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# Marilyn Monroe's On-screen Spectrum of Femininity

## Types and Nature of Her Movie Characters

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The article makes an attempt to create a typology of movie characters played by Marilyn Monroe. Her film roles are classic examples of typecasting. Since Monroe was a type of a sexy blonde, that was what she played in her movies. Whether it was a comedy or drama, her sexiness defined the entire character. However, the attributes of the sex bomb Marilyn combined with other features: of an innocent child, a lost and helpless girl, a sensitive and tender woman. These three types of characters: a child-woman, a female buddy, and a woman-partner, make up the full picture of Monroe's femininity with which viewers interact during the cinematic mystery and which create an artistic, social and cultural phenomenon called 'Marilyn Monroe.'

**Key words:** Marilyn Monroe, postwar America, 1950s, Hollywood, stardom, movie character

## Introduction

The year 2022 marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marilyn Monroe's death. The platinum blonde, whispery-voiced actress is one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's indisputable icons. She was one of the last movie stars produced by the Hollywood Star System: beautiful, extremely feminine, affecting viewers in an inexplicable, magical way. Since her mysterious death at the age of 36, she has become an icon of femininity, sex, Hollywood, America, and the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Edgar Morin argues, a film star 'satisfies profound anthropological needs which are expressed at the level of myth and religion' (Morin 116). Stars play the role of deities worshiped during a religious ceremony, which, according to Morin, is what film screenings are (Morin 57). The mythical stories that are created around movie stars are typical *gesta deorum*, stories on divine deeds. The divine deeds of Marilyn, known as the Goddess of Love, belong to three elements: her private life, her early death, and her screen roles.

This text makes an attempt to categorize the types of film characters played by Monroe. After all, it is these characters that are mainly responsible for creating the eternal myth of the star, as her screen incarnations are the only visible, widely available form of her as a deity and the only one in which this deity is worshiped during the cinematic mystery. It was through film creations that the star presented her appearance and personality; and, in turn, these specific characteristics of the star were a close match of the needs of the cinema audience, shaped by the moral and cultural changes of the society she lived in. Monroe's film creations reflected the morality and cultural practices of the 1950s America: a peaceful and prosperous country before the assassinations of JFK, and the Vietnam War.

However, before we discuss the three types of characters played by Marilyn, characters which built the full spectrum of on-screen femininity represented by her, it is necessary to mention a film character that does not fit into any of the types listed above and discussed below but whose appearance established a clear turning point in the reign of a new type of femininity in American cinema. The character is Rose Loomis, the heroine of *Niagara* (1953), a thriller directed by Henry Hathaway. The script of the film is based on the old pattern of the eternal triangle: the wife has a lover and together they plan to kill her husband, who, however, sees through their evil intentions and murders them both.

Marilyn played the role of the evil but passionate wife Rose Loomis. It was her first major role, despite she had already made 18 films in Hollywood and was the No.1 sex symbol and 'the hottest thing in Hollywood,' as reported in the American press. Rose is neither complicated nor mysterious. Her intentions are easy to see, but her sexuality overshadows everything in the movie; eluding a scenario that predicted a sneaky vamp, instead a sex bomb appears on the screen. According to Andre Bazin, the director constructed 'a system of more complex erotic allusions and metaphors' around his protagonist. As a result, Monroe appears to be nude whether she has a nightgown, a dress or a sheet on (Bazin 65). Rose's exuberant sexuality is also exposed through special cinematographic treatments that show her face, body or the famous cakewalk from an appropriate perspective. Rose's amorality is punished. The destiny that enters into her life with a new love and a plan to kill her husband ends with her own death. However, she dies only as femme fatale, because Rose as sex bomb remains in everyone's memory.

*Niagara* is the only movie in which a character portrayed by Marilyn dies. It is a very symbolic death, too: a vamp has died – but the sexy blonde lives on. Never again would Monroe play the evil-hearted woman. Her bodily perfection would be harmonized with spiritual purity. Her beauty did not fit the role of the femme fatale, which is why she tried to be so ostentatiously sensual in *Niagara*. As a result, Rose Loomis as performed by her became a parody of the femme fatale, a transgressive type of femininity that said goodbye to the old patterns and at the same time ostentatiously presented new ones. In the portrait of Rose, the vamp is dominated by the sex bomb, a dangerous and amoral woman is defeated by the beautiful one.

Monroe undoubtedly introduced and promoted a certain type of femininity through the characters she played. Marjorie Rosen suggests that she created a universal type of femininity, a type of Everywoman: beautiful, sensitive, attainable. She managed to do so because her appearance contradicted her personality. She had very strong, sex-appealing looks, but was very fragile and vulnerable on the inside

(Rosen 270). In the 1950's, according to Richard Dyer, Monroe became 'virtually a household name for sex' (Dyer 21). For Americans, the most important thing was Marilyn's physicality, her voluptuous curves, blonde hair, dreamy eyes and red lips that only seemingly corresponded to her subtle personality.

