



National Humanities Center Primary Source Collection

# BECOMING MODERN: AMERICA IN THE 1920S

[americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern](http://americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern)

A collection of primary resources—historical documents, literary texts, and works of art—thematically organized with notes and discussion questions

## Resources by Genre

Each genre is ordered by Theme: THE AGE, MODERNITY, MACHINE, PROSPERITY, DIVISION.

External sites are noted in small caps.

### ■ COLLECTIONS: CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY NONFICTION, FICTION, ILLUSTRATIONS, CARTOONS, etc.\*

<a href="#">THE AGE 1</a>	“The Age”	<a href="#">PROSPERITY 1</a>	“Age of Prosperity”
<a href="#">MODERNITY 1</a>	Modern Youth	<a href="#">PROSPERITY 2</a>	Business
<a href="#">MODERNITY 2</a>	Modern Woman	<a href="#">PROSPERITY 3</a>	Consumerism
<a href="#">MODERNITY 3</a>	Modern Democracy	<a href="#">PROSPERITY 4</a>	Crash
<a href="#">MODERNITY 4</a>	Modern Faith	<a href="#">DIVISIONS 1</a>	Ku Klux Klan
<a href="#">MODERNITY 5</a>	Modern City: The Skyscraper	<a href="#">DIVISIONS 2</a>	Black & White
<a href="#">MACHINE 1</a>	“Machine Age”	<a href="#">DIVISIONS 3</a>	City & Town
<a href="#">MACHINE 3</a>	Automobile	<a href="#">DIVISIONS 5</a>	Religion & Science
<a href="#">MACHINE 5</a>	Radio	<a href="#">DIVISIONS 6</a>	Labor & Capital
		<a href="#">DIVISIONS 7</a>	Native & Foreign
		<a href="#">DIVISIONS 8</a>	“Reds” & “Americans”

### ■ POLITICAL CARTOON COLLECTIONS

<a href="#">THE AGE 3</a>	– <i>Chicago Tribune</i> political cartoons: 24 cartoons (two per year, 1918-1929)
<a href="#">PROSPERITY 1</a>	–“Age of Prosperity”: 12 cartoons
<a href="#">PROSPERITY 4</a>	–Crash: 12 cartoons
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 1</a>	–Ku Klux Klan: 16 cartoons
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 2</a>	–Black & White: 18 cartoons
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 4</a>	–Wets & Drys: 8 cartoons
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 6</a>	–Labor & Capital: 14 cartoons
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 7</a>	–Native & Foreign: 6 cartoons
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 8</a>	–“Reds” & “Americans”: 8 cartoons

Image: Florine Stettheimer, *The Cathedrals of Broadway*, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Gift of Ettie Stettheimer, 1953. 53.24.3. Image: Art Resource, NY. Reproduced by permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; cropping permission request in process.

\* Most texts in *Becoming Modern* are excerpted. Full-text documents are so noted in the section headnotes.

## ■ NONFICTION: ESSAYS / PERIODICAL ARTICLES / BOOK SELECTIONS

These texts are presented as individual resources for study in the collection. Other nonfiction works are represented in the collections of contemporary commentary.

