

THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



Los Angeles Public Library

Marathon dancers taking a rest, near the Bimini Baths, Los Angeles, California, 1920s (detail)

— MODERN YOUTH —

“Is the Younger Generation in Peril?” “Has Youth Deteriorated?” “How Wild Is Wild Youth?” Are they worse than any previous generation? Are they irretrievably corrupted by modernity? The anxiety that dominated headlines in the Twenties was met with equally fervent defenses of the postwar generation. Let’s enter the fray.

I would like to say a few things about my generation.

In the first place, I would like to observe that the older generation had certainly pretty

well ruined this world before passing it on to us. They give us this Thing, knocked to pieces, leaky, red-hot, threatening to blow up; and then they are surprised that we don’t accept it with the same attitude of pretty decorous enthusiasm with which they received it, ’way back in the eighteen-nineties, nicely painted, smoothly running, practically foolproof. “So simple that a child can run it!” But the child couldn’t steer it. He hit every possible telegraph pole, some of them twice, and ended with a head-on collision for which *we* shall have to pay the fines and damages. Now, with loving pride, they turn over their wreck to us; and since we are not properly overwhelmed with loving gratitude, shake their heads and sigh, “Dear! dear! We were so much better mannered than these wild young people. But then we had the advantages of a good, strict, old-fashioned bringing-up.” How intensely *human* these oldsters are, after all, and how fallible! How they always blame us for not following precisely in their eminently correct footsteps! . . .

Now my generation is disillusionized, and, I think, to a certain extent, brutalized, by the cataclysm which *their* complacent folly engendered. The acceleration of life for us has been so great that into the last few years have been crowded the experiences and the ideas of a normal lifetime. We have in our unregenerate youth learned the practicality and the cynicism that is safe only in unregenerate old age. We have been forced to become realists overnight, instead of idealists, as was our birthright. We have seen man at his lowest, woman at her lightest, in the terrible moral chaos of Europe. . . . We have been forced to live in an atmosphere of “tomorrow we die,” and so naturally, we drank and were merry.

John F. Carter, Jr.

“These Wild Young People,” by One of Them”
Atlantic Monthly, September 1920

Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd
Middletown: A Study in American Culture
 1929*

Selected in 1924 as typical town of “middle America,” Muncie, Indiana, was the focus of two sociologists’ research into the changes wrought in modernizing America since the late 1890s.

Indiana Historical Society

◀▶ The more sophisticated social life of today has brought with it another “problem” much discussed by Middletown parents, the apparently increasing relaxation of some of the traditional prohibitions upon the approaches of boys and girls to each other’s persons. Here again new inventions of the last thirty-five years have played a part. In 1890 a “well-brought up” boy and girl were commonly forbidden to sit together in the dark; but motion pictures and the automobile have lifted this taboo, and once lifted, it is easy for the practice to become widely extended. Buggy-riding in 1890 allowed only a narrow range of mobility; three to eight were generally accepted hours for riding, and being out after eight-thirty without a chaperon was largely forbidden. In an auto, however, a party may go to a city halfway across the state in an afternoon or evening, and unchaperoned automobile parties as late as midnight, while subject to criticism, are not exceptional. . . .*



Young couples in formal wear, Terre Haute, Indiana, ca. 1930

◀▶ A more democratic system of relationships with frank exchange of ideas is growing up in many homes: “My mother was a splendid mother in many ways, but I could not be that kind of mother now. I have to be a pal and listen to my children’s ideas,” said one of these mothers who marked obedience zero for herself and “A” for her mother [in a questionnaire ranking the “traits to be stressed in raising children” in 1890 and 1924]. One worker’s wife commented, “Obedience [as the most important trait] may be all right for younger children, but, now, take my boy in high school, if we tried to jerk him up like we used to be, he’d just leave home.” And another, “we are trying to make our boy feel that he is entitled to his own opinion; we treat him as one of us and listen to his ideas.” The value that the children apparently place upon this policy is indicated by the fact that “respecting children’s opinions” is rated by 369 high school boys and 415 high school girls second only to “spending time with children” as a quality desirable in a father; . . .

◀▶ The following discussion among eighteen high school boys and girls at a young people’s meeting in a leading church on the general topic, “What’s Wrong With the Home?” reveals the parents’ perplexity as seen by the children:

Boy. “Parents don’t know anything about their children and what they’re doing.”

