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Practical Femininity: The Student Development of *Legally Blonde*'s Elle Woods

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For many students, college is an erratic stage of life, characterized by both excitement and distress. This dynamic process can take a student through a paradigm shift into an unanticipated life path. A student may encounter challenges in relationship negotiation, career exploration, and morality re-evaluation; however, resolving these issues can lead to becoming a more mature individual, who is able to support others through a concrete sense of self (Skoe, 2014). These experiences can also be helped or hurt through contextual factors such as social support and a campus' cultural fit (Patton et al., 2016). In the same way, Elle Woods (see Appendix) of *Legally Blonde* undergoes spontaneous and jarring changes in her college and personal life, spurring her to develop morally and build on her sense of self-authorship through her

identity. Just as the film emphasizes that Elle Woods is a multi-faceted individual in the face of sexist stereotypes, a single student development theory would not be sufficient to fully encapsulate her growth. Following a summary of the film, Elle Woods' development will be connected to both Gilligan's Theory of Women's Moral Development and Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory to detail her growth into a compassionate and self-assured role model.

Plot Synopsis

Luketic's (2001) *Legally Blonde* introduces University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Delta Nu sorority president Elle Woods as an optimistic but ultimately naïve fashion merchandising major. She highly values her sorority and her boyfriend Warner Huntington III (see Appendix), but her aspirations are crushed when he breaks up with Elle due to her hyper-femininity not fitting the image he wants for his next stage of life: Harvard Law School. With the goal of winning back Warner, Elle gets accepted into Harvard but experiences culture shock and social isolation due to her glamorous lifestyle. With gradual support from classmates, professors, and friends as well as a rising interest in succeeding in the law program itself, Elle excels in classes and secures a prestigious law internship, placing her on the defense of a Delta Nu sister. Though sexism and misunderstandings tear down her self-confidence as a law student at a critical point in the case, Elle receives a female professor's validation, regains her sense of identity, and uses her unique knowledge set to win the case. By the end of the film, Elle is a role model, proving that her femininity and compassion are vital skillsets rather than detractors to

her ability and self-worth as a law student and a person with conviction to help others.

A Pillar of Compassion: Gilligan's Theory of Women's Moral Development

In her relational and professional experiences throughout the film, Elle Woods proceeds through the three levels of Gilligan's Theory of Women's Moral Development. Gilligan's theory includes three levels of *orientation to individual survival*, *goodness as self-sacrifice*, and the *morality of non-violence*, with the transition periods of *selfishness to responsibility* and *goodness to truth* between the levels (Patton et al., 2016). As with many stage models, transition between levels of morality can result from a personal crisis such as a breakup of a relationship (Skoe, 2014). Similar to the first level of orientation to individual survival, Elle cannot fully process her grief and her wish for Warner's approval. Still, she does not show particularly self-centered behavior, wanting more to please others than herself, though it may be considered self-centered to not consider her friends' suggestions against moving to Harvard to pursue Warner.

Her first transition from *selfishness to responsibility* still centers on her attachment issues to Warner, pushing her to spontaneously apply to Harvard and take on her self-appointed responsibility of passing the Law School Admission Test. Elle considers this the "right thing" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 347) to do for her relationship. She slightly departs from the standard structure of this first transition and the second level of *goodness as self-sacrifice*, as the social acceptance prioritized in this second level has been her priority since the beginning (Patton et al., 2016). Elle lets her good-

ness be defined by Warner, which is characterized less as standard goodness and more as superiority to other women in his life such as fellow Harvard Law School student Vivian Kensington (see Appendix) to whom Warner is engaged.

When her conversation with Warner at a party reveals that she will likely never be good enough for him, Elle instead begins her second transition from *goodness to truth*. This turning point marks the beginning of her open acknowledgement of his sexism, inviting her to question why she was placing his approval ahead of her own worth as emphasized by Patton and colleagues (2016), and evolves her goal into proving her value as an academic individual. Her goals become more internally motivated, though her ego is still focused on the opinions of others overall. Her full transition to truth is marked by Elle posing as her manicurist and friend Paulette Bonafonté's (see Appendix) fake attorney in order to take back her dog from her ex-boyfriend, showing Elle her potential in the field of law to be a force of good.

