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Summary Article: **Harlow, Jean (1911 Kansas City, MO-1937 Los Angeles, CA)**

From *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Women in Early American Films: 1895-1930, An*

Jean Harlow, who went on to become *the* platinum blonde bombshell of the 1930s, got her start in silent films. She was born into a well-to-do family headed by a successful dentist and therefore received a privileged upbringing. At the age of sixteen she eloped with the heir of a wealthy Chicago family, but the marriage did not last. It did, however, get Harlow to Hollywood. Within a year she was working as an extra in films starring Laurel and Hardy and Clara Bow.

After appearing in two successful Laurel and Hardy shorts—*Double Whoopee* and *The Saturday Night Kid* (both 1929), Harlow was cast in the talking version of Howard Hughes's World War I film *Hell's Angels* (1930). Although the film had been in production for two years, when the decision was made to continue in sound several roles had to be recast, including the female lead. When the film was finally released it was one of the top ten grossing films of the year.

The film made Harlow famous and the hottest new property in Hollywood. She was a talented comedian and is part of one of the most famous dialogues in early film. In *Dinner at Eight* (1933), Harlow portrays a gold-digging trophy wife whose appearance and behavior hint at an amoral background. As Harlow's character complains that one of the men had expressed the belief that machinery would one day replace humans in every profession, Marie Dressler's character replies, "Oh, my dear, that's something *you* need never worry about."

Her less-than-intelligent vampish persona was established, and Harlow made the most of it. She moved to MGM where she signed a contract at \$1,250 weekly for all fifty-two weeks of the year, rather than the standard thirty-nine weeks. Her third film at her new studio was gold—*Red Dust* (1932) opposite Clark Gable firmly established her star status.

After *Red Dust* she returned to comedies again and scored another hit with the satirical *Bombshell* (1933). After this hit, it was not until she, Gable, and Wallace Beery were paired again that she hit box-office gold with *China Seas* (1935). Although the studio tried to transition her to dramas, her best performances were in comedies.

While making *Saratoga*, Harlow became extremely ill. Within days she died of acute nephritis. When the film was released after her death, it made in excess of \$2 million. The year of her death, Harlow became the first female film actor to appear on the cover of *Life* magazine (May 1937).

Like Marilyn Monroe after her, Harlow has never been allowed to rest in peace. At regular intervals her life is examined for possible flaws and her name maligned to various degrees. She was subject of two mediocre films in 1965 purporting to tell the story of her life. But through it all, she remains a fine, if underrated, actor and comedian.

Film Credits

1928	<i>Moran of the Marines; Chasing Husbands</i>
1929	<i>Liberty; Fugitives; Close Harmony; Double Whoopee; The Unkissed Man; Thundering Toupees; Bacon Grabbers; The Saturday Night Kid; The Love Parade; This Thing Called Love; Weak but Willing; New York Nights; Why Be Good?; Why Is a Plumber?</i>
1930	<i>Hell's Angels</i>
1931	<i>City Lights; The Public Enemy; The Secret Six; Iron Man; Goldie; Platinum Blonde; Beau Hunks</i>
1932	<i>Three Wise Girls; The Beast of the City; Red-Headed Woman; Red Dust; Talking Screen Snapshots</i>
1933	<i>Hold Your Man; Dinner at Eight; Bombshell</i>
1934	<i>The Girl from Missouri</i>
1935	<i>Reckless; China Seas</i>
1936	<i>Riffruff; Wife vs. Secretary; Suzy; Libeled Lady</i>
1937	<i>Personal Property; Saratoga</i>

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