Girl. “They don’t want to know.”

Girl. “We won’t let them know.”

Boy. “Parents ought to get together. Usually one is easy and one is hard. They don’t stand together.”

Boy. “They don’t want to know.”

Boy. “Parents ought to have a third party to whom they could go for advice.” [Chorus of “Yes.”]

Boy. “This is the first year I’ve wanted to dance. Dad wanted me to go to only two this Christmas. [Triumphantly.] I’m going to five and passing up four!”

* Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1929. Reproduced by permission of Mr. Staughton Lynd.

* The possible relation of popular songs to the courtship habits of 1890 and today should not be overlooked. In the ballads of a generation ago—“After the Ball,” “Airy, Fairy Lilian,” “On a Bicycle Made for Two”—lovers might sit together in the moonlight, “hands touching lightly,” or perhaps in the bolder songs there was a solitary kiss or “squeeze,” but rarely was there the “I’ll-hold-you-enfold-you” quality of the songs to which young Middletown dances dreamily today.

SOURCES OF DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN 348 BOYS AND 382 GIRLS AND THEIR PARENTS [IN "MIDDLETOWN"]

SOURCE OF DISAGREEMENT ¹		BOYS CHECKING		GIRLS CHECKING	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1.	Use of the automobile	124	35.6	113	29.6
2.	The boys or girls you choose as friends	87	25.0	103	27.0
3.	Your spending money	130	37.4	110	28.8
4.	Number of times you go out on school nights during the week	157	45.1	182	47.6
5.	Grades at school	140	40.2	119	31.2
6.	The hours you get in at night	158	45.4	163	42.7
7.	Home duties (tending furnace, cooking, etc.)	66	19.0	101	26.4
8.	Clubs or societies you belong to	19	5.5	40	10.5
9.	Church and Sunday School attendance	66	19.0	71	18.6
10.	Sunday observance, aside from just going to church and Sunday School	50	14.4	53	13.9
11.	The way you dress	55	15.8	94	24.6
12.	Going to unchaperoned parties	53	15.2	105	27.5
13.	Any other sources of disagreement ¹	33	9.5	32	8.4
	"Do not disagree" ²	7	2.0	8	2.1

¹ This is one question in the questionnaire given to all the English classes in the three upper years of the high school. . . . It read: "Check the things listed below about which you and your parents disagree. State any other causes of disagreement." The items are given here in the order in which they were presented in the questionnaire. [Table footnote continues.]

² Among other sources of disagreement listed by the boys were: "Spending all my time on athletics," "Smoking," "Drinking," "How much I should work," "Having a rifle."

Among those listed by the girls were: "Cigarettes," "Boys," "Petting Parties," "Bobbed hair," "Playing cards," "Reading too many books," "Dancing," "Machine riding to other towns at night with dates," "Evolution."

³ This item was not on the questionnaire. The answers here so classified were volunteered by the children and probably do not include all those who "do not disagree." Fifty-seven boys and eighty-two girls answering the questionnaire did not check this list.

Indiana Historical Society



Young people photographed in Martin's Studio, Terre Haute, Indiana, ca. 1925

H. M.

Letter to the *Chicago Tribune*
May 20, 1928

Much has been said recently pro and con about modern youth. My work keeps me in daily contact with them and try as I may I cannot view them with any amount of optimism. They are selfish and inconsiderate, thinking of no one's comfort or pleasure but their own. I know of many instances where the parents are denying themselves many pleasures which are rightfully due them in order that their children may have enough to keep up with the pace of the times. Do you ever hear of any of them asking their parents to accompany them to the theater or some other form of amusement? I never have. many parents would be willing to pay their own way but they are not even accorded an invitation.

Modern youth is disrespectful and brazenly bold. They carry on their suggestive petting in the theaters and streetcars, yes, and even in the back pews of churches!

They lack precision in speech and all you ever hear them say is "hot mammas," "keen shapes," "nice legs," etc. This is modern youth as I see it. of course I suppose there are exceptions. I'd like to meet a few. H.M.

