

Essay

H.L. Mencken (1880–1956) was a critic of American life who often lampooned the mediocrity of American culture.

A Footnote on the Duel of Sex

1
2 If I were a woman I should want to be a blonde, with golden, silky hair, pink cheeks and sky-blue eyes. It
3 would not bother me to think that this color scheme was mistaken by the world for a flaunting badge of
4 stupidity; I would have a better arm in my arsenal than mere intelligence; I would get a husband by easy
5 surrender while the brunettes attempted it vainly by frontal assault.

6 Men are not easily taken by frontal assault; it is only strategem that can quickly knock them down. To be a
7 blonde, pink, soft and delicate, is to be a strategem. It is to be a ruse, a feint, an ambush. It is to fight under
8 the Red Cross flag. A man sees nothing alert and designing in those pale, crystalline eyes; he sees only
9 something helpless, childish, weak; something that calls to his compassion; something that appeals
10 powerfully to his conceit in his own strength. And so he is taken before he knows that there is a war. He
11 lifts his portcullis in Christian charity—and the enemy is in his citadel.

12 The brunette can make no such stealthy and sure attack. No matter how subtle her art, she can never hope
13 to quite conceal her intent. Her eyes give her away. They flash and glitter. They have depths. They draw the
14 male gaze into mysterious and sinister recesses. And so the male behind the gaze flies to arms. He may be
15 taken in the end—indeed, he usually is—but he is not taken by surprise; he is not taken without a fight. A
16 brunette has to battle for every inch of her advance. She is confronted by an endless succession of Dead
17 Man’s Hills¹, each equipped with telescopes, semaphores, alarm gongs, wireless. The male sees her clearly
18 through her densest smoke-clouds... But the blonde captures him under a flag of truce. He regards her
19 tenderly, kindly, almost pityingly, until the moment the gyves² are upon his wrists.

20 It is all an optical matter, a question of color. The pastel shades deceive him; the louder hues send him to
21 his artillery. God help, I say, the red-haired girl! She goes into action with warning pennants flying. The
22 dullest, blindest man can see her a mile away; he can catch the alarming flash of her hair long before he can
23 see the whites, or even the terrible red-browns, of her eyes. She has a long field to cross, heavily under

24 defensive fire, before she can get into rifle range. Her quarry has a chance to throw up redoubts, to dig
25 himself in, to call for reinforcements, to elude her by ignominious flight. She must win, if she is to win at all,
26 by an unparalleled combination of craft and resolution. She must be swift, daring, merciless. Even the
27 brunette of black and penetrating eye has great advantages over her. No wonder she never lets go, once her
28 arms are around her antagonist's neck! No wonder she is, of all women, the hardest to shake off!

Commentaire [PC1]: hunting

29 All nature works in circles. Causes become effects; effects develop into causes. The red-haired girl's dire
30 need of courage and cunning has augmented her store of those qualities by the law of natural selection. She
31 is, by long odds, the most intelligent and bemusing of women. She shows cunning, foresight, technique,
32 variety. She always fails a dozen times before she succeeds; but she brings to the final business the
33 abominable expertness of a Ludendorff³; she has learnt painfully by the process of trial and error. Red-
34 haired girls are intellectual stimulants. They know all the tricks. They are so clever that they have even cast a
35 false glamour of beauty about their worst defect—their harsh and gaudy hair. They give it euphemistic and
36 deceitful names—auburn, bronze, Titian. They overcome by their hellish arts that deep-seated dread of red
37 which is inborn in all of God's creatures. They charm men with what would even alarm bulls.

Commentaire [PC2]: Cf. apparently cyclical structure of the passage.