Today, we see in Monroe above all a tender soul mismatched to the times and culture she lived in. Her film roles are classic examples of typecasting. Since she was the type of the sexy blonde, that was what she played in her movies. Whether it was a comedy or drama, her 'platinum sex-explosion' (Capote 226) defined the entire character. However, the attributes of the sex-bomb-Marilyn combined with other features: of an innocent child, a lost and helpless girl, a sensitive and tender woman.

### **Type 1. A Child-Woman as a Variant of a Dumb Blonde: A Perfect Product of the 1950s**

Playing one and the same character throughout their careers is a fate that befell all the classic Hollywood stars. As Siegfried Kracauer argues in his theory of film, 'The typical Hollywood star resembles the non-actor in that he acts out a standing character identical with his own or at least developed from it, frequently with the aid of make-up and publicity experts. As with any real-life figure on the screen, his presence in a film points beyond the film. He affects the audience not just because of his fitness for this or that role but for being or seeming to be a particular kind of person—a person who exists independently of any part he enacts in a universe outside the cinema. The Hollywood star imposes the screen image of his physique, the real or a stylized one, and all that this physique implies and connotes on every role he creates... The late Humphrey Bogart invariably drew on Humphrey Bogart whether he impersonated a sailor, a private "eye," or a night club owner' (Kracauer 99-100).

In line with this rule, Marilyn Monroe drew on Marilyn Monroe, regardless of whether she was a dancer, secretary or a young divorcee. On the other hand, the range of figures played by actors is determined by the actor's appearance, which implies the personality or intellectual potential of these characters. So who can a sexy blonde play if not a dumb blonde?

This grotesque type of woman was created by Derryl F. Zanuck, the boss of 20th Century Fox, who, according to the legend confirmed by his biographer Mel Gussow, adored dazzling girls (Gussow 173-4). The careers of many of his studio's stars began in Zanuck's bedroom. It was he who launched Juliette Greco, Alice Faye, and Betty Grable in the 1940s and 1950s. Marilyn took the place of the last one.

The first B movie characters Monroe played did not have much to say. They attracted the audience with their looks, body, alluring, sexy way of moving and lack of intelligence. A typical example is a cameo role in the comedy with the Marx brothers titled *Love Happy* (1950), in which Marilyn plays the client of detective Sam Grunion (Groucho Marx). Her entire screen appearance lasts less than a minute. She enters Grunion's office and says, 'Some men are following me.' To which the detective replies, 'Really? I don't know why.' He also moves his eyebrow significantly, because of the famous swinging hips, the so-called Marilyn cakewalk. It was obvious that the way she entered the office was a thousand times more important than the way she spoke her one and only line.

She was allowed to say little in her next two films, too, which were otherwise outstanding Hollywood productions where she appeared thanks to John Hyde's patronage. In John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle*, Monroe played Angela, an old gangster's mistress (due to the Hays Code, she was called a 'niece'), whose main occupation involved laying on the sofa in a very tight jumpsuit. Likewise, Miss Claudia Caswell, the character of Joseph Mankiewicz's masterpiece *All About Eve* (1950), hardly says anything in the movie. She appears on the screen from time to time, wearing a not particularly intelligent smile but very elegant dresses, every inch of which emphasize Marilyn's lushness. The great success of Edmund Goulding's *We Are Not Married* (1952), in which Marilyn plays a young wife who competes in beauty contests against her husband's will, showed that the demand for sexy and silly blondes was very high and that comedy was a genre that could expose both sex appeal and fatuousness in a harmless yet expressive way.

This observation was skillfully used by Howard Hawks, who combined Marilyn's extraordinary eroticism with the naivety and simplicity of a child, thus creating the type of femininity that had been longed for in America for years. In one actress, the childlike innocence of Mary Pickford got combined with the mature shapes of Mae West. Importantly, this type harmonized with Marilyn's beauty perfectly; when she later played silly blondes, she did not remain silent, but acted and spoke lines that stood in contradiction to her appearance. Monroe had played girls more childish than their looks would suggest before. This was the case in Phil Karlson's *Ladies of the Chorus* (1948), in which she performed her first famous hit *Every Baby Needs a Da Da Daddy*, or in the aforementioned *Asphalt Jungle*, where Angela talks with the spontaneity of a little girl about the holiday she wants to go on with her 'uncle.'

For Hawks, the character of the dumb blonde, whose appearance of a sex bomb is combined with an infantile mind and mentality, seemed particularly alluring and he used it in his comedy *Monkey Business* (1952). The main character of the movie is Barnaby Fulton (Cary Grant), a typical absent-minded scientist who works on the elixir of youth. One day, Fulton drinks his elixir by mistake, which causes him to experience a sudden rush of youthful vigor. He begins to act like a teenager: he wears crazy outfits, buys a sports car and embarks on a madcap escapade with his boss's secretary Lois Laurel, played by Marilyn Monroe. Lois is no good as a secretary – she confuses things, breaks equipment and is a terrible typist – but she is a perfect partner for the rejuvenated doctor who enjoys childish pranks. At the same time, she remains a physically mature woman. When Fulton's wife (Ginger Rogers) reproaches her husband for his enthusiasm for Lois, he explains:

'She is a half-infant.'

