

Blonde Attitides in Dolly Parton's Songs

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Deconstructing the Blonde Stereotype in Dolly Parton's "Dumb Blonde" and "9 to 5"

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ABSTRACT

The blonde stereotype considers blondes as usually attractive and desirable, but at the same fragile and ignorant. The aim of the paper is to deconstruct the stereotyped representation of the blond-haired women in Dolly Parton's " Dumb Blonde " and " 9 to 5 ". Dolly Parton is very famous for her self-deprecating humour. She plays with her personae and feints to be a dumb blonde. The lyrics of her 1967 hit "Dumb Blonde" clearly challenge the stereotype, whereas " 9 to 5 "(1980) examines the condition of white-collar women who work in a male-dominated environment. The paper does not provide an answer to overcome the blonde setreotype ; rather it reviews the condition of American women in the contemporary era and see if they are fully emancipated.

Key words : Blonde - stereotype - Dolly Parton - empowerment - modern capitalism

Introduction

"Why did the blonde stare at the orange juice can during 20 minutes? Because it said : concentrate". This joke obviously makes everyone laugh and I must admit I find it funny too. Yet, let's pay close attention to the woman who stares at the juice can. She has fair hair and seemingly she is not very bright. What if the protagonist was a man with black hair, I bet that many people will not find the joke very funny. The reason is there is an old common belief in western society that a blonde-haired woman is not intelligent. The sociocultural cliché gave birth to a category of jokes called *blonde jokes* which rely on gender humour.

The field of study that focuses on examining the representation of the *feminine* in general and the blonde-haired woman in particular is called : feminist and gender studies. It is interesting to start the paper with a quotation from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), a book which is often regarded as a major work of feminist philosophy. De Beauvoir argues that : "representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men ; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth" (De Beauvoir 1949 :161).

For a long time, American popular culture portrayed women from a hegemonic masculine view point in a gender-biased and stereotyped way. American women were mostly represented as peripheral characters in a mainstream culture dominated exclusively by men. It must be noted, however, that popular culture is not the only factor of ostracizing the feminine gender. A large number of women are facing socio-economic problems to make a living. Real life in the American society is not like the Horatio Alger's rags to riches tales. Fulfilling the American dream has become almost impossible for instance for a family composed of a single mother and two children. Women have few economic opportunities beyond those that pay minimum wage ($7.25 per hour). Under US modern capitalism of hegemonic corporations, women need to work 2 or 3 jobs, 24/7, 52 weeks a year, only to make ends meet. It seems that American women undergo double oppression in their country, first for their gender and second for being members of the working class.

The aim of this paper is to explore the double oppression of women by deconstructing the stereotyped representation of blondes in two songs of female country music singer Dolly Parton, "Dumb Blonde" (1967) and "9 to 5" (1980). To start with, let's review the concept of the *blonde stereotype*.

1- On blonde stereotype :

The term *stereotype* derives from the Greek words στερεός (*stereos*), 'firm, solid' and τύπος (*typos*), 'impression', which literally means 'solid impression'. (Online Etymology Dictionary). Originally, It was a printing technique that was adopted by the brothers Didot in 1798 and which made use of a printing

plate that duplicated any typography. Stereotype, in its social psychological sense, was coined first in 1922 by American journalist Walter Lippman in his famous work *Public Opinion* where "he saw it as an element of the 'pseudoenvironment' which human beings interpose between themselves and the world in order to make sense of it" (Cantwell 90 : 63). The Merriam webster dictionary gives the following definitions: 1- an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic ;

2- something conforming to a fixed or general pattern ; especially : a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment (http://www.merriam-webster.com/).

We assign individuals to groups on the basis of a single trait, such as skin, hair color, religion, gender, or a country. The following statements are examples of sterotypes :

- all Americans are cowboys.
- All French drink wine and complain all the time.
- All Africans are lazy.
- All Arabs are terrorists.
- All blonde women are dumb (unintelligent).

The blonde stereotype is a common sexist belief placed on fair-haired women. Western blonde women are usually perceived as attractive and likeble, but at the same they are considered as fragile and incompetent. Generally speaking, persons with fair hair are viewed as stupid, childish and as less respect than people with dark hair. In her academic study entitled : *On Blondes*, Joanna Pittman makes a connection between blonde hair and low social status that goes back to Middle Ages in Europe. The original idea holds that aristocracy stayed indoors and developed darker hair, whereas pesants and labourers worked under the sun the whole day and developed fair hair. Dark hair Europeans considered fair hair persons as belonging to a lower class. The first dumb blonde in western histroy is the French courtesan Rosalie Duthé. She was a lady of the night who dated french kings and members of European nobilty. She is depicted in a 1775 play : *The Curiosties of the Saint Germain's Fair* as a doll who acts like a real person : she speaks slowly, drinks, and dances, but at the end of the play the audience realizes she is intelligent when she successfully deprives men from their money.