Gilligan's third level of morality, *nonviolence*, includes aspects such as a more informed understanding of the self and one's morality, informed by maintaining one's identity and using one's strengths to care for others and oneself (Patton et al., 2016). Similarly, Elle maintains her own sense of morality when confronted by her peers and professor on her internship client and former Delta Nu sister Brooke Taylor-Windham's (see Appendix) case when they pressure her to reveal Brooke's embarrassing alibi (of having a liposuction that would damage her fitness business) for her husband's murder. There is a possible gender dichotomy in the scene as well, as the men, more likely to be

socialized to prioritize the rules of justice in morals, lean towards using the alibi regardless of emotional consequence, while Elle opposes this view with her own relationship-focused morals benefitting Brooke's trust (van Nistelrooij & Leget, 2017). Elle refuses to disrespect Brooke's privacy while defending her case, gaining Vivian's respect, and recognizing the strength of her own kindness when Brooke changes attorneys from Elle's internship supervisor Professor Callahan (see Appendix) to Elle.

Elle's dedication to compassion, while learning to stand up for herself when Professor Stromwell (see Appendix) urges her to return to the case after Callahan pressures her to trade sexual favors for a career opportunity, is also shown through her Delta Nu friends and Paulette arriving as support. Elle is situated within the scene metaphorically and physically as a pillar of compassion towards her friends and client, an approach that secures the bonds that support her professionally and personally. She ends the film as her class's chosen speaker at graduation, emphasizing in her speech the vital importance of having conviction in one's beliefs and remembering faith for both others and oneself, summarizing the balanced morality of the last of Gilligan's stages which have assisted in her self-authorship growth.

Deciding One's Own Worth: Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory

Baxter Magolda's Self Authorship Theory contains the three elements of *trusting one's internal voice* to control one's actions, *building an internal foundation* to guide one's actions and create an identity influenced by life events, and ultimately *securing internal*

commitments by balancing internal beliefs and external reality (Patton et al., 2016). The path to self-authorship is a non-linear one based on personal characteristics and environmental contexts, leading one to develop more authentic connections within those contexts (Patton et al., 2016). Patton and colleagues (2016) also list the phases of self-authorship as *following formulas*, arriving at a *crossroads*, *becoming the author of one's life*, and establishing an *internal foundation*.

Elle's journey of gaining agency over her life-path begins with her in the first of Magolda's phases, allowing external forces such as Warner to define who she is and from where she should gain approval. She relies on the societal expectation that she prioritizes romance above all else, leading her to have a negative emotional reaction when her relationship dissolves, not by her choice. Her decision to move to Harvard is significantly relationship- and approval-bound. A difference in this phase as Elle proceeds through her development is that she does rebuff some of the discouragement vocalized by outside sources such as her parents and school advisor. Still, this difference in development may be because Warner's external influence trumps others' influence in her decisions, still rendering her path decided by others. However, when Elle discovers that law school is a challenge to adapt to and that Warner does not see her achieving any success in the field (as well as discovering he is engaged to Vivian), her goals of fixing her relationship become unrealistic and set her on a metaphorical crossroads.

When emerging adults realize that their externally decided plan is not feasible, this crisis pushes them to explore options and problem-solve (Cohen et al., 2013). Elle arrives at the second phase, the *cross-*

roads, when she acknowledges that she must prove her potential as a law student to others, who are ostracizing her. A notable exception to this ostracization is Emmett Richmond (see Appendix), who immediately supports her without judgement on campus and during her internship. In another slight difference from the usual self-authorship formula, phase two is characterized by the questioning of alternative paths, while Elle's *cross-roads* is immediately followed by her actions of studying more earnestly (Patton et al., 2016).

As Elle alters her goal from gaining Warner's approval to succeeding in the law program, she is recognizing her own strengths and standing up for her own potential against Warner and her peers' doubts, developing a stronger self-concept and re-negotiating her relationships as outlined by the phase of *becoming the author of one's life* (Patton et al., 2016). In another way, however, Elle has still not taken action against her larger issue of relying on others' opinions to define her self-worth, now using competition as a reason to compare herself to her peers and to Vivian in particular. This need to conform to others' expectations represents itself through her fashion choices, becoming more monotone in times of greater conformity and more femininely pink (the color representing her authentic self) in times of greater self-confidence, culminating in her fully pink suit when becoming Brooke's winning attorney. The process of this developing self-authorship in the film is also shown through Elle standing by her priorities towards protecting Brooke's alibi, befriending her peers, and finding success in law practice by way of her hard work and social insight. Her increased engagement in the practice of law is tied to her equally increased intrinsic motivation to use

this knowledge to actively help others, rather than the study being a steppingstone toward Warner's approval (Arvanitis & Kalliris, 2017).

