



**HWA CHONG INSTITUTION (HIGH SCHOOL SECTION)**

**HUMANITIES RESEARCH PAPER 2021**

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Topic: Feminist analysis of the portrayal of the dumb blonde in *Legally Blonde* and *Gentlemen*

*Prefer Blondes*

Slant: Literature

Total Word Count (excluding appendixes, footnotes & references):

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**Declaration**

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

Student's Signature:

Date of Submission:

## Acknowledgements

**Abstract** (Not more than 150 words giving a rough outline of your research)

This paper will look into how the romanticisation and sexualisation of the dumb blonde simultaneously lifts and tears down blonde women, and investigate the development of this stereotype from the 1953 to 2001.

## Chapter 1: Introductory Chapter

### 1.1 Background

The figure of the dumb blonde is one that wears large amounts of makeup, teeters around in high heels, has perfectly coiffed locks and manicured hands, dresses in pink, and is “overly” passionate about her appearance, among other things. She is also, by the heterosexual male’s standards, conventionally attractive, with blonde hair, perfect skin and an “hourglass” body, thereby making her appealing to the male gaze. This figure of the “dumb blonde” has sparked many controversies within feminist discourse, with some arguing that the dumb blonde is reductive, an oversimplification of femininity, and implies femininity equates to idiocy through the perception and attitudes of those around her. However, others argue that the dumb blonde’s power is not so much in her knowledge of conventional things that the patriarchy place emphasis on such as taxes. Instead, her knowledge on things that are seen as shallow, such as fashion, hair care, or showmanship rather than “important” things such as doing taxes or having academic pursuits. This can come into play in unexpected ways, as seen in Elle Woods winning the lawsuit due to her knowledge of perm maintenance, or Lorelai being able to exploit her femininity to gain male attention and therefore earn money.

### 1.2 Rationale

The dumb blonde is a figure that has sparked much controversy, and this paper aims to find out whether the figure of the dumb blonde subverts feminist messages of feminine power, and to analyse the depictions of the figure of the dumb blonde, and thereby ascertain the significance of the blonde in the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminist movement. Hence this paper also seeks to compare and contrast depictions of the blonde, namely Monroe’s Lorelai and Witherspoon’s Elle, to find out what exactly empowers her, and how they have impacted the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminist movement from the 1950s to the early 2000s.

This research project will use Laura Mulvey’s theory of the Male Gaze to make a longitudinal comparison of how the blonde is portrayed in the films *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Legally Blonde* respectively. In addition to this, this paper seeks to find whether the blonde bombshell is ultimately feminist, and to add to feminist arguments surrounding the dumb blonde being reductive and insulting to feminine stereotypes, or that their femininity empowers them in a unique manner. This thus can add to feminist discourse on the dumb blonde, shedding insight on the figure.

### 1.3 Research Questions

1. How do the directors of *Legally Blonde* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* make use of the femininity of the dumb blonde to simultaneously empower and tear her down?
2. What are the differences, and implications of the messages behind these two films with regards to feminine empowerment, and how does this reflect onto its degree of “progressivity”?

#### **1.4 Thesis Statement**

The director of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sexualises the dumb blonde’s femininity, appealing to the male gaze, while the director of *Legally Blonde* challenges the perception of the blonde that the male gaze has constructed through Elle’s ownership of her femininity. While the former may seem to be less “empowering” and “progressive” than the latter, when *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is analysed as a product of its time, it can be said that it is “empowering” in its own way. However, when analysed from the lens of the present day, *Legally Blonde* is infinitely more empowering in how it breaks free from the idea of the necessity of the “male gaze”, and how men are necessary to the success of women.