Bessie T. Fortson

Letter to the *Atlanta Constitution*
March 5, 1927

RESENTS SUGGESTION OF MODERN GIRLS
BEING "MUDDY-MINDED HELL CATS"

Editor: As the mother of a sixteen-year-old daughter, I think it is time to call a halt when the pastor a church, addressing a gathering of college boys, terms all modern young girls "hell cats with muddy minds" and makes the point-blank assertions that "modesty among the younger members of the fairer and faster sex is deader than a dead man's hand" and "the average girl of seventeen would not object to "appearing nude if she had any excuse to do so."

If this is his opinion of the young girls of today, he has, to say the least, been unfortunate in the class he has met.

It occurs to me that, as the prosperity of a jest is said to lie in the ear of him that hears it, and beauty in the eye of the beholder, so the mental muddiness referred to rests in the mind of this speaker.

MODERN YOUTH was a persistent topic of public concern—and of public talks—in the 1920s, as evidenced by headlines from the *Atlanta Constitution*.

Defense of "Modern Girl"
:: FLAPPERS TO MAKE FINE MOTHERS, SHE SAYS ::
Voiced by Rheba Crawford

June 10, 1924

Modern Girl Is No Worse
:: SOCIAL WORKER SAYS PROBLEMS DIFFERENT ::
Than Those of Other Days

April 15, 1925

Parents Blamed for Faults
DRINKING FATHERS, CARD-PLAYING MOTHERS SCORED
Of Modern Youth of America

Dec. 2, 1925

Revivalist Calls Modern Girls
BUT STILL BELIEVES THEY'RE LIFTING MORALS OF MEN
'Hell Cats With Muddy Minds'

March 2, 1927

Girls of Today Less Gullible
:: SALVATION ARMY HEAD PRAISES MODERN YOUTH ::
Than Formerly, McIntyre Says

March 27, 1927

'Flaming Youth' a Myth,
:: PURDUE MENTOR SCORNFUL OF "OLD FOGIES" ::
Declares Visiting Dean

April 22, 1927

Live Today, Not Past, Declares
:: ZAIDEE GRAHAM DEFENDS MODERNISTIC IDEAS ::
Brenau College 'Modern Girl'

March 10, 1929

Bobbed Hair, Short Dresses
:: MODERN YOUTH WHOLESOME, MISS PYRTLE SAYS ::
Fail To Alarm N. E. A. Head

July 5, 1929

Sinclair Lewis
Babbitt
novel, 1922

In Lewis's famed portrayal of middle-class midwestern life in the rapidly changing America of 1920, George Babbitt ambivalently observes "modern youth" at a party hosted by his son Ted for his high school senior class friends.

On the night of the party he was permitted to look on, when he was not helping Matilda with the Vecchia ice cream and the *petits fours*. He was deeply disquieted. Eight years ago, when Verona had given a high school party, the children had been featureless gabies [simpletons]. Now they were men and women of the world, very supercilious men and women; the boys condescended to Babbitt, they wore evening clothes, and with hauteur [haughtiness] they accepted cigarettes from silver cases. Babbitt had heard stories of what the Athletic Club called "goings on" at young parties; of girls "parking" their corsets in the dressing-room, of "cuddling" and "petting," and a presumable increase in what was known as Immorality. Tonight he believed the stories. These children seemed bold to him, and cold. The girls wore misty chiffon, coral velvet, or cloth of gold, and around their dipping bobbed hair were shining wreaths. He had it, upon urgent and secret inquiry, that no corsets were known to be parked upstairs; but certainly these eager bodies were not stiff with steel. Their stockings were of lustrous silk, their slippers costly and unnatural, their lips carmined and their eyebrows penciled. They danced cheek to cheek with the boys, and Babbitt sickened with apprehension and unconscious envy.

Worst of them all was Eunice Littlefield, and maddest of all the boys was Ted. Eunice was a flying demon. She slid the length of the room; her tender shoulders swayed; her feet were deft as a weaver's shuttle; she laughed, and enticed Babbitt to dance with her.

Then he discovered the annex to the party.

The boys and girls disappeared occasionally, and he remembered rumors of their drinking together from hip-pocket flasks. He tiptoed round the house, and in each of the dozen cars waiting in the street he saw the points of light from cigarettes, from each of them heard high giggles. He wanted to denounce them but (standing in the snow, peering round the dark corner) he did not dare. He tried to be tactful. When he had returned to the front hall he coaxed the boys, "Say, if any of you fellows are thirsty, there's some dandy ginger ale."