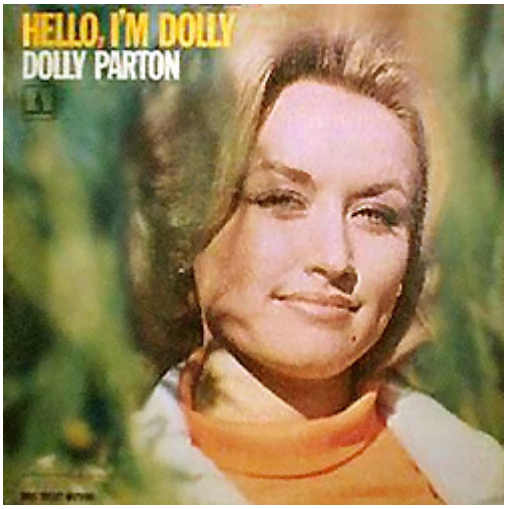
Numerous Hollywood actresses of the twentieth century played dumb blondes characters. Everyone remembers Maryline Monroe in the famous movie *Gentelmen Prefer Blondes* (1953). She plays the role of the brainless gold-digger *Lorelei Lee* who sings "Diamons Are a Girl's Best friend". Monroe epitomized the fragile and superficial blonde and became ultimately a tale of tragedy when she died

prematurely at age of 36 in 1962. We have also three film adaptations of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) in which the directors delibarately portray Daisy Buchanan as a dumb blonde goldigger. The films cast respectively three blonde haired actresses : Betty Field (1949), Mia Farrow (1974), and the bottle blonde (by using chemicals) Carey Mulligan (2013). However, we all know that there are no specific or detailed descriptions of Daisy in the novel. Fitzgerald did not choose to create literary portraits of her. He describes her in chapter 1 as being dressed in White. "Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth"(Fitzgerald 1925 : 10). On top of that, neither Zelda, Fitzgerald's wife, nor Ginevra King, Fitzgerald's mistress and inspirational muse for Daisy were blondes. They were brunettes and the producers of the films used the blonde stereotype for cinematic purposes.

To deconstruct the blonde stereotype, we will examine two songs of Dolly Parton: "Dumb Blonde" (1967) and "9 to 5" (1980). But, first one may ask the following question: who is Dolly Rebecca Parton ? She is an American singer-songwriter of country music who was born in Tenessee in 1946. She is one of the most-honored female country singers of all time. She has earned 8 Grammy Awards. She is also a successful businesswoman who owns the famous amusement park *Dollywood* in addition to two dinner theaters : *Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede* and *Pirates Voyage*. One final point, Dolly Parton is a blonde, and contrary to what has been said so far she is neither superficial nor dumb. Let's examine her first song "Dumb Blonde".

1- Blondes are not dumb:

Being a new female country music singer who tries to achieve success in a music industry mainly controlled by men, Dolly Parton records her first studio album *Hello, I'm Dolly* in 1967. It is common for begining artists to be inspired by their own lives. They may include autobiographical devices. Subjects refer to themselves using the first person singular pronoun 'I' in English. Parton's first album embodies what Philippe Lejeune calls the 'autobiographical pact'- our implicit belief that the author, the narrator and protagonist are one and the same. "In order for there to be autobiography, and personal literature in general, the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical" (Lejeune 1975 : 5). Dolly Parton is the singer, the narrator and the principle character. The album's cover art also contends the self-referential device with a picture of a smiling Dolly Parton who introduces herself with a personal statement to the public (see below).



Cover art of Dolly Parton's first album : *Hello, Im Dolly* (1967)

"Dumb Blonde" is the first song of the track list album. The record peaked at #24 on the 1967 Billboard's Hot Country Singles Chart. (www.allmusic.com). The same year, country entertainer Porter Wagoner invited Parton to sing her successful hit on his weekly country music television program *The Porter Wagoner Show*. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9m_OvYkoyeE).

The protagonist of the song is a blonde who breaks up with her man. The relationship is over and consequentely she can reveal things she could not say before. Parton clearly challenges the blonde stereotype by using the negative structure in the lyrics. She goes straight to the point without using figurative language or literary devices. "Just because I'm blond ; don't think I'm dumb ; cause this dumb blond ain't nobody's fool" (Parton, 4-6). Colloquial language is a key feature in country music. This genre of popular music originated in Southern America, mainly in Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas. Some famous country music singers include : Jimmie Rodgers, Dolly Parton, Johnny Cash, and Sheryl Crow among others. Roughly speaking, the listeners of country music are working class and rural whites of the Southern states of America. Southern slang langauge includes short sentences without a subject, the use of contractions and the drop of the first syllable of some words (e.g. *cause* instead of *because* in the stanza above).