#### **1.5 Scope of Research / Delimitation(s)**

This paper will investigate the figure of the dumb blonde in two films, namely *Legally Blonde* (2001) and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Literary theories used will include Laura Mulvey’s theory of the Male Gaze. Laura Mulvey’s Male Gaze Theory was chosen due to its relevance to the sexualisation of the blonde in film, and the theory’s’ impact on feminist film studies.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is significant in that it is the “original” depiction of the dumb blonde in modern literature, with Marilyn Monroe personifying that figure until her eventual suicide. *Legally Blonde* is also a very salient choice in that it is a more recent film, that has garnered the praise of feminist critics, and stars a “dumb blonde” as well. Both of them have different offerings as to why the blonde is glorified and torn down, adding to possible analysis.

#### **1.6 Significance of Research / Usefulness**

This paper will add to feminist discourse surrounding the idea of the blonde, and improve film critics’ understandings of how the blonde is portrayed. It will also take feminist analysis of the dumb blonde beyond the blonde being harmful to feminine presenting people in how “shallow” these people are portrayed to be, and discern the ways in which the blonde can be empowered through her hyper femininity. Ironic subversion of intended messages will also be analysed, to help this paper come to the conclusion of whether a hyper feminine woman is ultimately empowered or torn down by the stereotype of the dumb blonde.

#### **1.7 Limitations**

This paper will not delve into gender theory, and the contrast between masculinity and femininity, due to issues with word count. Only the blonde and her interactions with her peers in *Legally Blonde* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* will be analysed as well.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 The stereotype of the dumb blonde

The figure of the dumb blonde, in essence, is the “ideal beauty standard” of the 1950s, and femininity embodied. As put by James Harvey, “she (Marilyn Monroe) was so much inside the fantasy, so alive with it, that she made everyone else around seem almost like an abstraction of sex” (Harvey, 1994) Marilyn Monroe is the perfect example of the blonde, in fact, she can be seen to be the original “blonde bombshell”. This can be read in the sense that she is a feminine ideal, lusted over by men, herein lies the downside of the blonde’s beauty. She is reduced merely to her sex appeal, and she is mainly portrayed in how she is seen in relation to the perception of men. How she is marketed solely by how attractive she is meant to be, also reveals how she is seen only in relation to her beauty in the eyes of men rather than of her own merits as a person.

In tandem with Harvey’s points on Monroe, Cella puts this idea forth: “However, Russell's performance as blonde spectacle in the courtroom signifies more than her friendship with Monroe's Lorelei; this climatic scene underscores that the construction, or even imitation, of feminine beauty has as much power as the real thing, because Russell is able to use her "spectacle" to seduce the male courtroom and divert attention away from Monroe.” (Cella, 2004) This agrees with Harvey in that Cella argues that Lorelai does have sex appeal, however, it adds to this idea through how Monroe’s Lorelai is able to make use of this sex appeal in the film to her own ends. Lorelai makes use of her beauty to manipulate and turn the Male Gaze in her favour, making her the one controlling the men, all while having them think they are in control, by virtue of them being men. There also exists some self-reflexivity within *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, where the directors make use of the blonde stereotype, making fun of the male courtroom being by Monroe’s highly sexualised dance routine, while simultaneously aware that a portion of their market would be part of the very “gaze” they are criticising, thus having the costume design dressing her as scantily as possible. The entire scene in and of itself is ironic on multiple levels in how the lawyers and even the Justice started dancing and clapping around Lorelai, with the Justice banging his gavel, half to try and calm the courtroom, yet the rhythm of the hits of the gavel are along to the music, ironic in how it is a call to order, being used as an instrument to Lorelai’s antics. Hence, Lorelai’s power can therefore perhaps lie within her beauty, but as expressed before, the fact that her only power relies on the male gaze itself is rather problematic. However, *Legally Blonde* is the antithesis of this concept, where Reese Witherspoon’s Elle Woods was grossly underestimated due to her presentation and overall femininity, however, her feminine knowledge of hair care proved useful in helping her win her case. Elle’s looks worked against her, but allowed her to rise up as an underdog, while Lorelai’s looks worked for her, but made her not able to wield much social power independent of men. However, this was made up by her knowledge of being able to manipulate her spectacle, ensnaring men in her façade of perceived naivete, when she was the one controlling the puppet strings all along.

