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THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION OF THE “ROARING TWENTIES”: PRACTICE OR PERCEPTION?

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Abstract

Even after the passage of over 80 years, the perceived radical shift in morality in the 1920's defies concrete definition. Many popular images seem to offer evidence that indicate a change in sexual propriety, with portrayals of scantily dressed flappers swigging illicit liquor from flasks, and racy advertisements for silk stockings showing off women's legs, so soon after a time when women were covered from the neck to the ankle even at the beach. Religious and conservative leaders alluded to a total collapse of morality and blamed popular entertainment for degrading America's youth. This paper analyzes primary sources from the 1920s in an effort to determine the attitudes of the people who experienced, and often shaped, the era. These sources suggest a wide variety of opinion among Americans and the existence of a fully developed sexual awareness lurking beneath the veneer of polite society long before the “roaring twenties.” Although it is not possible to prove or disprove a true “revolution” in sexual morality, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussion of the values which changed and those which were simply exposed by the light of a more tolerant time. [Keywords: United States, 1920s, sexuality, sexual mores, morality, fashion, flappers]

The 1920s were a time of monumental change in nearly every aspect of American life, but perhaps none more conspicuous than sexuality. Since the arrival of the Puritans, polite society in America gave the impression that human sexuality was acceptable only within the bounds of marriage, and only as a slightly distasteful means of procreation. There was doubt about the propriety of sexual education even when limited to informing young brides and grooms about what to expect on their wedding night, and it was not unusual for new brides to be shocked and disgusted when they discovered what was expected of them. Birth control was condemned by the church and the media, who could not justify preventing conception within marriage and certainly would not condone sexual activity outside of marriage.

As new forms of entertainment and communication contributed to an evolving popular culture, however, an interesting phenomenon became clear - people were interested in sexual behavior. In fact, they would pay to see it. Motion pictures, plays, songs, novels, and advertising all reflected the market for sexually-themed entertainment. Vice police, media, churches, and reform groups tried desperately to reign in the production and consumption of material they deemed to be obscene, but their efforts were met with limited success. Their dire warnings about the degeneration of America's youth not only went unheeded but were met with increasing instances of the establishment defending the younger generation. Through an examination of primary documents including books, magazine and newspaper articles, and social hygiene reports,

this paper will show that sexuality in the 1920's underwent a more radical change in perception than in reality, while noting some real shifts in behavior among the younger generation.

To understand the shift in perception, we must first understand how sexuality was viewed prior to the 1920's. American culture was heavily influenced by Protestant values, which included chastity, modesty, and the link between sexuality and original sin.¹ In spite of the constant presence of prostitution, pregnancy outside of marriage, pornography, homosexuality, and other examples of "deviant" behavior, it appeared that the majority of society had overwhelmingly accepted the idea that sex was a private matter between a married man and woman, and not a source of recreation but a necessary evil for the serious business of procreation. Yet an eye-opening survey by Dr. Clelia Mosher, conducted between 1892 and 1920, reveals that a surprising number of educated Victorian women who participated in the survey had at least some knowledge about sex and reproduction prior to their marriages, and that many of them were enthusiastic wives who enjoyed healthy sexual relationships with their husbands.² Many women, when questioned about the purpose of intercourse, listed pleasure along with reproduction and increased marital affection, chipping away at the notion that publicized values of the era were homogenously accepted.³

The epidemic of venereal disease among American soldiers during World War I led to a crisis in values regarding prophylaxis and shed light on some realities of sexual behavior. An estimated 96% of cases of venereal disease were contracted prior to a soldier's entrance into the service, illustrating the prevalence of sexual activity even before reaching the brothels of Europe, in spite of mainstream America's reluctance to acknowledge it.⁴ As men with sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhea began filling infirmaries and seriously affecting the military's available manpower, the reality became impossible to ignore.⁵ Distribution of the "male sheath" and sexual education for soldiers became a necessity of war for many nations, and just one of many dirty secrets of military service not to be discussed in polite company. As the war ended, however, the national discussion about prophylactics and birth control was just heating up.

