she is very competitive academically. When she arrives at Harvard Law School and surprises her ex-boyfriend Warner, his disbelief reveals the deep social bias she faces. Elle's confident response, "What, like it's hard?" subverts his low expectations and signals her refusal to be underestimated. Despite being judged for her appearance, Elle matches her peers academically while staying true to her identity. This moment reflects Stuart Hall's theory of contesting representation by combining both positive and negative images, as Elle embraces her femininity while proving her intelligence, and by challenging the stereotype from within.

Linardi: Contesting Otherness: Investigating Elle Woods' Position
in *Legally Blonde*



Figure 9. Warner was surprised to see Elle in Harvard.

Elle is against the stereotype by showing that she is professionally brilliant. One of her most important achievements happens during a murder trial, where she uses her unique knowledge of beauty and fashion to uncover key details that others overlook. Her understanding of perm maintenance leads her to expose the real killer, proving that skills often seen as feminine, like attention to detail and people skills, are just as valuable in serious professional settings. Even when others laugh or dismiss her insights, Elle stays true to herself and ultimately wins the case. This moment reflects Stuart Hall's idea of contesting stereotypes by showing both positive and negative images and challenging representation from within. Elle redefines what a serious lawyer can look like and proves that femininity can be a strength.



Figure 11. Elle questioning Chutney.

By Challenging the Social Hierarchy

Elle challenges the easy woman stereotype by showing that she does not allow herself to be sexualized by her professor, despite her fashionable appearance. A key moment occurs when Professor Callahan praises Elle's intelligence but then makes an inappropriate advance, revealing he does not fully respect her as a professional. Rather than staying silent, Elle firmly stands up for herself and rejects his behavior. This moment shows how Elle challenges both the power imbalance and the stereotype that women like her are easy or unserious. Following Stuart Hall's idea of contesting representation from within, Elle does not change herself to fit in but instead calls out injustice while remaining true to who she is. The scene also illustrates both negative and positive images. Callahan misuses his authority, while Elle represents strength and integrity, challenging fixed ideas about who belongs in professional spaces.



Figure 12. Elle stands up to Callahan.

Elle also shows that being a fashionable blonde does not limit her academic success. When she tells her college advisor about her plan to attend Harvard Law School, she is met with disbelief and judgment. The advisor's skeptical tone and dismissive comments reflect assumptions about who belongs in elite academic spaces. Rather than backing down or changing who she is, Elle confidently rejects the idea of backup schools and insists on her goal. This moment aligns with Stuart Hall's idea of contesting stereotypes from within. Elle maintains her identity and challenges narrow definitions of academic excellence. Her determination, confidence, and resilience highlight that femininity and intelligence are not mutually exclusive. Throughout her time at Harvard, Elle faces mockery and isolation but pushes forward on her own, eventually proving her capabilities by succeeding academically, becoming the graduation speaker, and receiving a prestigious job offer. This demonstrates that she not only challenges social biases but also redefines what success in elite institutions can look like.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the analysis reveals that when Elle Woods enters Harvard Law School, she is quickly judged as someone who does not belong, not simply because of her appearance but because of deeper social biases about who is seen as worthy of success in elite academic spaces. Her feminine traits, such as wearing pink, showing enthusiasm, and loving fashion, are wrongly taken as signs of incompetence. As a result, both peers and professors dismiss her ideas, underestimate her abilities, and label her as a dumb blonde or even as overly flirtatious. These assumptions reflect broader societal tendencies to devalue femininity and to uphold power and privilege by limiting who gets to be seen as intelligent or professional. Elle is othered and boxed into a narrow role, forced to constantly prove that she is more than the image others place on her.

However, Elle does not passively accept these labels. Over time, she begins to resist by staying true to herself while working hard to succeed on her own terms. Her transformation is not about changing who she is but about realizing that her identity is a strength. She uses her empathy, attention to detail, and communication skills, traits often dismissed as feminine, to thrive in law school and even win a difficult murder trial. By proving that intelligence and femininity can coexist, Elle challenges the very structure that defines who is taken seriously. Her journey not only contests the dumb blonde stereotype but also expands what it means to be professional, capable, and successful. In the end, she carves out a place for herself and opens space for others like her, showing that success does not require abandoning one's identity.

REFERENCES

- Awards. (n.d.). IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0525659/awards/>
- BoxOfficeMojo. (n.d.). *Top grossing romantic comedy movies at the box office*. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/>
- Grindon, L. (2011). *The Hollywood romantic comedy*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE.
- Morning Consult. (2018). *Most popular movie genres among adults in the United States as of December 2018, by gender*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/254115/favorite-movie-genres-in-the-us/>
- Rose, L. (2023, April 29). *How Reese Witherspoon took charge of her career and changed Hollywood*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/how-reese-witherspoon-took-charge-her-career-changed-hollywood-1260203/>