### 2.2 Mulvey’s Male Gaze

As Laura Mulvey (1975) puts it, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”, and “Women displayed as sexual object is leitmotif of erotic spectacle”. This depicts how the dichotomy of “male” and “female” in film, and the inherent power dynamics in film, which is the core of “Male Gaze Theory”, where women’s power, ironically, ultimately still lies in men’s inherent power of

being the subject rather than stemming from her own ability. In a rather “meta” way of seeing things, the only way actresses are able to get paid is via being objects to the men outside of the silver screen. And in a darker sense, women also need to sleep with male directors to get into their good graces, as documented by much of Hollywood’s history, where women need to make use of their bodies and the fact that they are objectified to be able to become a subject on the screen. However, while the subject of erotic spectacle is mostly the woman, suggesting that the woman is seen as an object of sexual desire, in *Legally Blonde* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the protagonist, or the “main subject” is always the woman. This may be due to the use of irony in said films, as being “chick flicks”, these films are catered to women, and hence make use of the Male Gaze to poke fun of the sexualisation of women in other films of the era. The sexualisation of men, in addition to women in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* also prove that the directors were indeed aware of the implications of the male gaze, and made use of it to satirize the over sexualisation of the blonde, thus subverting the sexualization of women.

In response to Mulvey’s 1975 essay, Clifford T. Manlove states “The gaze has a power beyond mere empiricism, and although this power can be used by the subject, unintended consequences will follow. Rippling outward from the path of the gaze, these consequences include: revealing the location and motives of the subject, reversals of hierarchy or subject/object relations, and repeated, vertiginous encounters with the deadly real”. When the subject of the male gaze gazes back at the gazer, the male gaze is able to reflect not only how the filmmakers perceive the subject/object dichotomy within the film itself, but also outside of the silver screen. The audience is participating in the subject/object dichotomy, wherein the characters on the screen are simultaneously subjects to their own lives, but objects to the audience. Yet, the audience are subjects to the screen but objects to the filmmakers, who are pandering to their view. This can be seen in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, where while Lorelai is the “object” of sexual desire in and out of the film, she is also the subject of attention as a character, and a subject in how she manages to manipulate Esmond and Piggy into gifting her expensive gifts, thus using her attractiveness to manipulate the patriarchy. While the patriarchy holds men at the top, it is torn down by this blonde, who by convincing men that she is “simple” and “naïve”, thus makes her think they have control over her, she holds financial power over them: she can make them buy anything she wants them to, due to their lust for her. Hence, it can be seen in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* that the idea of the Male Gaze and its reversals of power dichotomies is indeed one that fits into feminist discourse.

### 2.3 Mulvey’s Male Gaze in relation to the blonde

Cella holds the position that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is more so a feminist film, rather than one that objectifies women and panders to the male gaze. This can be seen from Cella writing, “Despite the popularity of Mulvey's feminist theory, I am not convinced that these two characters perform simply to be "consumed" by the male gaze. Like theorists Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, I am enamored by the power, energy, and with that Monroe and Russell exude on stage. Arbuthnot and Seneca argue that the film contains two important feminist themes: "women's resistance to objectification by men and women's connection to each other." I would extend their argument to include a third theme, one that highlights the false and constructed nature of the blonde spectacle and that allows a certain level of irony to inform our reading of their on- and off-stage performances.” (Cella, 2004) Arbuthnot and Seneca posit that in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Lorelai and Dorothy push against being sexualised, in addition to having a close, developed relationship. Hence, the two theorists thus make the link that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is hence a feminist film. On the other hand, Cella posits that these two ideas are valid, but suggests a level of irony employed in the film. While I agree with

Cella's analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and the depiction of the blonde being one that is exaggerated and over the top, however, it would be too simplistic to merely chalk it down to irony being the sole driving factor behind the blonde spectacle. While the blonde is a satire to the trained eye, it can also be read as a movie that appeals to the male gaze to the untrained eye: Monroe's sex appeal is not only satirised but also being made use of – and why can these two ideas not coexist simultaneously? The movie can attempt to do both things, to be for the male gaze, and feminist critiques alike. On the other hand, I mildly disagree with their points. On the former idea, while the women are indeed “humanised” and are aware that they are objectified, they are still objects of sexual desire, and in the case of Monroe, are accepting of it when there is something to gain for her. On the latter argument, it can be said that the full development of female lead characters is a big step for the 1950s, and their lasting friendship despite their clear differences also subverts the expectations that the blonde is shallow and only fraternises with those like her. Hence, some validity is said to be had in Arbuthnot and Seneca's argument.