38 And the blondes, by following the law of least resistance, have gone in the other direction. The great
39 majority of them—I speak, of course, of natural blondes; not of the immoral wenches who work their
40 atrocities under cover of a synthetic blondeness—are quite as shallow and stupid as they look. One seldom
41 hears a blonde say anything worth hearing; the most they commonly achieve is a specious, baby-like
42 prattling, an infantile artlessness. But let us not blame them for nature's work. Why, after all, be intelligent?
43 It is, at best, no more than a capacity for unhappiness. The blonde not only doesn't miss it; she is even
44 better off without it. What imaginable intelligence could compensate her for the flat blueness of her eyes,
45 the xanthous⁴ pallor of her hair, the doll-like pink of her cheeks? What conceivable cunning could do such
46 execution as her stupendous appeal to masculine vanity, sentimentality, egoism?
47 If I were a woman I should want to be a blonde. My blondeness might be hideous, but it would get me a
48 husband, and it would make him cherish me and love me.

Commentaire [PC3]: art

Commentaire [PC4]: Ambiguity description: originally positive features, now associated with lack of depth ("flat") or colour/vitality ("pallor"), dissonance and strangeness ("xanthous") and artificiality ("doll-like")
→ masculine voice showing through? (cf. l. 8-10)

Commentaire [PC5]: Only occurrence of the word in the whole text

Suggested Outline

Apparently cyclical structure of the extract, with a clear echo between the opening and closing paragraphs, but progression from positive description of the blonde to underlining of the “hideous” artificiality of her features. Subtle shift in tone (starting in l. 20): introduction of scientific references, more and more caustic description of the three female types presented successively in the text.

I. “All is Fair in Love and War” (John Lyly, *Euphues*, 1578)

title (“Duel of Sex”, l. 1) < literary topos of the battle of the sexes

⇒ art of seduction as a form of war between men and women (e.g., Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* with the agonistic conversations between Katharina – the eponymous shrew – and Petruchio, for instance)

Somewhat (but not entirely) original: women are the attackers and men are the “quarry” (l. 24), which is usually a source of comedy in literary works (e.g., Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*, in which the eponymous character has to rebuff Mrs Slipslop’s almost carnivorous sexual advances)

Each woman has an “arsenal” of her own, based on the two main instruments of war mentioned in the passage → either intelligence or beauty (blonde = no intelligence, all beauty / redhead = all intelligence, no beauty / brunette = somewhere in the middle)

Men as object = prey, quarry, enemy force to be subdued, enemy citadel to be conquered

Spatialized description (gaining ground) → enemy = defeated and captured (nb. playful reversal of the idea that marriage imprisons women)

treatment → literary topos of *militia amoris* (with the extended metaphor of seduction as gender-based warfare) coloured by:

- experience of WWI (e.g., historical references to “Dead Man’s Hills” and military equipment in l. 16-17 or to “Ludendorff” in l. 33)
- mediaeval warfare (e.g., the references to the man’s “portcullis”, l. 10, and “citadel, l. 11, or even the “gyves”, l. 19)
- hunting (“quarry”, l. 23)
- bullfighting (l. 37)

So, mixed metaphor that straddles over various activities, various centuries and various geographical areas, endowing the argument with a certain appearance of universality

+ light, playful treatment of war

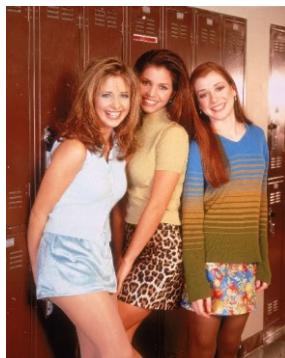
⇒ hyperbolic treatment of courtship = part of the comic tone of the extract, with archetypal depiction of each type of woman

II. An Ironic Feminine Triptych

Tripartition of women: virginal or angelic blondes (often sweet or dumb) [= child] / dark (and often brainy) brunettes [= wife] / fiery, devilish red-heads [= seductress]



Susan Sarandon (Jane), Michelle Pfeiffer (Sukie), and Cher (Alexandra) in George Miller's 1987 film adaptation of John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984)



Sarah Michelle Gellar (Buffy), Charisma Carpenter (Cordelia) and Alyson Hannigan (Willow) in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Plays on widespread clichés:

