

From Romantic Validation to Self-Confidence: The Character Development of Elle Woods in Legally Blonde (2001)

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ABSTRACT

This study focusses the character development of the main protagonist in the romance-comedy film in *Legally Blonde*, directed by Robert Luketic in 2001. The film tells the story of Elle Woods, a socialite girl who is trying to get her ex-boyfriend back, but as time went by, she got more than that. Instead of getting her ex-boyfriend back, she gained experiences, conflict, humiliation, and an identity crisis. These experiences serve as a factor that shaped her to become the top graduate at Harvard Law School. This study using a descriptive qualitative method, this study analyzes 16 selected scenes and dialogue that illustrate the protagonist's psychological transformation. The result of the study indicate that Elle's character develops from being spoiled, and lacking motivation to improve her value to becoming self-motivated and increasing self-respect without needing external factors. This transformation demonstrates how narrative conflict functions as a catalyst for character growth, fulfilling the criteria of a dynamic character who undergoes a positive character arc.

Keywords: *Elle Woods, Character Development, Dynamic Character, Positive Character Arc*

INTRODUCTION

Film is an art form that can have different meanings for different audiences. One of the media that is often used to describe various human experiences and emotion. Some people view it as entertainment, while others see it as a medium for learning, a medium for introducing social culture, and also for social reflection (Farhat & Juanda, 2025).

Through its stories and characters, films can portray situations that are very relevant to real life. Through films, audiences can also see how conflicts, social relationships, and personal experiences can change a person's development. Sometimes there are films that show a person's journey of changing their goals and values. This is what makes films not only accepted by audiences as entertainment but also as a medium for representing the social and psychological realities of human beings.

In real life, character development is important for humans. Like its represented in the film, character development happens because experiences, conflict and also social interaction that each individual has gone through. Humans continue to experience success, failure, social pressure, and interact with one another. No matter of how big or small the factors are, this process naturally causes humans to develop emotionally, whether in terms of how they think, how they solve or face problems, and also how they view life. Therefore, character development can be understood as a learning process that happen throughout life.

Previous studies have also examined character development in films. (Farhat & Juanda, 2025) analyzed character changes in the film *A Man Called Otto*. Their study result show that Otto's character evolves from being angry and

annoying to being warm and more caring towards his surroundings. This development occurs due to social interactions and experiences that take place throughout the story.

According to Abrams (1999), a character is a figure in a narrative work who has certain traits, attitudes, and behaviors that are revealed through actions, dialogue, and interactions with other characters. Abrams also describes several types of characters, one of which is a dynamic character. A dynamic character undergoes changes throughout the story. These changes are caused by several events, such as conflicts and interactions with other characters. There are also flat characters, which are characters that do not undergo significant changes throughout the story.

Furthermore, Weiland (2016) explains character arc describe how experiences, conflicts, and events that happen throughout the story influence a character's way of thinking and attitude. One of them is a positive character arc, where the character's personality changes for the better. In this pattern, the character usually starts the story with a mistaken belief. This belief is called "the false belief." But as the story progresses, the character experiences events that ultimately make them realize that their belief is incorrect and replace it with a new understanding that allows the character to develop for the better.

The movie *Legally Blonde* (2001) represent that kind of development. *Legally Blonde* is a romance-comedy film released in 2001 by Robert Luketik and written by Karen McCullah Lutz and Kristen smith. Adapted from the novel *Legally Blonde* by Amanda Brown. It stars Reese Whitterspoon as Elle Woods.

At first, Elle Woods is portrayed as confident, fashionable, and socially popular. Elle is a cheerful, optimistic, and confident person because of her beauty and fashion sense, but she is considered as unintelligent and uncritical. After her boyfriend Warner dumped her because he was going to Harvard Law School, Elle felt humiliated, and the confidence she had built up suddenly collapsed. She decided to get in Harvard Law School, where Warner would continue his studies, in order to regain her confidence, prove to warner that she was worthy and to get warner back. Throughout the story, she faces academic humiliation, gender stereotypes, professional challenges, and emotional crises. These experiences gradually reshape her self-perception and motivation.

Several previous studies have analyzed *Legally Blonde* from different perspectives. Some researchers focus on gender representation and argue that the film challenges the stereotype of blonde women as unintelligent. Others highlight the feminist message of the film, emphasizing how Elle reclaims her dignity in a male-dominated academic environment. Additionally, some narrative studies discuss how comedy is used to address serious issues such as sexism and social bias.