The musical instruments of "Dumb Blonde" include a lead electric guitar which plays solos in addition to an accoustic guitar, which consists of accompaniments chords and riffs. It is also a sepcific trait that we find in country music. It relies on basic and simple music instruments including : a guitar, a banjo and an harmonica. In short, country music is a sub-genre of the music of common people. It makes use of simple lyrics and basic music instruments. That is why millions of Americans enjoy listening to country music. It reflects their everyday lives and celebrates their ordinariness.

Parton is aware of the cultural charcterization of fair haired women as being naive and unintelligent. Her reclamation can be summarized in the following statement : blondes are not dumb. On one hand, she breaks down the cliché by an empowring process in which a woman can find a place in society even if her man leaves her. “When you left you thought I’d sit ; an’ you thought I’d wait ; an’ you thought I’d cry ; you called me a dumb blond ” (7-10). On the other hand, she cleaverly keeps the ameliorative aspect of the blonde stereotype as she reminds us that blonds are said to be more likeable and attractive vis-à-vis brunettes or red headed women. “And you know if there’s one thing this blond has learned ; blonds have more fun” (12-13). Parton is very famous for her self-deprecating humour in her everyday life. She plays with her personae. She is a blonde but when she is asked on blonde jokes she ironically comments: “I’m not offended by all dumb blonde jokes because I know I’m not dumb and I also know that I’m not blonde” (Rhiannon Williams, 2013).

Even if American women overcome the blonde stereotype, there is obviously another issue that prevents them from empowering themselves regardless of their hair color. They work in hegemonic corporations that pay minimum wage. Besides, they are being harrassed in a male-dominated environment which does not make it easy for them to fully assert themselves. In the next section, we will go beyond the blonde stereotype and examine the social condition of women at work. The second song of Parton, “9 to 5”, explores this aspect.

2- Female white-collar workers or their (im) possible empowerment in “9 to 5”:

Parton wrote “9 to 5” in 1980 for the comedy film of the same name which starred : Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, and Dolly Parton (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbxUSsFXYo4).The film depicts the condition of three female secretaries at office. In 2009, Parton revealed in the famous talk show *The View*, that her artificial fingernails were the inspiration for the song. In fact, knowing she had to write a track for a movie about secretaries at office, she created a rhythm that sounded like a typerwrier when rubbing her long fingernails together. At a certain point in the song, we can hear a specific sound of a typewriter which was a tool that secretaries used in the 1980s. The song peacked at #1 during two weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 (http://www.billboard.com/) and also won the 1981 Grammy for Best Country Song (http://www.grammy.com/). “9 to 5” is the main song of Parton’s *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs* album (1980). The cover art of the album shows the different jobs an American woman can work. (see below)



Cover art of *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs* (1980)

The expression *odd jobs* refers to those small low-paying jobs which require little training or skill. We can see on the picture Parton being surrounded by tools that are linked to some specific jobs. These may include:painters, gardeners, cleaning agents, and secreteries among others. It is important to understand the American employment context because there is a clear distinction between odd jobs and professions. The former can be done by anyone without a specific grade, whereas the later require an education as for: federal employees, physicians, or college tenured professors. Unskilled workers hold part-time or full-time jobs (40 hours a week). They have no annual leave since America is the only developed country in the world that does not require employers to provide paid vaccation time. However, some CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) can offer their employees 10 paid days off a year at best. They are not entitled to two consecutive off days (saturday and sunday) and they need to work overtime to make ends meet. On top of that, they can be fired at the discretion of their employers at any moment because most of American states have adopted the *at-will employment* principle that allows the employers to lay off employees without having to provide a justification for that. On the other hand, when it comes to professional workers they hold a well paid permanent profession which means they have a kind of social stability and they can be sure they will not undergo an unfair dismissal. The federal laws grant them an annual paid vaccation in addition to some priviledges such as: regular week-ends, working hours without shifts or overtime, paying bonuses, and career advancement.

The expression *9 to 5* means the 8 hours a day most Americans work for making a living. The term *white collar* was coined by American writer Upton Sinclair to refer to the white dress shirts of office workers.