- [THE AGE 2](#) –Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties*, 1931, selections
- [MODERNITY 5](#) –Lewis Mumford, “The Intolerable City: Must It Keep On Growing?” *Harper’s*, February 1926, excerpt
- [MACHINE 3](#) –Will Rogers on traffic safety, syndicated column, April 4, 1926
- [MACHINE 4](#) –Richard Byrd & Charles Dewar, “Has Aviation a Future?” *The Forum*, August 1928  
–On “the phenomenon of Lindbergh,” appendix by Fitzhugh Green in Lindbergh’s memoir, “*We*,” 1927
- [MACHINE 6](#) –Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct*, 1933, Ch. 10, “Schemes of Life,” excerpts  
–Monta Bell, “Movies & Talkies,” *The North American Review*, October 1928
- [PROSPERITY 2](#) –Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*, 1925, excerpts
- [PROSPERITY 3](#) –Robert Benchley, “How to Sell Goods,” *New York World*, May 10, 1920  
–Will Rogers on advertising slogans, syndicated column, April 12, 1925
- [PROSPERITY 5](#) –American Federation of Labor, *Letters to a Bishop*, correspondence between Samuel Gompers and Bishop William Quayle (Methodist Episcopal Church), 1920, excerpts  
–American Federation of Labor, *The Challenge Accepted—Labor Will Not Be Outlawed or Enslaved*, Declaration of the Conference of Representatives of National and International Trade Unions, 1921, excerpts
- [PROSPERITY 6](#) –1919 Seattle General Strike: coverage from labor and general distribution newspapers, excerpts
- [DIVISIONS 2](#) –Clarence Darrow, *The Story of My Life*, 1932, on the Ossian Sweet trials, 1925-26  
–W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth,” in *Darkwater*, 1922, on the East St. Louis race riot of 1917; with later commentary by Robert Benchley
- [DIVISIONS 4](#) –“Five Years of Prohibition and Its Results,” *The North American Review*, summer & fall, 1925, excerpts  
–Nonfiction works excerpted in several collections of contemporary commentary include:
  - Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties*, 1931
  - Stuart Chase, *Prosperity: Fact or Myth?* 1929
  - Clarence Darrow, *The Story of My Life*, 1932
  - William Lionel George, *Hail Columbia!: Random Impressions of a Conservative English Radical*, 1921
  - Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 1929
  - Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*, 1929
  - Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 1920
  - Felix Graf von Luckner, *Seeteufel erobert Amerika* [*Sea Devil Conquers America*], 1928

## ■ FICTION: NOVELS / SHORT STORIES / PLAYS / POETRY

These texts are presented as individual resources for study in the collection. Other fiction works are represented in the collections of contemporary commentary.

- [MODERNITY 1](#) –F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” short story, 1920 UNIV. OF SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS
- [MODERNITY 2](#) –Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, novel, 1920: Carol Kennicott in Washington, DC
- [MODERNITY 5](#) –Robert Frost, “A Brook in the City,” 1921  
–Hart Crane, “To Brooklyn Bridge,” introductory poem to *The Bridge*, 1930
- [PROSPERITY 6](#) –Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, novel, 1922: the labor strike
- [DIVISIONS 2](#) –Kern & Hammerstein, *Show Boat*, musical drama, 1927: miscegenation scene YOUTUBE
- [DIVISIONS 3](#) –Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, novel, 1920: Carol Kennicott in Washington, DC  
–Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, novel, 1922: Babbitt’s booster speech on the midwestern city of Zenith  
–Robert Frost, “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” poem, 1920
- [DIVISIONS 8](#) –Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, novel, 1922: the Good Citizens’ League

## ■ CARTOONS / COMIC STRIPS / POSTERS

- [THE AGE 4](#) –*New Yorker* cartoons (13), 1925-1929
- [THE AGE 7](#) –New York City subway posters, 20, 1918-1931 (Interborough Rapid Transit Corp.)
- [MODERNITY 2](#) –Alvah Posen, *Them Days Is Gone Forever*, comic strip series, selection on the modern woman, 1922-1923