'Not that half that's visible,' Mrs Fulton comments dryly.

The personality of the child-woman is presented even more fully in Hawks's next movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), an adaptation of the stage musical based on Anita Loos's novel. Two showgirls, Lorelei (Monroe) and Dorothy (Jane Russell), sail to Paris, where Lorelei plans to wed Gus Esmond (Tommy Noonan), a gullible upper-class, nerd. The girls are pursued by a private detective hired by Esmond's disapproving and suspicious family. Lorelei seems very flighty, unreasonable, and silly. She also seems to be, like the previous characters played by Marilyn, very naive and childish. But these are only appearances: Lorelei has a soft spot for diamonds

and believes that catching a rich husband is the only way for a woman to live a safe and prosperous life. She thinks like a real gold digger, and as far as finances go she is very reasonable and practical, but not at all mercenary. Lorelei's attitude is best characterized by her conversation with Gus's distrustful father, who decides to protect his son at all costs:

'So you admit that all what you are after is his money?' Edmond senior asks.

'No, I don't. Aren't you funny? Don't you know that a man being rich is like a woman being pretty. You might not marry a girl only because she is pretty. But, my goodness, doesn't it help? If you had a daughter, wouldn't you rather she didn't marry a poor man? You wanted the most wonderful things in the world to be very happy but why is it wrong for me to want those things?'

'They told me you are stupid, but you don't sound stupid to me,' notes Mr Edmond, somewhat perplexed.

'I can be smart when it is important,' Lorelei replies.

This conversation shows remarkable logic in her thinking. She is not a classic gold digger, she likes Gus and she also likes diamonds, and she sees nothing wrong with combining the good with the useful. Lorelei's common sense replaces any deficiency in her intellect or education.

Besides, this conversation shows another feature of some characters played by Monroe. They are usually quite witty, which means that they are also quite sharp and inventive in verbal humor. Lorelei is witty despite her infantilism and this fact adds a certain piquancy, mystery, and ambiguity to her character: she is stupid, yet intelligent; naive, yet aware of what is important in life; materialist, yet tender and sincere. Other dumb blondes played by Marilyn have a lot in common with Lorelei, although each one is unique in her own way.

Pola Debevoise, one of the protagonists of *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), is by far the dumbest of all the dumb blondes created by Marilyn. Audiences and critics referred to her as being 'dumber than dumb' or having her 'foot in her mouth.' Pola has none of the intelligence and cunning of Lorelei, she is always spacey and scatterbrained. In addition, she is myopic but does not put on glasses in the company of men. As a result, she commits a number of *faux pas*: she enthusiastically greets perfect strangers, bumps into closed doors, routinely stumbles, does not recognize the people she is talking to. Pola's character is full of comic counterpoints, which Marilyn interprets excellently. Her appearance—figure, hairstyle and sex appeal—contradicts the conventional representation of the myopic, shy girl; she is ditsy while remaining seductive and full of sexual vibrations.

In 1955, Monroe and her photographer and friend Milton Green founded Marilyn Monroe Production Inc., a film production company. She was, she claimed, bored with the stupid blonde roles. But the character Monroe played in the first movie her company produced was not much different from those imposed on her by the Hollywood studios. *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1956) is an adaptation of Terence Rattinger's play *The Sleeping Prince*, which was a hit in London's West End. The co-producer, director and leading actor was Laurence Olivier. Marilyn plays the musical performer Elsie Marine, while Olivier is Charles, the widower prince regent of a fictional country of Carpathia.

After the show, the prince is introduced to the performers. During Elsie's presentation, 'a shoulder strap of her dress snapped' (Churchwell 234). It's all

absent-mindedness; Elsie is like Pola: scatterbrained, always late, doesn't attend to details, and keeps making blunders. Entering the prince's grand mansion, this simple Milwaukee girl opens her eyes wide and says with genuine admiration: 'That is something!' She moves around like a bull in a china shop, does not know the rules of court etiquette or polite decorum, doesn't understand when to stand and when to sit down. She is helpless as a child. But when she finds out that the meeting to which the prince has invited her is to be an intimate dinner *a deux*, she wants to escape, wishing the prince 'good luck next time, but not with me, of course.' Elsie knows how to give sharp and clever retorts, and intelligently parodies polite decorum of the court: she bows down to the valet, just in case, and mispronounces or sarcastically lengthens aristocratic titles. The character of Elsie combines the traits of Lorelei and Pola. She is witty and intelligent like Lorelei, but clumsy and somewhat naive like Pola. All these characters are linked by the expressive film personality of Marilyn, who consciously uses the attributes of her physicality and undoubted comedy talent.

The child-woman type had a therapeutic effect both on men, who felt more masculine and much wiser around her, and on women, whose fears Marilyn disarmed with her childish grace and kindness. Marilyn's face and voice were naturally childish and innocent while her body was that of a sex bomb. By combining these apparent opposites, Marilyn created the type of child-woman that appealed so well to the American public of the 1950s. First, it was the opposite of the vamps and demanding beauties of previous years. Norman Mailer wrote that the image of Marilyn was 'gorgeous, forgiving, humorous, compliant and tender... she would ask no price. She was not the dark contract of those passionate brunette depths that speak of blood, vows taken for life... no, Marilyn suggested sex might be difficult and dangerous with others but ice cream with her' (Mailer 15). She was a child-woman who offered pleasure without asking for anything in return.