In response to Mulvey's theory of women being objectified for the male gaze, Carroll write this: “What appears to be meant by this is that scenes are blocked, paced, and staged, and the camera is set up relative to that blocking in order to maximize the display potential of the female form. Undoubtedly, as John Berger has argued, many of the schemata for staging the woman as a display object are inherited from the tradition of Western easel painting, where an elaborate scenography for presenting female beauty in frozen moments was developed.” (Carroll, 1990) This does ring true in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, wherein Monroe's bosom is frequently found in the middle of the screen, thus objectifying and making use of her “female form” to pander to the male gaze. However, in *Legally Blonde*, this is not the case, wherein this aspect of the male gaze is not so apparent. This may thus show the progression of the influence of feminist film studies, and how it has impacted the film industry such that the sexualization of women is discouraged.

## 2.4 Conclusion of Lit Review

Lorelai and Elle can both be analysed with the lens of the Male Gaze in how they both blur the lines between “Subject” and “Object”, where the respective directors make the argument that while both characters can be seen to be “objects” to the men in the film, they still are “subjects” of their own narratives, and thus are portrayed as sympathetic characters, rather than a pretty side love interest. In making use of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, the dumb blonde in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is one that is aware of the subject/object dichotomy and thus manipulates it to her advantage, while *Legally Blonde* directly critiques the idea of the Male Gaze, challenging the idea that women need men to “be someone” in the world.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This paper will make use of Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze to analyse how the dumb blonde is portrayed. Analysis will be made on how the dumb blonde is presented, including but not limited to her wardrobe, makeup, mannerism and the like. In addition to this, analysis on how the blonde interacts with other women and potential love interests around her will be made to find out where the dumb blonde stands in the power hierarchy, and whether the Male Gaze detracts from, or empowers her.

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Interpretation

*Legally Blonde* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* both can be considered to be “feminist” films – however, the manner of which their specific protagonists are empowered is highly different, where *Legally Blonde* takes a more “independent woman” route, and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* challenges the structure of the patriarchy via techniques of subversion.

The male gaze in film dichotomises attractiveness and intelligence, where these ideas are perceived to be mutually exclusive. This can be seen from the attitudes in *Legally Blonde*, where in the scene where two girls in Elle’s sorority, Delta Nu, ask her “Oh my god. What are you doing?” when they walk past her studying in her room. Elle then replies “Reading about the LSATs”, and one of the girls say “My cousin had that. Apparently, you get a really bad rash in your-”, and proceeds to gesture toward her lower body, to which the other sorority girl replies with a sound of pity. First, the tone of which the girls ask “what are you doing?” made it sound as if Elle were caught in the midst of something scandalous rather than studying. The shock and horror at Elle studying highlights the fact that sorority girls are perceived to be solely one dimensional by everyone around them, including the women who are supposed to support them through thick and thin, i.e. their sorority sisters. Hence, the fact that Elle wants to achieve something outside of being merely another pretty face, to pursue law of all careers, does not make sense with the preconceived image that they had of Elle, especially given her position as sorority president, the “ultimate” blonde. This perhaps also is a statement on internalised misogyny, where sorority girls have been conditioned into thinking that their sole purpose of existence is to be pretty and ultimately become a model rather than pursue any academic interests that they might have. It can also be read that the filmmaker makes the point that conventionally attractive women are continuously objectified by men, and made to believe that they are only good to be one dimensional objects of desire and nothing else. The filmmakers also show how the male gaze makes women “objects” in how when Warner breaks up with Elle, he says, “If I’m to be a senator, well I need to marry a Jackie. Not a Marilyn.” This shows how Warner sees women to be merely ornaments and accessories, no better than bags that can be thrown aside once the season ends. Elle is his girlfriend for when he wants to “have fun” in college, however, his plan was always to marry someone who he deemed to be “serious”, unlike Elle, the “dumb blonde”, who was not fit for his “public image”. The allusion to Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe also shows how he saw her as a side fling, just as the alleged affair that Marilyn Monroe had with John F Kennedy – Jackie Kennedy was the perfect First Lady, performing her duties remarkably well, while allegedly, Monroe was merely a side affair of JFK’s. This is a feminist criticism of how the male gaze dehumanises and makes women “part” of their male partners in how they are “chosen” by said men, rather than it being a mutual decision to date. It is seen to be a criticism rather than a portrayal as the protagonist in this case is Elle, rather than Warner, and Elle is portrayed as more sympathetic in her constant sniffing and overall sadness over the situation, making her seem “human”, as opposed to the callousness of Warner, who merely looks around furtively, blaming Elle’s tears on a “bad salad”. Hence, it can be seen as the filmmakers showing how men attempt to dehumanise and make women their objects, and how foolish it is, given the fact that women are people with feelings as well, and not mere puppets or “eye candy” to elevate one’s social status.