## ■ VISUAL ART

<a href="#">MODERNITY 6</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Charles Sheeler, <i>Skyscrapers</i>, oil on canvas, 1922</li> <li>–Louis Lozowick, <i>New York</i>, lithograph, ca. 1925</li> <li>–Edward Steichen, <i>Sunday Night, 40<sup>th</sup> Street</i>, gelatin silver print, ca. 1925</li> <li>–Georgia O’Keeffe, <i>City Night</i>, oil on canvas, 1926</li> <li>–Edward Hopper, <i>From Williamsburg Bridge</i>, 1928</li> <li>–Walker Evans, <i>Brooklyn Bridge</i>, gelatin silver print, 1929</li> <li>–Martin Lewis, <i>Glow of the City</i>, drypoint on paper, 1929</li> <li>–Bertram Hartman, <i>Trinity Church and Wall Street</i>, oil on canvas, 1929</li> <li>–Florine Stettheimer, <i>The Cathedrals of Broadway</i>, 1929 [Metropolitan Museum of Art]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PHILLIPS COLLECTION</li> <li>BRITISH MUSEUM</li> <li>MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON</li> <li>MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS</li> <li>METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART</li> <li>METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART</li> <li>SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM</li> <li>BROOKLYN MUSEUM</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MACHINE 1</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Charles Demuth, <i>My Egypt</i>, oil on fiberboard, 1927</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ART BEYOND SIGHT</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MACHINE 2</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Charles Sheeler: works depicting factory/industrial landscapes               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-River Rouge industrial complex (Ford), Detroit, photographs, 1927</li> <li>-<i>American Landscape</i>, oil on canvas, 1930</li> <li>-<i>Classic Landscape</i>, oil on canvas, 1931</li> <li>-<i>River Rouge Plant</i>, oil on canvas, 1932</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS</li> <li>MUSEUM OF MODERN ART</li> <li>NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART</li> <li>WHITNEY MUSEUM OF ART</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MACHINE 4</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Stanton Macdonald-Wright, <i>Aeroplane Synchromy in Yellow-Orange</i>, oil on canvas, 1920 [Metropolitan Museum of Art]</li> <li>–Elsie Driggs, <i>Aeroplane</i>, oil on canvas, 1928 [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston]</li> </ul>	
<a href="#">PROSPERITY 3</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Florine Stettheimer, <i>The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue</i>, oil on canvas, 1931 [Metropolitan Museum of Art]</li> </ul>	
<a href="#">PROSPERITY 4</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–James N. Rosenberg, <i>Oct. 29 Dies Irae</i> (Day of Wrath), lithograph, October 29, 1929 (in collection of contemporary commentary) [Library of Congress]</li> </ul>	
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 2</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Aaron Douglas, <i>Charleston</i>, gouache, ca. 1928 [North Carolina Museum of Art]</li> </ul>	
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 4</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Edward Hopper, <i>The Bootleggers</i>, oil on canvas, 1925</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CURRIER MUSEUM OF ART</li> </ul>

## ■ FILMS / NEWSREELS / ANIMATED CARTOONS

<a href="#">THE AGE 5</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Felix the Cat silent animated cartoons (8), 1922-1927</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE/NHC</li> </ul>
<a href="#">THE AGE 6</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Detroit News Pictorials, silent newsreels (30), 1923-1928</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DETROIT NEWS PICTORIAL/WSU</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MODERNITY 1</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–<i>The Flapper</i>, silent film, 1920</li> <li>–<i>Our Dancing Daughters</i>, silent film, 1928 (three clips)</li> <li>–<i>Our Modern Maidens</i>, silent film, 1929 (three clips)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE</li> <li>TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES</li> <li>TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MODERNITY 2</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–“Are Women’s Sports Too Strenuous?” silent newsreel, 1925</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BRITISH PATHÉ NEWS</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MODERNITY 5</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Newsreels (silent)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-“Old and New Detroit,” 1923</li> <li>-“905 Feet High,” 1929</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DETROIT NEWS PICTORIAL/WSU</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MODERNITY 7</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–<i>Manhatta</i>, silent art film by Charles Sheeler &amp; Paul Strand, 1921               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Intertitles text from Walt Whitman, <i>Leaves of Grass</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>–<i>Skyscraper Symphony</i>, silent art film by Robert Florey, 1929</li> <li>–<i>The Crowd</i>, Hollywood silent film, 1928 (opening sequence)</li> <li>–<i>Cockeyed</i>, special-effects silent newsreel, ca. 1925 (clip)</li> <li>–“The City of Skyscrapers,” silent newsreel, early 1920s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE</li> <li>YOUTUBE</li> <li>TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES</li> <li>NATL. FILM PRESERVATION FOUND.</li> <li>BRITISH PATHÉ NEWS</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MACHINE 2</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–<i>A Tour thru the Rouge Plants</i>, silent film, ca. 1932</li> <li>–<i>The Source of the Ford Car</i>, silent film, ca. 1932</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BRITISH PATHÉ NEWS</li> <li>INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MACHINE 3</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–<i>Wheels of Progress</i>, silent film, U.S. Bureau of Roads, ca. 1927</li> <li>–Newsreels (silent)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-“Motorists try brakes for police department,” 1927</li> <li>-“Had your automobile brakes tested yet?” 1928</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE</li> <li>DETROIT NEWS PICTORIAL/WSU</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MACHINE 4</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Newsreels (silent/sound): aviation innovations, 1923-1930 (7)</li> <li>–Felix the Cat, <i>The Non-Stop Fright</i>, silent animated cartoon, 1927</li> <li>–Mickey Mouse, <i>Plane Crazy</i>, sound animated cartoon, 1928 DISNEY ANIMATION/YOUTUBE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BRITISH PATHÉ NEWS</li> <li>INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE</li> </ul>
<a href="#">MACHINE 5</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–<i>La Bohème</i>, silent live-action film, 1926 (clip)</li> <li>–<i>Show Girl in Hollywood</i>, sound live-action film, 1930 (clip)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>WARNER BROS.</li> <li>WARNER BROS.</li> </ul>