However, few studies on Elle Woods' character development of Elle Woods. Many discussions mention that she became more confident with her new purpose in life and appreciated herself more, but no one really identified how Elle became like that. Therefore, there is still a research gap in analyzing how her psychological growth is constructed systematically through narrative structure.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the character development of Elle Woods by applying Abrams' concept of dynamic character and Weiland's theory of positive character arc. This study focuses on identifying Elle Wods' transformation factors, what triggers them, false beliefs, motivated triggers, demotivated triggers, antagonistic influences, and identity struggles. By examining key scenes and dialogues, this study argues that *Legally Blonde* is not merely a romantic comedy, but also a narrative of internal growth and identity reconstruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character development in films is both important and interesting to study. It is important because it is a factor that enhances the quality of the story, allowing us to gain a broader perspective on a person's life or situation and also understand how humans change through life experiences. It is interesting because this process reflects the reality of human life. Their perspective, attitudes, and behaviors happens trough different experiences and situation. This dynamic nature of humans is reflected in narrative works such as films.

According to M. H. Abrams (1999), a character is a figure who appears in a story and has certain traits, attitudes, and personality that can be seen from what they do, what they say, and their social interactions. Abrams says that a dynamic character is a figure who undergoes significant changes throughout the story, either in their way of thinking or their behavior.

K. M. Weiland, in his book *Creating Character Arcs* (2016), states that the changes experienced by characters also reflect the reality of human life. In real life, each individual has their own failures, successes, and struggles that trigger changes in their mindset and habits. This process shows that humans develop over time. Weiland further divides character arcs into several types, one of which is the positive character arc. A positive character arc occurs when a character grows from weakness, misunderstanding, or external dependence into maturity, confidence, and self-awareness.

By combining Abrams' concept of dynamic character and Weiland's positive character arc, character development can be found in a more structured way. Abrams helps identify whether a character experiences significant change, while Weiland explains how and why that change happens through narrative stages. These theories provide a clear framework to analyze the transformation of a character.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative method to examine the character development of Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001). The data source of this study is the film *Legally Blonde* by Robert Luketic 2001. The dataset consists of selected scenes and dialogues that represent significant moments in Elle's Woods' character development. Data selection was conducted purposively by identifying narrative segments that clearly depict shift in the protagonist's beliefs, motivations, and self-protection.

Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, to understand the narrative context and identify key turning points. Relevant scenes and dialogues were then transcribed and documented for analysis.

The data were analysed using two theoretical perspectives: Abrams' concept of dynamic character (1999), and Weiland's theory of the positive arc. The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, scenes that indicate changes in Elle's beliefs and attitudes were identified. Second, these scenes were categorized according to stages of character transformation, such disruption, internal conflict, and growth. Third, the data were interpreted to explain how narrative conflicts contribute to the protagonist's development from dependence on external validation toward self-confidence and independence.

DISCUSSION

Elle Woods' character development in *Legally Blonde* (2001) clearly represents a dynamic character as explained by Abrams (1999). A dynamic character is someone who experiences internal psychological change because of conflicts in the narrative. In addition, Weiland (2016) explains that a positive character arc begins when the protagonist holds a false belief (the Lie), faces progressive complications, experiences a crisis, and finally accepts a new truth.

Her transformation is not instant, but built step by step through emotional conflict, academic pressure, and identity struggle.

Data 1

Catalyst – Breakup Scene

Timestamp: 00:07:58

Warner: i think we should break up.

Elle: what?

Warner: well, i've been thinking about it, and it's the right thing to do.

Elle: you're breaking up with me? i thought you were proposing.

Warner: Proposing? Elle, if I'm going to be a senator, well, I need to marry a Jackie, not a Marilyn.

This breakup functions as the catalyst of Elle's transformation. Before this moment, Elle was a spoiled woman from a wealthy family who achieved success easily thanks to her beauty, and she pursued a career in modelling and fashion. Her image was that of a cheerful, optimistic, famous, and attractive woman.

When Warner compares her to “Marilyn” instead of “Jackie,” Warner felt he had to marry someone who was his academic equal, and he felt that Elle only cared about her beauty and the modelling world, without any intelligence to back it up. Warner indirectly underestimated Elle and looked down on her for not being his intellectual equal.

According to Abrams (1999), a dynamic character must experience an event that disturbs their previous stability. This breakup serves as that disturbance. It forces Elle to reconsider her identity and position in life.