However, it can be said that *Legally Blonde* is a critique of said “stereotype” in how despite not understanding why Elle is choosing to go to Harvard Law School given their lack of academic interest, they support her nonetheless, as seen in her sorority mate helping her study for the SATs, and her friend offering her a “lucky scrunchie”. Beyond that, her ultimate “character arc” ends in her becoming the valedictorian of Harvard Law School, and succeeding in her defending of her client in a murder case. This shows the development of her self-confidence and view of herself, from her limiting her perception of herself to be what others

see in her and want her to be, to her constructing her own narrative and acting on it, becoming a multifaceted character who is beautiful, feminine and academically inclined.

That being said, *Legally Blonde* can be subversive of its message of female empowerment, such as when one sorority member offers Elle her “lucky scrunchie”, saying that it “helped me pass Spanish”, to which another girl replies “You passed Spanish because you gave Professor Montoya a lap dance after the final”, to which the first girl replies, “Yeah, luckily”, followed by an oblivious eye roll and a wide grin. This is an attempt at a joke on how sorority girls and blondes often use their “feminine wiles” to convince their male teachers into giving them better grades, which, while is a slightly off-colour joke, and is highly unprofessional of the professor, it is also builds on stereotypes of relations between men and women. It paints men as unable to control their impulses and sexual urges, and the blonde as exploitative of that fact, which is not only untrue, but also extremely unethical on both ends. This joke is very much not in keeping with the films’ feminist stance on female empowerment, thus subverting its message with an attempt at humour. This subversion is also seen in how Elle’s motivation to join Harvard Law School is not for achievement, to seek justice for others, but rather, was part of a poorly planned attempt to win Warner back. This perhaps reinforces the mindset that blondes’ only motivation in life is fashion, beauty and men, and have no aspirations for their professional careers. While it supports this dichotomy, it is important to note that Elle as a character has not been fully “developed” as her own person beyond the sorority in this part of the film, and thus perhaps would be better read as a critique on how she is perceived rather than on her actual character.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* takes a rather different approach to its view on the theory of the male gaze, where although Lorelai’s “power” stems from a man, it can be said that in how she is able to manipulate men to do what she wants, she thus is challenging the power structure of the patriarchy in her own unique way. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Lorelai is portrayed to be “simplistic”, and “idiotic”, however, interestingly, this “simplicity” is played up in front of rich men who she can manipulate into giving her material items. This is seen in her wonder at the round windows on the ship. This “innocence at the world” is perhaps an attempt to make herself seem vulnerable, and play to the gendered expectations of the patriarchy. The patriarchy’s “ideal woman” is one who is “simple”, “demure”, and “easily manipulated”. On the surface, Lorelai presents herself as such: in front of rich men who pay and gift her ostentatious objects, she pretends to be an airy idiot, which is far from what her inner personality. Inside, she is calculating and intelligent, as seen in a scene where she manipulates the head waiter to seat her and Dorothy next to Henry Spofford III who she heard “owns a state, a big one, too”, in an attempt to set the two up. Lorelai tells the head waiter that once when she was at a hotel in Atlantic City, men bribed the head waiter with large sums of money to place them at her table, to which this head waiter admits to doing himself. However, Lorelai claims that the head waiter at the Atlantic City hotel had to pay them all back because she had all her meals delivered to her room. She then insinuates that if Henry Spofford III is not sat at her table, she would not show, thus forcing the head waiter to refund the people paying him. The head waiter immediately agrees to this. This shows the cunning of Lorelai: she is not as simple as she puts herself out to be, and completely understands how her beauty can be manipulated to make men do what she wants. However, this plan to set Lorelai up with Henry backfires on her in how Henry Spofford III turns out to be a young boy, thus ruining her plans for Dorothy to get with a rich man. The difference between the facade she presents and what she actually stands for inside shows female empowerment: she is completely aware of the structure of the patriarchy, and how to appeal to the male gaze, and in doing so, materially, she benefits from it. This is supported by what Lorelai says at the end of the film: “I can be smart when it’s