"Oh! Thanks!" they condescended.

He sought his wife, in the pantry, and exploded, "I'd like to go in there and throw some of those young pups out of the house! They talk down to me like I was the butler! I'd like to—"

"I know," she sighed; "only everybody says, all the mothers tell me, unless you stand for them, if you get angry because they go out to their cars to have a drink, they won't come to your house any more, and we wouldn't want Ted left out of things, would we?"

He announced that he would be enchanted to have Ted left out of things, and hurried in to be polite, lest Ted be left out of things.

But, he resolved, if he found that the boys were drinking, he would—well, he'd "hand 'em something that would surprise 'em." While he was trying to be agreeable to large-shouldered young bullies he was earnestly sniffing at them. Twice he caught the reek of prohibition-time whiskey, but then, it was only twice—

Dr. Howard Littlefield lumbered in.

He had come, in a mood of solemn parental patronage, to look on. Ted and Eunice were dancing, moving together like one body. Littlefield gasped. He called Eunice. There was a whispered duologue, and Littlefield explained to Babbitt that Eunice's mother had a headache and needed her. She went off in tears. Babbitt looked after them furiously. "That little devil! Getting Ted into trouble! And Littlefield, the conceited old gas-bag, acting like it was Ted that was the bad influence!"

Later he smelled whiskey on Ted's breath.

After the civil farewell to the guests, the row [fight] was terrific, a thorough Family Scene, like an avalanche, devastating and without reticences. Babbitt thundered, Mrs. Babbitt wept, Ted was unconvincingly defiant, and Verona in confusion as to whose side she was taking.



John Held, *Dancin' in the Jazz Age*, gouache, 1920

HAS YOUTH DETERIORATED?

THE FORUM ■ JULY 1926 ■ EXCERPTS

The *Forum*, a magazine of social and political commentary, regularly invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. For this inquiry, the *Forum* published essays by two representatives of “modern youth. Each addressed the older generation’s fascination with the younger generation’s fascination with sex.

YES: “Reaping the Whirlwind”

ANNE TEMPLE

. . . This tremendous interest in the younger generation is nothing more nor less than a preoccupation with the nature of that generation’s sex life. What people really want to know about us, if they are honest enough to admit it, is whether or not we are perverted, whether we are loose, whether we are what they call immoral; and their curiosity has never been completely satisfied. Deny it or not, this concern comprises our primary interest for the general public.

. . . it is almost impossible to get away from the subject of sex today. It is talked over in polite and impolite salons [gatherings for conversation]. It is discussed in Park Avenue hotels and in Child’s. There are books about it. There are plays about it. There is even a science about it. Ordinarily, one might say that the life of the present generation is the result of constant suggestion and rumor. But not so in this instance. It is the young people themselves who are the students and advocates of the “new morality.” Largely through us, old standards are not being laughed at and called blind; conventions [standards] have been dispensed with; obligations are scoffed at; and “Liberate the Libido” has become our national motto. . . .

. . . My quarrel with the young people of today concerns quite another matter—the loss of a thing which some call innate refinement. We lack a certain dignity of charm and refinement which, despite their silly conventions and their inhibitions, our fathers and mothers are not without. We young people are like a herd of calves, enclosed in a wide pasture. Leaderless we rush, in an impetuous juvenile stampede, toward the farthest pasture gates, not knowing what lies beyond—more pasture lands, or chasms. We have hurled aside all conventions. Accepted standards are “nil” with us. And now, without precedents, denying all antecedents, we are as bald and as intrinsically uninteresting as a plucked ostrich. We have sowed the wind: we are reaping the whirlwind. True, we have our freedom, our “self expression,” and our inhibition-less theories. Even at that, however, I am wondering if the past generations haven’t something on us.

NO: “The Fabulous Monster”

REGINA MALONE

What is our Youth coming to? It is coming, through mistakes, through the unavoidable extremism of any revolt against authority, to a new conception of life—to a new morality, to new “mores” better adapted to the age than those it has discarded. Beneath our studied superficiality, beneath our cynical nonchalance, our assumed indifference, and apparent ill-breeding, is there not more than a germ of that ageless yearning for improvement which has characterized the youth of every age? . . .