At this stage, Elle holds a false belief (Weiland, 2016):

“If I become what he wants, I will be worthy.”

This belief drives her next decision.

Data 2

Reaction and Action – The False Belief (Going to Harvard for Love)

Timestamp: 00:10:00

Elle: “This is the type of girl Warner wants to marry.”

Elle: “A law student.”

After being dumped, Elle experienced life after a breakup until she made a new goal, which was to enter Harvard Law School, where Warner was studying. Elle studied very hard for the LSAT test. Psychologically, this shows resilience. She transforms emotional pain into action.

At this stage, Elle holds a false belief (Weiland, 2016):

“If I become what he wants, I will be worthy.”

This false belief drives her next decision.

According to Weiland, this is the reaction stage in a positive character arc. The protagonist begins taking action but is still influenced by false belief. According to Abrams, this shift in behavior indicates early dynamic development because Elle moves from emotional dependence to self-initiated effort.

Data 3

Increase Confidence – Accepted into Harvard

Timestamp: 00:18:00

Dialogue (Admission Video & Letter Scene)

When Elle received the news that she had been accepted to Harvard Law School, she felt very happy. This moment was very important because Elle felt that she was not stupid and deserved to be with Warner. Emotionally, she felt proud of her hard work and her confidence began to rise because, for the first time, Elle felt that she had struggled to achieve something. This success is still connected to her false belief, she believes Harvard will help her win Warner back.

From Abrams’ perspective, this scene shows social transformation. Elle moves from being perceived only as a fashionable girl to officially becoming a law student. From Weiland’s perspective, this is a temporary external success. Although she achieves her goal, her false belief still lives with her. She still believes her value depends on Warner, her ex-boyfriend.

Data 4

Culture shock – Academic Humiliation

Timestamp: 00:27:40

Professor Stromwell: “Would you support my decision to ask her to leave class.”

In terms of social and intellectual, Harvard Law School became an antagonistic environment for Elle. It was very different from Elle's previous life. Elle was heavily criticized by her professors for being unprepared and not studying enough. Elle felt very embarrassed and doubted her abilities. This is the beginning of her identity crisis.

According to Abrams, internal psychological conflict is a strong sign of dynamic characterization. Her emotional state shifts from optimism to insecurity.

According to Weiland, this is progressive complication. The world challenges her false belief and forces her to confront reality.

Data 5

Emotional Collapse – Warner and Vivian are Engaged

Timestamp: 00:29:00

Warner: “Ha... Have.. you meet Vivian?”

Elle: “Do you know her?”

Vivian: “I’m his fiancée.”

After that embarrassing incident, Elle found out that Warner was engaged to Vivian. This hits Elle really hard because she had worked so hard to get into law school just to win Warner back, but the reality was that Warner wasn't coming back, even though Elle tried to make it work. She feels shocked, hurt, lost.

According to Weiland, this is a progressive complication that weakens her false belief. If her belief was:

“If I get Harvard law, Warner will love me again,”

Now that belief no longer makes sense.

Data 6

Demotivation – Losing Direction

Timestamp: 00:32:40

Elle: “So it was all for nothing, and I.. I just wish.. I just wish I had never gone to Harvard.”

She became unstable again, lost her confidence, and felt that everything she had done was in vain. She felt ashamed and heartbroken. She realized that even though she had put in a lot of effort, she still lost Warner. At this stage, she experienced emotional confusion. Not only was she heartbroken, but she also had many questions. If she is not Warner's future wife, then who is she?

According to Abrams (1999), this moment shows psychological disturbance, which is necessary for dynamic character development. Her stable self-image begins to break.

Data 7

Paulette Support – Told Elle to Fight

Timestamp: 00:35.00

Paulette: “Steal the bastard back.”

After feeling demotivated, Paulette provided emotional support for her plan to fight for Warner. At times, Paulette encouraged Elle to continue believing in her false belief rather than helping her to move on. At this moment, Paulette suggested balancing Vivian. This is very interesting in terms of character arc.

According to Weiland (2016), helper characters do not always guide the protagonist directly to the Truth. At this stage, Paulette functions as emotional comfort, confidence booster, motivational supporter

It rebuilds her confidence slightly, but still within the old mindset.

Abrams' concept of dynamic character allows this kind of gradual development. Change happens step by step, not instantly. Elle still believes:

"If I can compete with Vivian, maybe I can fix everything."