In her bestseller *Marilyn*, Gloria Steinem argues that 'Since most men have experienced female power only in their childhoods, they associate it with a time when they themselves were powerless... That's why male adults, and some females too, experience the presence of a strong woman as a dangerous regression to a time of their own vulnerability and dependence. For men, especially, who are trained to measure manhood and maturity by their distance from the world of women, being forced back to the world for female companionship may be very threatening indeed. A compliant child-woman like Monroe solves this dilemma by offering sex without the power of an adult woman, much less of an equal. As a child herself, she allows men to feel both conquering and protective; to be both dominating and admirable at the same time' (Steinem 14).

Second, the characters played by Marilyn were beautiful, but silly. With them, every man was intelligent, and every woman, even the least attractive, felt more rational. However, Marilyn's dumb blondes have something more: the joy of life and a sense of humor. They are comic characters, and their innate intelligence and remarkable sense of humor make it impossible to interpret them unequivocally.

Finally, by adding to the sexy blonde type the naivety and innocence of a child, Marilyn satisfied the tastes of two-faced American audiences, being as they were puritanical and extremely hedonistic at the same time. In the 1930s, Mae West's frivolity outraged Americans. To counterbalance it, hordes of child stars such as

Deanna Durbin, Judy Garland, and Shirley Temple were promoted. Hedonic America needed a sex bomb, the Puritan side argued for innocence. Watching the characters played by Marilyn on the screen – Lois, Lorelei or Pola – everyone was satisfied, because even if she behaved in a defiantly sexy way, she did it as if unconsciously, and when she was an innocent child, she displayed her half-stripped shapes and emitted erotic vibrations.

Marilyn's type of child-woman was particularly well suited to tickle a sense of indecency without going beyond moral boundaries. Monroe in these roles is a pornography of the imagination, made sparkling by the efficient technology. The audience liked it, the audience needed it: Marilyn's fancy eroticism was elegant, amusingly exciting, and conflict-free.

Marilyn Monroe – an erotic Baby-Doll, which was what the affluent America of the 1950s needed – was living proof that men prefer blondes and a living instruction on how to marry a millionaire.

## **Type 2. A Female Buddy, Attainable but Lonely, Searching for Acceptance**

The characters of dumb blondes such as Lorelei, Pola or Elsie are like beautiful, wonderfully dressed dolls. They live in imaginary, fairy-tale worlds in the company of men as unreal as themselves. They also experience incredible adventures with millionaires or princes in luxury hotels, mansions, and palaces. Marilyn's appearance made it very difficult to imagine her as part of the common man's experience. This was one reason she played entertaining, glamorous girls; another was to keep Marilyn's sex appeal at bay. In her best roles, she mixed her well-thought-out acting tricks with an unawareness of the effects they may cause, as if she did not realize the reactions aroused by her appearance, the way she walked or smiled, 'dumb, childish blonde, innocently unaware of the havoc her sexiness causes around her' (Churchwell 62).

This is how the anonymous character played by Marilyn in Billy Wilder's 1955 movie *The Seven Year Itch* behaves. However, this time the gorgeous blonde girl comes not to a prince or a millionaire, but quite an ordinary man in a gray suit. *The Seven Year Itch* was another movie based on Broadway material. The author of the piece was George Axelrod, who also co-authored the script with Wilder. Tom Ewell and Vanessa Brown starred on Broadway. Tom Ewell was also hired for the lead role in the movie. He plays a New York clerk whose wife is going on vacation to the countryside. The summer in the city is unbearably hot. The heat is exhausting and Richard's head is full of fantasies. A beautiful girl moves into the apartment above. Accidentally, she throws a flowerpot with a tomato bush onto Richard's terrace and he invites her for a drink. This is how their summer adventure begins. It is not entirely clear whether this is a real relationship or only the fantasy of a man tired with work and heat. *The Girl Upstairs*<sup>1</sup> is the essence of the characters played by Monroe so far. She plays herself and a symbol at the same time. But she is not an unrealistic screen creation, a fairy-tale heroine, or a millionaire's fiancée. She leaves this ideal

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Monroe is credited as such.

but artificial world to live next door to the average American male. She is a simple girl, breaming with extraordinary sex appeal, to be sure, but a girl, not a movie star. She is not glamorous, and does not wear expensive dresses or diamond jewelry but simple summer dresses.

Norman Mailer argues that, with the role of the Girl Upstairs, Marilyn created the perfect product of the Eisenhower era, an innocent American girl who believes in the goods she advertises on TV; she is as simple and healthy as the entire 1950s (Mailer 123). The neighbor affects Richard in a way we are already familiar with: on the one hand, she awakens his senses with her exuberant femininity, and on the other, disarms him with a childish naivety and innocence. When they arrange to have a drink, Richard imagines her to be a vamp, exalted and cold, wearing a tiger-print dress and smoking a cigarette in a long, elegant holder. He dreams that he will impress her with Rachmaninoff, but the Girl comes in candy pink pajamas, talks like a chatterbox asks for a large glass of Martini, and jumps up like a child when she sees the air conditioning. She talks about how she had to call a plumber because her big toe got stuck in the tap while she was taking a bath, and how she was ashamed of the stranger because... she didn't have her nails painted.