"Workin' 9 to 5, what a way to make a livin' ; barely gettin' by, it's all takin' and no givin' ; they just use your mind and they never give you credit ; it's enough to drive you crazy if you let it" (Parton, 9-16). Parton draws attention to the fact that millions of Americans including women struggle to get ahead. Single mothers with no education have no options ; they need to hold a low-wage job to make a living because otherwise they cannot pay their rent, their bills, and clear their debts. A 2013 survey of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (US Department of Labor) shows that 3.3 million workers earned wages at or below the minimum ($7.25 per hour), making up 4.3% of hourly workers (http://www.bls.gov/). Women make up 62.4% of the lower-paying workforce in contrast to 37.6% of the male workforce which means that women substantially outnumber men in low-wage jobs. However, the findings of the federal government were challenged by the National Women's Law Center in 2014. Its survey claims that low-wage jobs pay $10.10 per hour or less, which means that in reality at least 20 million of American workers are in low-wage jobs with women making up two-thirds of the golbal workforce.(http://www.nwlc.org/)

In the early 1980s, holding a position as an office secretary for a woman was not a big deal. Basically, she needed to have a twelfth grade level (the last year of high school). Her administrative duties included typing out letters with a typerwriter, maintaining files and documents, and arranging business meetings. A secretary needed also to be pretty and if she were a blonde, it was quite likely she would be hired as a receptionist or as the boss's secretary. "9 to 5 for service and devotion ; you would think that I would deserve a fair promotion ; want to move ahead but the boss won't seem to let me ! I swear sometimes that man is out to get me !" (17-24). Now, it becomes obvious that one of the problems for secretaries is their sexist and vicious male boss who tries to dominate them. Parton breaks down the cliché of the pretty blonde secretary who brings a coffee to her boss and is kind with him only to get a promotion she deserves. Similarly, Parton's role as a secretary in the film *9 to 5* contends the idea of empowering working women at office. She is an attractive blonde secretary who refuses the advances of her sexist, autocratic, and hypocritical boss, while he keeps on harrassing her endlessly. Even so, she finds the way to overthrow him with the help of two other secretaries.

In the ending lines of the song, Parton reveals that despite the fact women undergo harassment and stress in their work, the American economic system prevents them from empowering themselves as she sings : "It's a rich man's game no matter what they call it ; and you spend your life puttin' money in his wallet" (45-48). There are further aspects in the song that can be analyzed but it is high time to conclude.

Conclusion : a stereotype…. or an archetype ?

Dolly Parton adequately deconstructed the blonde stereotype. What then shall we do with it? Shall we censor all the words, jokes and stereotypes that undermine the feminine gender ? No, it does not make any sense. Third-wave feminism proposes to bring about some changes in the representations of women in TV, media, and popular culture and to update the languge that defines them. Others, think otherwise. Washington Post columnist and movie critic Ann Hornaday warns that the dumb blonde is " an archetype in need of saving" (Ann Hornaday 2014: http://www.washingtonpost.com/). There are thousands of blogs, websites, and social network profile pages which are dedicated to blonde jokes. Some blonde women celebrate their blondness and play with this singular trait. Everyone likes a little self-depracating humour. We all laugh at dumb blonde jokes, but it does not necessarly mean we believe blondes are literally dumb.

More seriously, the main challenges facing American women nowadays are of an economic and social nature and concern the improvement of their living standard. The American woman will not be fully emancipated until she stops thinking about her existential condition in the working life. The federal government should force hegemonic corporations to raise wages of their employees and particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.The so-called middle class family of the suburban is fadding away. Fullfilling the American dream is becoming practically impossible for everybody. People are just trying to get by and no one can deny this reality. I shall conclude with a somehow utopian prediction of American historian and activist Howard Zinn (1922-2010) which he stated in his best-selling and influential *A People's History of the United States* (1980). In chapter 23 entitled 'The coming revolt of the guards', he argues:

> In a highly developed society, the Establishment cannot survive without the obedience and loyalty of millions of people who are given small rewards to keep the system going: the soldiers and police, teachers and ministers, administrators and social workers, technicians and production workers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, transport and communication workers, garbage men and firemen. These people-the employed, the somewhat priviledged- are drawn into alliance with the elite. They become the guards of the system, buffers between the upper and lower classes. If they stop obeying, the system falls (Zinn 1980 : 635).

Perhaps, the guards of the coming revolt do not belong to the above category of middle class workers who according to Zinn are given 'small rewards'. Middle class workers enjoy a decent standard of living and they have no good reasons to be discontented with the system. The ones who are really concerned with bringing about a change are the jobless and the low paid workers. In these tough times, poor people democratically voice their outrage by protesting out in the streets. The guards are there. The discontent has already commenced with the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011.

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