Which brings us to a more serious phase of the Youth question: our attitude toward sex. We no longer spell the word with a capital letter; and it is as frankly discussed as automobiles or the advantage of cold storage over moth balls. Why should our elders consider our interest in this subject a sign of unnaturalness or perversion? . . . I am confident that in the opinion of the majority of members of my generation, it is only when a discussion of the subject of sex exceeds the dictates of good breeding that it becomes shocking or unmoral. As for violations of the moral code: it follows logically that the same class of persons who were promiscuous, both in their discussion and in their acts, existed in our parents’, our grandparents’, and our great-grandparents’ day. . . .

All the petty things to which you, a generation or two ahead of us, attach so much importance, are mere symbols of a revolt whose object is Freedom—Freedom, the cry of the ages—and it is only in this light that they should be regarded. Beauty and idealism, the two eternal heritages of Youth, are still alive. It is only the form of expression which they have assumed that has been mistaken for the death knell. Laugh it off, you who are alarmed at this fabulous monster of Youth! Pay less attention to the surface signs of the revolt and more to the good being accomplished by it. Remember how the expression affected you when your parents cried, “O Tempora! O Mores!” [“Oh what times! Oh what customs!” Cicero] And the funny part is that the young insurgent who today inspires your wrath will one day be saying to a group of tolerant youngsters: “Things certainly have changed. Now in *my* day—”

Reinhold Niebuhr
*Leaves from the Notebook
of a Tamed Cynic, 1929*

Niebuhr, one of the most influential American Protestant theologians, pastored a small Detroit congregation in the 1920s, during which he kept a journal on ministering in modern times.

1926: One is hardly tempted to lose confidence in the future after listening to a group of young people discussing the important problems of life. Of course the number who approach the future reflectively and with real appreciation for the issues involved in the readjustment of traditions to new situations is not large. There are not many such groups and even in these the number who really take part in the discussion is small.

Nevertheless their wholesomeness is impressive. I can't always withhold a sense of pity for them. With traditions crumbling and accepted standards inundated by a sea of moral relativity, they have a desperate task on their hands to construct new standards adequate for their happiness. There is always the temptation to be too rebellious or too traditional, to be scornful of the old standard even when it preserves obvious virtues, or to flee to it for fear of being lost in the confusion of new standards. Yet the best way of avoiding these dangers is to subject them to the scrutiny of a thoughtful group which knows how to discern the limitations of any position, old or new.

On the whole the discussion of our young people at the church seem to be more wholesome than those in which I participate in the colleges. Most of these young folks have assumed responsibilities and are therefore not as inclined to be morbidly critical and skeptical as the college group. The cases cited from their own experience help to give vitality to their discussion, and they are not enervated by that extreme sophistication which imperils the college youth and tempts him to end every discussion and discount every discovery with the reflection, "This also is vanity." [*vanity*: meaningless; Ecclesiastes 4, King James Bible]

I really wonder how we are going to build a civilization sufficiently intelligent to overcome dangerous prejudices and to emancipate itself from the inadequacies of conventional morality without creating the kind of sophistication which destroys all values by its skepticism and dampens every enthusiasm by its cynicism. In America that possibility is particularly dangerous because our intellectualism is of the sophomoric type. There is no generation, or only one generation, between the pioneers who conquered the prairies and these youngsters who are trying to absorb the whole of modern culture in four years. The traditions against which they react are less adequate, less modified by experience and culture, than those which inform the peoples of Europe.

And the teachers who guide them into the world of new knowledge are frequently themselves so recently emancipated that they try to obscure their cultural, religious and moral heritages by extreme iconoclasm [rejection of traditional beliefs]. It is difficult to be patient with one of these smart-aleck Ph.Ds. on a western campus who imagines that he can impress the world with his learning by being scornful of everything that was thought or done before this century.

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SEES MODERN YOUTH AHEAD OF FATHERS

Dr. Abbott Finds Boys Five
Times as Decent as Previous
Generation Despite Faults.

TAKE NOTHING FOR GRANTED

They Demand Facts, Says Head of
Lawrenceville School—He Lays
Restlessness to Lack of Faith.