When they come home from the cinema in the evening, it is still so hot that the girl asks Richard to let her stay overnight and take advantage of his air conditioning. Obviously, Richard sleeps on the couch.

'You know what?' says the Girl, 'We can do this all summer.'

Unfortunately, Richard cannot make full use of his freedom; tormented by remorse, he imagines that his wife is having an affair with Tom McKenzie. When Tom shows up unexpectedly at Richard's apartment, Richard mentions something about his own flirting and about a blonde in the kitchen:

'I can explain everything! The coffee, the toast, the blonde in the kitchen.'

'What blonde in the kitchen?' Tom asks.

'Wouldn't you like to know! Maybe it's Marilyn Monroe!' triumphantly answers Richard,

So is all this real or a fantasy of a tired, unattractive middle-aged man? Should it be even real, it still does not bother anyone. The friendly relationship between the Girl and Richard makes him realize how important his wife is to him. He decides to leave New York and join his family, but at the same time he feels self-assured because his beautiful neighbor, whose existence is as unreal as her appearance, tells him that he is a wonderful man.

'If I were your wife, I would be jealous of you. Very jealous.'

Richard goes to his wife, and the Girl is again left alone, although it is her who needs care and affection. While Richard wants to literally have the Girl, she wants friendship, understanding, and warmth. Wilder's film takes us deeper into the psyche of a dumb blonde who is as attractive as she is lonely. It's not men who need her, it is she who needs men: not their lust, though, but respect and understanding.

The female buddy character had already appeared in earlier Monroe movies. In 1951, she starred in the comedy *The Love Nest*, directed by Joseph Newman, which tells the story of a young man (Jimmy Scott, played by William Lundigan) who returns from the war to his wife (June Haver). Jimmy is expecting his army friend Bobby to come over to him. Bobby turns out to be a woman who has just left the WACs. Bobby, or Roberta (played by Marilyn Monroe), stays in Jim's house, which

does not make his wife happy. But Roberta and Jim share a bond of purely friendly, platonic sympathy. Despite her obvious sex appeal, Jim treats Roberta just like an army buddy. A similar friendship also develops between Lois and Doctor Fulton. The doctor does not see a sexy woman in her, but a great friend and companion of his *adolescent insanity*. Roberta, Lois, and The Girl Upstairs are the characters that the critics called Miss Available, because they are accessible and attainable female buddies, the absolute opposite of the old screen goddesses.

Moreover, the female buddy character is most often combined with another function of the sexy blonde, the role of the third party in the love triangle. Richard Sherman, Jim, and Dr. Fulton are all married. For their wives, the characters played by Marilyn are their rivals. As a 'perfect woman,' Marilyn was also the embodiment of the rival for all the women watching her movies. Wilder combined these two functions in the figure of the Girl Upstairs; the beautiful blonde is looking for friendship and understanding, she wants to be treated as a human being, not as an object of male desire, but on the other hand, only a real and sexual relationship can give her a chance of not being alone.

Finding friendship and acceptance is the goal of many characters played by Marilyn. Truman Capote claims that Monroe is not an appearance, but an attitude towards the world and men: she toils like a laborer to please everyone. Indeed, in most of her movies, the characters played by Monroe struggle to get a man. Lois unsuccessfully flirts with Dr. Fulton, Pola bends over backwards to find a man, Elsie is the first to confess love to the prince and she repeats the confession to him regularly, although he never reciprocates with a similar declaration. However, none of Monroe's characters try harder than Sugar Kane from Wilder's next movie, *Some Like It Hot* (1959).

Sugar Kane is the protagonist of one of the three plots developed in the movie, which is a parody of Hollywood love films with Tony Curtis playing the lover and Monroe his beloved. Wilder uses the gender reassignment theme to comment on cultural stereotypes of male and female social roles imposed by Hollywood. Sugar Kane is, like other characters played by Marilyn, very attractive and sexy, and is also sensitive and silly. She has been wounded so often in her life that, for the sake of psychological comfort, she always has a hip flask with her. Moreover, Sugar suffers from a rather stereotypical weakness for saxophone players who seduce and use her before disappearing into thin air. That is why she says about herself that she is not too bright. She travels to Florida (an archetypal American paradise and habitat of millionaires) to escape the saxophonist's curse and find a stable future at the side of a tycoon. Sugar is not only like other characters played by Marilyn, but also yearns to do the same. By playing with conventions of stereotypes, Wilder shows how the scheme of a sexy but not very bright blonde works. The men she meets do not take her seriously, but rather take advantage of her and disappear. Sugar has come to Florida to end her doom. She wants to be sensible and practical like Lorelei and marry a bag of money, ideally young and bespectacled, that is, looking like Gus Esmond. In this case, it is Sugar who wants to treat men as they treated her: like a thing. Unfortunately, the fairy tale of Cinderella does not always come true and Sugar falls in love with a saxophone player again.