Data 8

Action – Trying to Get Warner's Attention

Timestamp: 00:36:56

Once again, Warner was Elle's reason for getting back up. Elle began to learn about law little by little and caught the professor's attention because of her answers to questions in class. Elle began to like law school and started to enjoy all the material she was learning. How did it feel to live when she was struggling to deepen her understanding of something. Elle still liked to watch Warner from afar.

This develops Elle's character to be more ambitious, even though she still in her false beliefs, but there is something growing within her, which is learning to try harder to achieve something. She is not only relying on charm, but also on effort and presence in the academic environment.

Data 9

Realization – The Party Scene

Timestamp: 00:40:00

Warner: Elle, come on, you'll never get the grades to qualify for one of those spots. you're not smart enough, sweetie.

Elle: wait, am i on glue, or did we not get into the same law school?

Warner: yeah, but-

Elle: but what? we took the same lasts, and we're taking the same classes.

Warner: i know, but come on, Elle, be serious. you can do something more valuable with your time.

Elle: I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I?

At this moment, Elle felt humiliated. She felt that no matter how much she grew and changed, Warner truly belittled and underestimated her. This moment was a turning point where Elle completely let go of Warner. She didn't want to waste her time and energy on a man like Warner anymore. Elle also felt that she was very valuable after everything she had worked for so far. She no longer needed Warner to know who she was.

Elle: "I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I?"

According to Weiland, this is a big crack the false belief. She realized that it wasn't her efforts that were wrong, but the expectations she had set from the start. While relating to Abrams, this moment shows deep internal realization. She is aware. After this scene, her motivation starts to change more seriously about academic competition.

Data 10

Action – Setting A New Goal

Timestamp: 00:45:21

After she was humiliated, Elle became more serious academically. She bought a laptop and borrowed books on law to prepare for everything and try to keep up with all the law students. She was no longer Vivian. She competed to raise her own value, not Warner's anymore.

Now her motivation is slowly changing. At first "I want him back. "Then "I want to show him I am smart. "And slowly: "I want to prove I belong here."

The weakening and even disappearance of false beliefs is good news for change. Elle entering law school was the first time she had tried to achieve something, but this time was the first time she had tried for herself. To Weiland, this is progressive movement toward Truth.

Data 11

Validation – Internship Recognition

Timestamp: 0:50:26

Elle was successfully selected by Professor Callahan's law firm, which is well-known and the dream of all law students because it always wins major cases. Her confidence began to rise, Elle even said:

Elle: Oh, Warner. Do you remember when we spent those four amazing hours in the hot tub after winter formal?

Warner: Yeah- No.

Elle: This is so much better than that! Excuse me. I have some shopping to do.

Elle felt satisfied with the results of her hard work. By passing this selection process, Elle felt validated and proud of herself. According to Weiland, this stage strengthens her journey toward truth. She starts seeing herself as capable independently of Warner.

Data 12

Internship scenes

Timestamp: 01:01:46

During her internship, Elle was given a lot of responsibility by Prof. Callahan. She felt happy and capable of participating in this internship program. This stage is significant because her confidence now comes from skill and knowledge, not appearance.

Psychologically, she begins forming a new identity: a serious law student with analytical ability. This represents rising action.

According to Weiland, tension increases because the character seems close to success but has not fully resolved internal belief.

Data 13

Crisis – Harassment and Emotional Collapse

Timestamp: 01:15:00

Elle: are you hitting on me?

Callahan: you're a beautiful girl.

Elle gets up.

Elle: So, everything you just said...

Callahan: I'm a man who knows what he wants.

Elle: and I'm a law student who just realized her professor is a pathetic asshole.

Callahan: too bad. i thought you were a law student who wanted to be a lawyer!

Elle: "All people see when they look at me is blonde hair and big boobs."

After being harassed by Callahan, Elle experiences her deepest emotional breakdown. The crisis Elle is facing now is more intense than the crisis caused by Warner because it attacks her dignity as a woman. Elle feels that everything is futile. She feels that she should not have entered Harvard in the first place.

She almost quits law school.

According to Weiland, this is the dark night of the soul. The character must decide whether to return to false belief or embrace truth. According to Abrams, this intense emotional shift confirms her dynamic transformation.

Data 14

Helper – Weakens the false Belief

Timestamp: 01:17:00

Professor Stromwell: "... you're not the girl I thought you were."

Before leaving Harvard, Elle intended to say goodbye to Paullete. Paullete encouraged her, and coincidentally, Professor Stromwell was there and overheard Elle and Paullete's conversation. She encouraged Elle not to give up.