	–Felix the Cat, <i>Felix in Hollywood</i> , silent animated cartoon, 1923	INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE
	–Mickey Mouse, <i>Steamboat Willie</i> , sound animated cartoon, 1928	DISNEY ANIMATION/YOUTUBE
<a href="#">PROSPERITY 3</a>	–Theater commercials (silent), 1920s: flour, hand cleaner, refrigerator	LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
<a href="#">PROSPERITY 4</a>	–American Federation of Labor, <i>Labor's Reward</i> , silent film, 1925 (clip)	NATL. FILM PRESERVATION FOUND.
<a href="#">PROSPERITY 5</a>	–Mutt & Jeff, <i>On Strike</i> , silent animated cartoon, 1920	NATL. FILM PRESERVATION FOUND.
	–Felix the Cat, <i>On Strike</i> , silent animated cartoon, 1923	INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 1</a>	–Newsreel (silent): Klan parade, Washington, DC, August 1925	BRITISH PATHÉ NEWS
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 2</a>	–Oscar Micheaux, <i>Within Our Gates</i> , silent film drama, 1920	INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 4</a>	–Newsreels (sound)	BRITISH PATHÉ NEWS
	–“The Dodgers! A Prohibition Sidelight from Buffalo,” 1931	
	–“Someone Is Going Short of Christmas Spirits!” 1932	
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 5</a>	–Felix the Cat, <i>Felix Doubles for Darwin</i> , silent animated cartoon, 1924	INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 8</a>	– <i>Uncle Sam and the Bolshevik-IWW Rat</i> , silent animated cartoon, 1919	NATL. FILM PRESERVATION FOUND.
	–Felix the Cat, <i>All Puzzled</i> , silent animated cartoon, 1925	INTERNET MOVING PICTURE ARCHIVE

## ■ RADIO BROADCASTS / SOUND RECORDINGS

<a href="#">MACHINE 3</a>	–Will Rogers, address to traffic chiefs, June 2, 1923	LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
<a href="#">MACHINE 5</a>	–WLS Chicago, WLS Showboat, the “Floating Palace of Wonder,” radio broadcast, ca. 1925 (with transcript)	
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 1</a>	–Will Rogers, “Timely Topics,” humor monologue, 1923	LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
<a href="#">DIVISIONS 8</a>	–Political addresses on “Americanism,” 1920, recordings, with transcripts	LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
	–Franklin D. Roosevelt (Democratic Party)	
	–Leonard Wood (Republican Party)	