It is worth noting that the characters played by Marilyn want to make it easier for themselves to gain friendship by choosing weak, unattractive, almost handicapped men. Lorelei says that she loves Gus because 'he is so vulnerable.' In fact, he

is a typical lame duck managed by his father. Freddy, Pola's fiancé is an inconspicuous man with glasses, especially unappealing when his debtor breaks his neck and he has to wear an orthopedic collar. Prince Charles is a middle-aged gentleman who experiences his second youth with Elsie. The masculinity deficits in *Some Like It Hot* could not be clearer: Cary is impotent, and suffers from a low libido.

So this hundred percent woman, the epitome of sex, enters into relationships with half-men. Does she want to dominate them? Only Lorelei knows the power of her kisses, and she is the one who rules over Gus. The remaining characters played by Monroe turn to these not fully masculine men, because they themselves have a psychological complex because of their body, which becomes a burden, something peculiar, a freak of nature, difficult to accept, especially by themselves.

Presenting such characters on screen comforted the male audience. Watching them, even the least attractive man felt valued and desired. After all, no one required him to constantly confirm his masculinity or challenge him. On the other hand, however, the sense of loss and emotional confusion of the characters played by Marilyn evoked a feeling of concern for a weaker being, made them feel as noble and strong knights.

Marilyn's film creations had a completely different effect on women. Gloria Steinem argues that 'For women, Monroe embodied kinds of fear that were just as basic as the hope she offered men: the fear of a sexual competitor who could take away men on whom women's identities and even livelihoods might depend; the fear of having to meet her impossible standard of always giving—and asking nothing in return... [S]he was nothing like the female stars that women moviegoers have made popular. Those stars offered at least the illusion of being in control of their fates... Stars of the classic "women's movies" were actresses like Bette Davis... or Katharine Hepburn... or even Doris Day... Their figures were admirable and neat, but without the vulnerability of a big-breasted woman in a society that regresses men and keeps them obsessed with the maternal symbol of breasts and hips. Watching Monroe was quite different: women were forced to worry about her vulnerability—and thus their own' (Steinem 14-15). Marilyn reminded women of what they had experienced themselves. Sugar's efforts to get a man resembled the efforts of many women to win the favor and affection of their partners. More than once, they too were reduced to a thing for their loved ones, who took what they wanted and walked away like Sugar's saxophone players.

Therefore, apart from playing a female cliché, Marilyn also played a female drama. Apart from being an exaggerated version of female perfection, she also was an exaggerated version of the female frailty resulting from the cruel stereotype of women's and men's social roles.

### **Type 3. A Woman-Partner, a Serious Statement about Human Tenderness**

In addition to acceptance, the characters played by Marilyn also wanted recognition of their identity. A beautiful blonde not only sought a man's favor, but also tried to gain his recognition as a partner, an autonomous person that has her own, independent views, feelings, and needs. The main characters played by Marilyn expected

not only to be passionately embraced and taken care of by a man; they also required the acknowledgement of their rights and a chance to make a real impact on reality. However, Monroe's screen incarnations as a woman-partner who, with her own reasons, is able to convince and change a man are often forgotten.

This is what happens, for example, in two comedies, the aforementioned *Prince and an Actress* and *Let's Make Love* (1960), directed by George Cukor. The story of Cukor's film, based on a script by Norman Krasna, can be summed up in one sentence: A millionaire falls in love with a poor dancer and wants to get her. Yves Montand was entrusted with the lead male role of Jean Marc Clemont, the New York millionaire with French roots. Amanda (Monroe) seems to be like the typical characters played by Marilyn: a beautiful sexy blonde working in show business. Her rendition of the Cole Porter *My Heart Belongs to Daddy* brings us to the famous woman-child theme. Amanda is also cheerful, lively and unceremonious, but that's where her resemblance to other Marilyn blondes ends, because Amanda is not a dumb girl: she studies at college and doesn't talk nonsense. What is more, she doesn't seek the millionaire's favor. It is Clemont who falls in love with Amanda and tries to get her. He sees in her what he was deprived of while living in a world of high society bound by stiff conventions of the etiquette.

To him, Amanda represents bluntness, honesty, and authenticity. She is like Elsie, who also shows the Prince what real life is all about. Both Amanda and Elsie stand for a better, healthier world, and with their tenderness and sensitivity, they influence the male world of values. The influence is admittedly slight and superficial, due to the poetics of the romantic comedy. However, a completely different dimension is taken by the influence of female values in the strictly male, aggressive, and cruel world of the American Wild West. The poetics of the classical western left little room for a woman character. She was only an addition to the men's world, rarely remembered and recognized. She might have been an object of men's rivalry, a saloon girl entertaining them, or a cowboy's faithful wife. *River of No Return* (1954) is Monroe's first major western. She plays Kay, a saloon singer, and therefore a woman of questionable reputation, who is uncritically in love with Harry Weston (Rory Calhoun), a villain with no respect for her.