This support functions as the helper element in her character arc.

Psychologically, this moment reconstructs her internal strength. For the first time, she continues her journey for herself, not for male approval. Her false belief weakens significantly at this stage.

Data 15

Final Transformation – Courtroom Confidence

Timestamp: 01:18:45

Elle: "Elle Woods, Your Honor. Rule 3.03 of Supreme Judicial Court states that a law student may appear on behalf of a defendant in criminal proceedings."

Elle replaced Callahan in the courtroom without his consent, but the judge approved it. Although she was nervous at first, Elle won a major case with ease. She felt proud of herself for being able to rise above the crisis.

According to Abrams, her personality and worldview have significantly evolved. According to Weiland, this marks the completion of her positive character arc.

Data 16

The Graduation Scene

Timestamp: 01:29:35

This scene symbolizes the culmination of Elle Woods' character development. Elle appears not only as a successful Harvard graduate but also gives a speech as the valedictorian. This scene not only celebrates her degree but also her efforts throughout her journey.

At the beginning of the film, Elle decides to enrol at Harvard because she wants to get Warner back. After facing several academic conflicts, she rises up with the same goal in mind, namely Warner, but after several more conflicts, she realizes that there will be no end to it if she pursues someone who does not want her. She realizes that it is not her fault that their relationship ended, nor is it her fault that her efforts failed, but rather that her expectations were problem.

According to Abrams (1999), a dynamic character must show clear internal development that results in a new perspective or worldview. In this final scene, Elle's worldview has clearly shifted. She no longer defines herself based on how others see her. Instead, she defines herself through her own growth, competence, and resilience.

From Weiland's (2016) perspective, this moment represents the "new normal" stage in a positive character arc. The protagonist has fully replaced the false belief with truth. Elle's initial false belief was:

"I need male approval to be worthy."

By the time she graduates, this belief has been replaced with:

"My worth comes from my ability, confidence, and self-respect."

This finding is also consistent with previous studies which state that the final stage of character development often reflects a stable identity and a deeper understanding of self-worth (Zahratunissa & Heriyati, 2023).

The professional appearance she had during her speech and her confidence were symbols of her new identity, one that did not depend on other people. She no longer sought validation or competed with anyone; she was there, on that podium, because of her own efforts. This transformation shows that the character of Elle Woods has fully reached self-acceptance and independence. This transformation also reflects moral and personal growth, where the character not only changes externally but also develops a deeper understanding of self-worth (Gunawan & Nurkhamidah, 2024). Similar findings are also discussed in previous studies, which suggest that character development in film often reflects a shift from external validation to internal self-worth as a result of personal experiences and social interaction (Farhat & Juanda, 2025).

Therefore, the graduation scene functions as the narrative closure of Elle's dynamic development. It confirms that her journey from romantic dependence to independent self-worth has been fully completed. This is in line with the concept of character development which states that the final stage of a character's transformation often represents a stable identity where the character fully understands their own value (Zahratunissa & Heriyati, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001) represents a dynamic character whose development follows a structured positive character arc. Based on Abrams' (1999) theory, Elle undergoes significant psychological changes throughout the story. Her identity evolves from a woman who depends on romantic validation to someone who stands on her own two feet by building self-worth through competition. Meanwhile, using Weiland's (2016) character arc framework, Elle begins her journey with a false belief that her value depends on romantic validation. Through such as academic humiliation, romantic rejection, competition with Vivian, and workplace harassment, this belief is gradually weakened.

The party scene is a turning point where Elle realizes that she will never be good enough if she follows Warner's standards. This pain is a new beginning for Elle, where she fights for her own values without external factors for the first time. The harassment scene is the lowest point for Elle because, up until then, she had been working hard to increase her value as a woman, only to suddenly collapse when she realized that she had been selected based on her abilities.

The graduation scene ultimately symbolizes the completion of her transformation. As a successful Harvard Law graduate and valedictorian, Elle stands confidently with great pride in himself for being able to overcome all the conflicts so far, she felt she deserved to be on that podium. This study confirms that Elle Woods fulfils the criteria of a dynamic character and successfully completes a positive character arc.

Beyond narrative structure, the film also reflects real social issues, especially gender stereotypes that often associate femininity with incompetence. Elle's development challenges this stereotype by proving that intelligence and femininity can coexist. Her journey shows that personal growth often requires emotional struggle, social pressure, and self-realization before achieving true independence.

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