Nov. 12, 1926. Dr. Abbott was headmaster
of the Lawrenceville Schools for Boys (NJ).

SEES MODERN YOUTH FACING GREAT TRIAL

Dr. Covert Says Young Genera-
tion Must Meet Moral Strain
of Materialistic Times.

BIDS ELDERS BE PATIENT

Children of Today Have Greatest
Possibilities of Any That Ever
Lived, He Declares.

Dec. 6, 1926. Dr. Covert was director of the
Presbyterian Board of Christian Education.

SEES MODERN YOUTH IN HUNT FOR THRILLS

Dr. Ward Says Elders Also
Have No Time to Consider
Deeper Meanings of Life.

URGES THOUGHT OF FUTURE

Coming Generation, He Declares,
Is Short-Sighted—Science Said
to Fail as a Guide.

Nov. 28, 1927. Dr. Harry F. Ward was a
professor at Union Theological Seminary
in New York City.

Advice and reassurance on modern youth was forthcoming from prominent clergy, educators, and child welfare professionals, as seen in these headlines from the *New York Times*.

“How Wild Is Wild Youth?”
The New Republic, May 5, 1926

It seems to be an accepted axiom nowadays that our young people are going to the devil. Press, pulpit, and publicist are agreed that youth is wild and getting wilder. The college boy and his flapper friend, it is charged, drink, pet, and are disrespectful to their elders, while the neighborhood gangster, aided by his youthful sweetie and stimulated by the false courage of heroin or cocaine, robs and murders with casual calmness long before he is out of his teens.

Most of this lamentation, of course, is based on theory and not on fact. Those who indulge in it have read in the papers of a few sensational cases like the Leopold-Loeb affair, or have witnessed some of the post-Prohibition drinking parties in which youth, imitating the practice of its elders, indulges. The reasoning is almost always from the particular to the general, a type of argument which is as dangerous in this case as usual.

Recognizing that this is true, the Children’s Bureau of the United States Bureau of Labor recently undertook to throw a little light, of a really scientific character, on this question. If youth is as wild as is represented, and the wildness extends through all classes, the results certainly ought to be reflected in the records of the juvenile courts and the institutions in which delinquents are detained. Accordingly, a careful study was made of the statistics dealing with the subject. The figures investigated included delinquency rates in fourteen of the leading cities of the United States . . .

In nearly all these fourteen cities, the delinquency rates per 1,000 children of “delinquency age” were decidedly *lower* in 1924 or 1925 than in 1915. There was a not very surprising increase during the war period, 1917 to and including 1919, but in most cities the downward trend thereafter was marked. . . .

These statistics, the reliability of which is beyond question, do not of course show that all the ululations of the alarmed editorial writers and preachers are unjustified. Youth may really be wild, in a fashion which does not get itself reflected in the delinquency and prison statistics. In so far, however, as the complaint has been made of youthful criminals as a new phenomenon, it is clearly without foundation. And certainly whatever wildness of youth exists, if it be not serious enough to draw the attention of the law, cannot be worth as much excitement, as many millions of words of frenzied exhortation, as it has been receiving.

“Life Lines”

HUMOR COLUMN, *Life*

- ♣ SHOPPER: I want to get a fashionable skirt.
 SALESLADY: Yes, madam. Will you have it too tight or too short?
 ___*Life*, October 7, 1920
- ♣ HE: Well, well; now we can talk about politics intelligently to you ladies, can’t we?
 SHE: That remains to be seen.
 ___*Life*, October 28, 1920
- ♣ Marshall Field has refused to give employment to girls who bob their hair, use rouge or powder, wear short skirts, or roll their stockings. They would have saved lots of time by limiting the announcement to the words “No Girls Wanted.”
 ___*Life*, October 6, 1921



A statistician tells us it takes 333 silkworms to make a pair of flappers’ hose [stockings]. Well, they can’t complain that their work doesn’t show.
 “Tom Masson Says,” humor column, *Collier’s*, April 30, 1927



<p>She doesn’t drink, She doesn’t pet, She hasn’t been To college yet. <i>Tennessee Mugwump</i></p>	<p><i>First Poppa</i>: Do you think your son will soon forget all he learned at college? <i>Second Poppa</i>: I hope so; he can’t make a living necking. <i>Columbia Jester</i></p>
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IF

(With Apologies to Kipling)

V. L. Shepherd, *Harper’s*, September 1926

If you can keep your hair when all about you
 Are shearing theirs and wanting you to, too,
 If you can hold your tongue when others mock you,
 But make allowance for their mocking, too;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To keep your hair long, after theirs is gone,
 And hold on to it when there’s nothing in you
 Except the will which says to you, “Hold On!”