Watson's opposite is Matt Calder (Robert Mitchum), a widowed cowboy farmer who after years in prison wants to start a new and honest life and raise his son. When one day, Harry steals Calder's horse and rifle, abandons Kay, and runs away in search of a better life, Calder swears revenge. He treats Kay as a necessary evil and doesn't deal with her any better than her lover did. But as they fight together to survive, and Kay shows her kindness and sensitivity and asks for a little tolerance and understanding, Matt begins to respect her. Kay changes his attitude towards the world and people, teaches him to be humane and open to others. She is not the erotic doll he thought her to be, but a lonely, abandoned and scorned woman who brings gentleness and tenderness into the cruel world of men's games and who is guided by her heart, not the code. It is worth noticing that the movie ends with the 'domestication' of Kay, both literally (Matt takes her out of the saloon, having previously covered her scantily clad body) and symbolically, when Kay throws away her red shoes, a symbol of her old saloon life (Wlodek 192).

Related to Kay is Cherie, the protagonist of *The Bus Stop* (1965), directed by Joshua Logan. Cherie, however, is an ambiguous, much deeper character. This is due

not only to a better script and direction, but also to Marilyn herself, who has significantly improved her acting technique.<sup>2</sup> Cherie, like Kay, is 'a southern cracker salon singer' (Guiles 297). She is pathetic, untalented, uneducated, and very plain. Cherie wears old worn-out clothes, has messy hair and sloppy, heavy makeup on a face that is pale with exhaustion. It was Milton Green who gave the character of Cherie 'a pale aspirin-and-black-coffee look, so pale that one could believe she rarely saw the sun; a leached-out human being who sang badly night after night to cowboys who rarely listened, and then collapsed in a hall bedroom at 3 a.m.' (Guiles 304).

Cherie is not a stunning beauty, but a human outcast, a clown who sells herself to survive. She is also a girl with huge dreams and aspirations: she wants to become a star and conquer Hollywood. Fred Lawrence Guiles characterized Cherie as a person 'whose talents are as small as her ambitions are large' (Guiles 297). During one of the nighttime shows, a young cowboy played by Don Murray falls in love with Cherie at first sight. Later that night, he announces that he wants to marry her. He then follows her every step, and when Cherie tries to get away from him, he catches her with a lasso like a mare. A male master and a female slave without the right to decide about herself: this is how a primitive cowboy imagines the world in which he takes everything by force, not caring for anyone's feelings. Cherie does not want to give up her aspirations, desperately defends herself, and runs out of the town, but the cowboy catches her at a roadside inn. 'Here Cherie acts like a wounded bird flapping its wings against the room's walls, where it is being chased by a hunter. She seems to be at the end of her nervous endurance: misguided glances, sticky lips, a colorless voice, a body shaken by shivers, constantly thrown away complaints oscillating between a loving confession and a plea' (Pitera 145). Eventually, the cowboy realizes that he is acting like a bully, that he did not consider Cherie's feelings or plans in order to make her happy.

Cherie's fight is not just about getting the man to say 'please.' Neither is it only a struggle for acceptance, a woman with a past of a poor chanteuse from a dirty bar. It is a fight for identity, for respect, for a position in the relationship. Despite her poor personality and shameful past, it is Cherie who changes the cowboy, introduces gentleness and affection into his world, restrains him with her weakness, and tames him with tenderness. Although it should be added that Cherie probably ends up, like Kay, as the cowboy's wife. As a result, the effectiveness of even the most committed heroines portrayed by Marilyn is always less than expected.

The richest, most profound and at the same time the most complex image of the female psyche is the character of Roslyn Tabor in John Hudson's *Misfits* (1961). The role of Roslyn was written especially for Marilyn, by her then-husband Arthur Miller. The action of the film is set in Reno, Nevada. Roslyn goes there to get a quick divorce. Her whole life has been a mess: a difficult childhood, troubles with her mother, and then with her husband. 'I never really had anyone,' she confesses.

Loneliness, difficult experiences and resentful bitterness make Roslyn oversensitive, almost neurotic; even when she smiles, there is still sadness in her eyes. At the same time, she is a beautiful, mature woman. Her appearance, very feminine

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<sup>2</sup> In 1955, Marilyn left for New York City to study Method acting at Lee Strasberg's famous Actor's Studio. The influence of the Method is very pronounced in the creation of Cherie's character.

soft voice, and sad eyes attract the attention of men. In Miller's story, Roslyn's feminine sensitivity is juxtaposed with the male world represented by Gay Langland (Clark Gable), an elderly cowboy and self-confident pragmatist, Guido Rancanelli (Eli Wallach), a seemingly lost widower, but in fact a hypocritical egoist and chauvinist, and the most sensitive of the three: Perce Howland (Montgomery Clift), a very unfortunate young cowboy. The whole male microcosm represents the values of the archetypal, ending world of the classic western movies: the male pride, honor, harshness bordering on cruelty and the need for unlimited freedom. Gay and Roslyn are complete opposites and possibly for this very reason, they attract each other. He is touched by her delicacy and fragility, she is impressed by his roughness and strength. Mutual fascination between a man and a woman ensues, but only to a certain extent. Roslyn cannot understand Gay's cruelty, which he identifies with his masculinity. He cannot accept her almost hysterical concern for everything. However, what Gay so ostentatiously presents is only a mask to hide his weakness, a form of window dressing. He is not at all a strong, independent man who loves freedom above all; he is a suffering father who is disregarded by his children and drowns his worries in alcohol. Guido and Perce are also losers who, under the guise of masculinity and the illusion of freedom, try to cover up the feelings of emptiness of a wasted life. Worse still, these three cowboys engage in a trade that defies the cowboy ethos: they catch wild mustangs and sell them for dog food.