- blondes: associated with “stupidity” (l. 4) and “a specious, baby-like prattling, an infantile artlessness” (l. 41-42) ⇒ stereotype of the “blonde bombshell”
- brunettes: potentially “subtle” “art” (both l. 12), “dept[h]” (l. 13), “mysterious and sinister” (l. 14)
- redheads: “craft and resolution” (l. 26), “swift, daring, merciless” (l. 26), “intelligent and bemusing” (l. 31), “hellish arts” (l. 36)

Basis for those clichés is always one single physical characteristic: the colour of a woman’s hair. All the other features (physical appearance + personality) derive from that one element.

⇒ ironic reappropriation of those clichéd views of womanhood (e.g., l. 42-43)

→ distance b/w him and what he says (favours intelligence over appearances, contrary to what he appears to be saying)

Indeed, borrows from scientific idiom (e.g., “an optical matter” in l. 20; aphoristic phrasing, and “causes” and “effects” in l. 29)

speaker also seems to be going through a process of “trial and error” (l.33) → steps of scientific method leading to the formulation of “laws” (“the law of least resistance” in l. 38; “the law of natural selection” in l. 40)

⇒ taxonomic typology reminiscent of that of biologists (the three types of women becoming three different species within the same genus)

⇒ voice of the male intellectual showing through (see also rare or scientific-sounding words such as “gyves” in l. 19 or “xanthous” in l. 44 + “footnote[s]” in l. 1 are usually found in academic publications)

III. Artifice and Subterfuge

whole text as thought experiment → text itself as subterfuge, since it is based on the initial hypothetical clause (“If I were a woman...”, l. 2)

⇒ mastery of the authoritative essayist, passing judgement on each species + underlying reflection upon something other than femininity alone

Strong focus on sight → interplay of gazes + bewitching woman

seduction as a primarily visual experience (cf. based on the colour of the women's hair)

Physical description of the woman the speaker would want to be owes much to the tradition of the Petrarchan blazon (e.g. starts with the hair and works his way down), based as it is on illusion and an idealized representation of womanhood

⇒ primacy of appearances, so much so that the speaker underlines – ironically – the immorality of women who try to cheat (bottle blondes) in l. 38-39 ⇒ denunciation of artifice

→ shift in meaning: from “art” = skill (l. 12, and possibly 36) to “artlessness” (l. 42) // morality, to artistic reference (cf. Titian, in l. 36)

⇒ metatextual reflection on the power of art? + with possible pun on “artillery” = essay as a way to denounce and criticize → oblique satire

Despite framing effect, clear movement/progression of the text → blonde = from positive description (associated with elevation, l. 1) to artificial beauty l. 44-45 and “hideous” (l. 47) physical features

↳ critique of the writer targeted at men rather than women (because men would marry blonds even if their blondeness is hideous and even if they are idiots)

⇒ part of Mencken's denunciation of those whom Mencken calls “Homo Boobus” or the “Booboisie” (the ignorant middle class) by parodying and ridiculing their views

+ the Booboisie's ignorance is foregrounded because of their own apparent preference for the blonde's stupidity (over the intelligence of the brunette and redhead)

NB. ambiguous use of voice in the text → at once the voice of the academic, but also parody of what his targets might say or think; in any case, remains a masculine voice

e.g., Christian fundamentalists (see irony of “in Christian charity”, l. 11, and “God help, I say, the red-haired girl!”, l. 21)

Commentaire [PC6]: Laura's main characteristics: blond hair, soft pearly white skin (though flushing on occasion), long neck, singing voice, heavenly gait, penetrating speech, humility and chastity, reasonable mind

¹ **Dead Man' Hill:** the site of a famous battle near Verdun during World War I. Translate « Colline du Mort-Homme ».

² **gyves:** fetters.

³ **Ludendorff:** Erich Ludendorff was a German general. He was famous for the successful military strategies he devised during World War I.

⁴ **xanthous:** yellow.