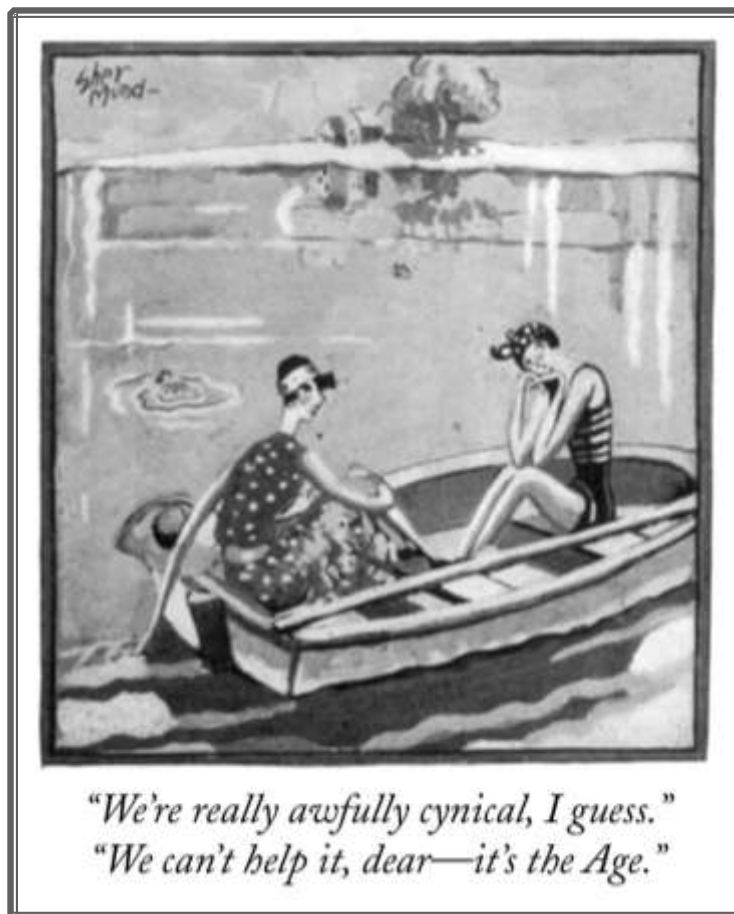
If you can talk with crowds and keep your locks too,
 Or walk with “Sheiks”—nor lose your common sense;
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
 If women dub you “Freak” in self-defense;

If you can smile with not a hat to fit you,
 If you can sigh, but never shed a tear,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
 And—which is more—You’ll be a lady, dear.



Cartoonist: Nate Collier
Reproduced by permission of the *New Yorker*.

The New Yorker, March 14, 1925



Cartoonist: Barbara Shermund
Reproduced by permission of the *New Yorker*.

The New Yorker, August 27, 1927

F. S C O T T F I T Z G E R A L D

___ON MODERN YOUTH___

F. Scott Fitzgerald embodied the “Jazz Age” in his personal life as well as his fiction, most notably the 1925 classic *The Great Gatsby*. In essays and commentary he often riffed on modern youth, including his generation and those coming of age in postwar America.



This Side of Paradise, novel, 1920 Princeton student Amory Blaine joins the Triangle Club, a student musical comedy organization, on its annual Christmas trip.

On the Triangle trip Amory had come into constant contact with that great current American phenomenon, the “petting party.”

None of the Victorian mothers—and most of the mothers were Victorian—had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed. “*Servant* girls are that way,” says Mrs. Huston-Carmelite to her popular daughter. “They are kissed first and proposed to afterwards.” . . .

The “belle” had become the “flirt,” the “flirt” had become the “baby vamp.” The “belle” had five or six callers every afternoon. If the P. D. [Popular Daughter] by some strange accident has two, it is made pretty uncomfortable for the one who hasn’t a date with her. The “belle” was surrounded by a dozen men in the intermissions between dances. Try to find the P. D. between dances; just try to find her.