Roslyn is shocked when she sees the cruel tying of horses:

'Horse killers! Killers! Murderers! You're liars! All of you, liars! You're only happy when you can see something die! Why don't you kill yourself to be happy? You and your God's country! Freedom! I pity you! You're three dear, sweet, dead men!'

Perce, the most reflective of the three, frees the horses, but Gay does not give up: he tames a stallion himself and then lets him go. He wants to prove to himself that he has a superior power to subdue the animal and that releasing the mustang was his own decision, not an act of submission to the woman. Notwithstanding, it becomes clear that Roslyn's tenderness and care are the only unchanging values on display. They protect and save, are connected with life. Cruelty, harshness and misconceived masculinity are just a pretense that leads to death and destruction. The role of Roslyn was Marilyn's last full appearance, and the only one in which her character has made a positive and serious claim about human tenderness and she, a woman, had the power to influence men's actions. Externally an ideal of femininity, Roslyn also internally is a well of feminine qualities: sensitivity, empathy, fragility. She is a stereotype of a woman, just as Gay is a stereotype of a man. Both of these roles, played by Monroe and Gable, take on a special dimension. Marilyn is no longer a child-woman; she has a mature face, puffy eyes, a plump figure. When she appears on the screen in tight-fitting jeans and pigtails, she looks like a caricature of a child-woman. Her sensitivity takes the form of a neurosis, and she kills her weakness with alcohol. The same is true of Gable: the embodiment of the mannish and assertive male ideal in the type of Rhett Butler from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) becomes a parody of a man in Huston's movie. He is still attractive and keeps a stiff upper lip, but this appearance of attractiveness masks his weakness and confusion.

Everyone is mismatched in *The Misfits*: cowboys do not fit the new customs entering the Wild West, wild horses have no place in modern civilization, Roslyn does

not conform to male rules, and movie stars deny their old screen images. Kay, Cherie, and Roslyn are dramatic complements to the silly girls Marilyn played in musicals and comedies. With their kindness and sensitivity, they save themselves and others. Roslyn makes a point that is the essence of the impact Monroe's characters make: 'We're all dying, aren't we. All the husbands and all the wives. Every minute. And we're not teaching each other what we really know, are we?'

## Summary

The characters played by Marilyn tell about people learning from each other, about peaceful coexistence, understanding and mutual acceptance, friendship and tolerance. Kay, Cherie and Roslyn do not fight for domination over their men, they only want to be recognized in their subjectivity and become partners with equal rights and recognition of their sound judgement.

It seems that today, sixty years after Marilyn Monroe's death, the image of femininity she presented has left no trace in our times. Social and economic conditions have forced women to fight for their rights, without leaving too much room for sensitiveness, gentleness and easygoing. Men threatened by female expansion subconsciously long for tender partners who will feed their ego. It is not about Marilyn's look, as the canons of beauty are changing, but about the message of her archetypal femininity as tender and touching at the same time.

Rather than a precise typology, the above analysis of the characters played by Marilyn Monroe is merely an attempt to describe them and define their contribution to the emergence of the artistic and social phenomenon called 'Marilyn Monroe.' If no book has yet been devoted to her film characters, it is probably also because each of them was not so much *played* by her as in fact *was* her. Lorelei, Sugar, Kay, and Roslyn are Marilyn Monroe—platinum blonde, with a wonderful body, using only the proper system of signs by which the viewers could identify her: half-closed eyes, carmine lips, childish low voice, and a cakewalk.

The star gives to the character presented on the screen as much as she takes from it; the star and her on-screen myth are inseparable. They influence each other and constantly increase their attractiveness, thus blurring the line between the actor's personality and her screen image, between reality and myth. John Huston, who directed Marilyn twice, when asked what he thought about her acting techniques, replied: 'She had no techniques. It was all the truth, it was only Marilyn. But it was Marilyn, plus. She found things about womankind in herself... She was not acting—I mean, she was not pretending to an emotion. It was the real thing' (Mills 142).

All characters played by Marilyn are dominated by her personality. In each, one can find the fate of Marilyn herself or the problems she struggled with: loneliness, misunderstanding, maladjustment, but also a consistent fight to be herself. The fate of Marilyn and the fate of the on-screen girls form one narrative, one morality play, which, for Marilyn, ended sixty years ago, on August 5, 1962. But the characters she portrayed and in which she survives continue to invite succeeding generations to savor fantasies which are constantly creating new versions of the Marilyn Monroe myth.

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