important. But most men don't like it." She admits to being aware of how the patriarchy functions and is formed, and her actions thus stem from wanting to achieve the "American Dream" with a rich husband. The idea that women could only rely on the wealth of rich men is a sad truth of the 50s, and the fact that she is manipulating the system in her favour perhaps is empowerment in and of itself. Perhaps it isn't as "progressive" as in *Legally Blonde*, where Elle achieves success on her own merit rather than through a rich husband, however, it is necessary to consider the socio-political environment of the time. Women in the 1950s were encouraged to "conform" and "domesticity" was prized – Lorelai pretended to conform and be the perfect wife, but inside, she had a hidden agenda and a cunning intellect. Hence, perhaps it can be said that it is a feminist piece for its time – by manipulating the man and seeing things from Lorelai's point of view, it subverts the idea of the domination of the "male gaze" – yes, Lorelai is overly sexualized, however, the importance of her sexualization within *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is that she is aware of the power structures, and manipulates this to gain what she wants, to achieve her own happiness of living a life of luxury with a rich man.

There are multiple similarities and differences in *Legally Blonde* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Key similarities lie in how the protagonists are both blondes, are portrayed to be "overly simplistic", and by the end of the film, find success. However, the difference lies in the growth of Lorelai and Elle. Where Elle grows to become valedictorian and wins her clients' case, Lorelai manages to convince Esmond Sr to let her marry Esmond, thus achieving her "American Dream". Elle's success lies in her own independent abilities in school and in the courtroom, Lorelai's lies in how she is able to successfully convince Esmond Sr to let her marry Esmond. It can be argued from the simplistic point of view that Elle's success is more "powerful" as a statement for the feminist movement in how she made said achievement of her own accord, it is important to note that part of her success was due to her mentor, Professor Callahan, took a sexual liking to her, making the movie's message more distorted, making Elle's achievements not entirely of her own merit, but rather as a product of the Male Gaze. On the other hand, while it is true that Lorelai's success can be seen as shallow and ultimately dependent on male figures, namely her fiancé and his father, her marriage to him testifies in how she has managed to ultimately manipulate the patriarchy in her favour, a feat for a blonde in her time.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

All in all, while *Legally Blonde* stands out over *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as the more "progressive" film, it still has a couple scenes that are problematic in nature, and subvert its message of female empowerment. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* can be considered to be unfeminist by fourth wave feminists in how it overly sexualises Monroe, however, by analysing it as a product of its time, it can be said that it is a fairly progressive film, where women are portrayed as more than "sex objects", and Lorelai, although portrayed to be a "gold-digger", is also rather sympathetic as a person.

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