The fourth and last of Magolda's phases, establishing an *internal foundation*, is achieved when one has a grounded belief system created from inner strength with openness to change and acceptance of responsibility to others (Patton et al., 2016). Elle has achieved the fourth of Magolda's phases when she has cemented her internal belief system prioritizing faith in Brooke and valuing her feminine knowledge to reveal the pool boy Enrique's lie about an affair with Brooke (though her outwards monotone appearance implies further development to truly be secure in herself). A difference in this phase is that Elle's strong belief system is not characterized by flexibility, but by her stubbornness presenting her theory to her defense team.

Again, there is a temporary loss in her *internal foundation* when Callahan reveals a sexual motivation to offering Elle her internship. Despite Emmett's support, her belief in her own capabilities becomes ungrounded, falling back into the first phase of basing one's self-worth on external opinions. There is also less mutuality in her relationships due to Callahan and Vivian turning against her (Patton et al., 2016). Still, Stromwell fights this by communicating to Elle her high expectations of her, using her empathy as a woman to encourage Elle back on the path of self-authorship and responsibility towards her case. Arriving back to the courtroom in a distinctly pink suit advertising her renewed self-image, Elle uses her knowledge of both law and hair care to find the hole in Brooke's stepdaughter's timeline of the murder, with her confessing guilt, and Elle winning the case and Brooke's

freedom. Elle's speech at her graduation reinforces her confidence in her values and priorities, becoming completely secure in using her femininity in a practical way in conjunction with her academics to succeed in her career goals and connections.

Conclusion

Elle Woods develops both as an individual and legal professional throughout her challenges in *Legally Blonde*, exemplifying how Gilligan's moral framework and Magolda's path of self-authorship can intersect in a college student's journey. Especially in the case of Magolda's non-linear framework, Elle may find future crises that could shake her purpose, identity, or beliefs. This is even more possible if she were to encounter contexts that included factors of unfamiliar culture, ethnicity, ability, sex, or gender, though the foundations of her identity, morals, and beliefs to serve as a useful skillset in navigating these lifestyle changes. Her development within herself will also lend to the quality of connections and social support she maintains in the future. As of the end of the film, Elle has found congruence in her vocational ability, unique beliefs, and care-based morals, using a practical form of femininity to enrich her own life and that of those around her.

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Appendix

Character Cast of *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001)

Elle Woods: UCLA Delta Nu sorority president, majoring in fashion merchandising. After being broken up with by her boyfriend Warner for her vibrant lifestyle, she pursues him by entering Harvard Law School after he does and uses her optimism and determination to succeed in her studies.

Warner Huntington III: Former boyfriend of Elle, aiming to attend Harvard Law School to become a politician. He breaks up with Elle based on her not fitting

his image of a serious future senator's wife.

Emmett Richmond: Teaching assistant and attorney working for Callahan as a former Harvard Law School student. He is the first at the school to extend kindness to Elle and continues to support her journey into law throughout the film.

Vivian Kensington: Harvard Law School student who is engaged to Warner after his breakup with Elle as she better fits his image of a serious wife. She is competitive, prideful, and initially dismissive of Elle.

Professor Callahan: Professor at Harvard Law School and attorney who supplies internships for Elle, Vivian, and Warner at his firm. He later sexually harasses Elle by offering a quid pro quo relationship for her continued law training.

Professor Stromwell: Strict, female professor at Harvard Law School and later supporter of Elle's journey as a woman practicing law.

Paulette Bonafonté: Manicurist and close companion of Elle. She is a confidante during Elle's stress, and Elle helps her with past and potential relationship struggles.

Brooke Taylor-Windham: Former Delta Nu sister and prominent fitness instructor who is being tried in court for the murder of her wealthy, older husband. Elle is an intern for Callahan on Brooke's case and supports Brooke's statement of innocence.

About the Author

Elizabeth S. Rodericks is a current graduate student in Bridgewater State University's Student Affairs Counseling MEd program. Her paper was completed in fall 2021 for Dr. Katherine Bender's College Student Development Theory course. Elizabeth's future goals include working in higher education advising and developing student success for first-generation, low-income (FGLI) college students.