The same girl . . . deep in an atmosphere of jungle music and the questioning of moral codes. Amory found it rather fascinating to feel that any popular girl he met before eight he might quite possibly kiss before twelve. [ellipsis in original]



**Fitzgerald, quoted in Margaret Reid, “Has the Flapper Changed?”
Motion Picture Magazine, July 1927**

The girls I wrote about were not a type—they were a generation. Free spirits—evolved through the war chaos and a final inevitable escape from restraint and inhibitions. If there is a difference, it is that the flappers today are perhaps less defiant, since their freedom is taken for granted and they are sure of it. In my day—stroking his hoary beard—they had just made their escape from dull and blind conventionality. Subconsciously there was a hint of belligerence in their attitude, because of the opposition they met—but overcame. . . .

Clara Bow is the quintessence of what the term “flapper” signifies as a definite description. Pretty, impudent, superbly assured, as worldly wise, briefly clad and “hard-berled” as possible. There were hundreds of them—her prototypes. Now, completing the circle, there are thousands more—patterning themselves after her.

Colleen Moore represents the young collegiate—the carefree, lovable child who rules bewildered but adoring parents with an iron hand. Who beats her brothers and beaux on the tennis courts, dances like a professional and has infallible methods for getting her own way. All deliciously celluloid—but why not? The public notoriously prefer glamour to realism. Pictures like Miss Moore’s flapper epics present a glamorous dream of youth and gaiety and swift, tapping feet. Youth—actual youth—is essentially crude. But the movies idealize it, even as Gershwin idealizes jazz in the *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Constance Talmadge is the epitome of young sophistication. She is the deft princess of lingerie—and love—plus humor. She is Fifth Avenue and diamonds and Catalpa orchids and Europe every year. She is sparkling and witty and as gracefully familiar with the new books as with the new dances. . . . Her dash—her zest for things—is compelling. She is the flapper *de luxe*. . . .

Joan Crawford is doubtless the best example of the dramatic flapper. The girl you see at the smartest night clubs—gowned to the apex of sophistication—toying iced glasses, with a remote, faintly bitter expression dancing deliciously—laughing a great deal with wide, hurt eyes. It takes girls of actual talent to get away with this in real life. When they do the perfect thing, they have a lot of fun with it. . . .

It’s rather futile to analyze flappers. They are just girls—all sorts of girls. Their one common trait being that they are young things with a splendid talent for life.



“Echoes of the Jazz Age,” Scribner’s, November 1931

Scarcely had the staid citizens of the republic caught their breaths [after World War I] when the wildest of all generations, the generation which had been adolescent during the confusion of the War, brusquely shouldered my contemporaries out of the way and danced into the limelight. This was the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders and eventually overreached itself less through lack of morals than through lack of taste. May one offer in exhibit the year 1922! That was the peak of the younger generation, for though the Jazz Age continued, it became less and less an affair of youth.

The sequel was like a children’s party taken over by the elders, leaving the children puzzled and rather neglected and rather taken aback. By 1923 their elders, tired of watching the carnival with ill-concealed envy, had discovered that young liquor will take the place of young blood, and with a whoop the orgy began. The younger generation was starved no longer.

Life is just a joyous song through the happy land. Jazz and ginger everywhere—gosh! hain't it grand?



Mother's at the beauty parlor
Running up a bill—



Father's in the cellar
Working at the still.



Sister's at a picture show;
Hopes to be a star—



Brother's slightly jingled
In his racing car.



Uncle's learning dance steps
At the cabaret—



Cousin's at a petting party
Hic! Hic! Hooray!



Auntie's in the runabout,
Stepping on the gas—



Granny's at the phonograph,
Cranking out the jazz.



Gran'pa's at the radio
Cussing out the static—



Sonny's at the roadhouse
With his automatic.



Daughter's at the court-
house,
Getting her decree—
Hopes to have another try
Soon as she is free.



Baby, in the bathroom,
Eats a poison pill.
Buddy's drinking bootleg
Guaranteed to kill.

“The Happy Family”

Chicago Tribune, April 13, 1924

Cartoonist: John T. McCutcheon

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