Condoms and diaphragms were fiercely opposed by religious groups. Kathleen Tobin explained, "The nation's churches would react to new notions of sexuality, the more conservative ones formulating close links between female immorality and contraceptives."⁶ The federal government upheld that belief with the passage of the Comstock laws in 1873, defining contraception as obscene and making contraceptive distribution or discussion through the mail or across state lines a federal offense.⁷ Advocating the right of women to limit their pregnancies or prevent them altogether, Margaret Sanger countered, "I do not believe that a universal knowledge of contraceptives would lead to immorality."⁸ Sanger defiantly opposed the position of the Catholic Church and the Comstock laws by publishing her opinions in her magazine, *The Woman Rebel*, and with a manual named *Family Limitation*, describing how to prevent pregnancy using contraceptives.⁹ The emerging ability to control pregnancy effectively contributed not only to smaller family sizes, but also enabled unmarried couples to engage in sexual relations without fear of unwanted pregnancy and reduced the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexual relationships outside of traditional marriage have been present throughout human history. They were usually regarded as immoral and unspeakable, and society generally faulted the woman involved, as she was considered the guardian of morality. The young women of the 1920's, with the increased economic independence many found during and after the war, were less inclined to capitulate to the double standards of Victorian society. Pioneering feminist and psychoanalyst Beatrice Hinkle wrote, "a sex morality imposed by repression and the power of custom creates artificial conceptions and will eventually break down."¹⁰ Hinkle articulated the issue of the age-repression and custom were manufactured and maintained by society. As women broke some of the powers of repression, they could begin to dictate custom anew. Hinkle explained, "I do not mean to imply that traditional moral standards controlling women's sexual conduct have never been transgressed...the great difference today lies in the open defiance of these customs with feelings of entire justification."¹¹ Hinkle's statement here clearly defines the difference between the existence of women's sexuality and the unapologetic, open acknowledgement of it.

Not only did these young women embrace their sexuality, they often publicly displayed it. An explosion in the use of cosmetics and dramatic changes in fashion gave external expression to their acceptance of their sexuality, and a whole new breed of woman, the flapper, was born.¹² As Family Court Justice Benjamin Barr Lindsay explained, "Excesses of all sorts are usually a rebound from an excess of forced conformity."¹³ Women in the twenties were emerging from an era of corsets and ankle-length bathing suits, and many pushed back hard against a society which could have them arrested for showing too much skin, enforced by vice police bearing rulers. An unknown contributor to *Flapper* magazine commenting on the advertised fashion trends of the early twenties wrote, "Why in the name of common sense do the manufacturers of ladies clothing insist upon girls wearing long skirts, when we simply don't want them? What do they think we are, a bunch of jellyfish with no minds of our own?"¹⁴

This new attitude among young women sparked panic and recriminations from defenders of conventional morality. Journalist Frederick Allen quoted President Murphy of the University of Florida as saying, "The low-cut gowns, the rolled hose and short skirts are born of the devil and his angels, and are carrying the present and future generations to chaos and destruction."¹⁵ Religious groups promoted the idea of a "moral gown," which would be loose enough to obscure the lines of a woman's figure and cover her from the neck to the wrist and ankle, and some states went so far as to promote laws requiring such standards.¹⁶ Author Steven Byington referred to "the day when the foremost civilized nations agreed that covering the skin of most of the body and disguising the principal contours of the person for at least one sex were absolutely essential to morality."¹⁷ Byington clearly made reference to the standard women were held to as the keepers of morality, responsible for keeping themselves and the men of the world in check. By the time his article appeared in 1925, however, a revolution had taken place. Beatrice Hinkle commented, "It can be said that in the general disintegration of old standards, women are the active agents in the field of sexual morality and men the passive, almost bewildered accessories to the overthrow of their long and firmly organized control of women's conduct."¹⁸

Motion pictures were a clear example of changing morality in both practice and perception. The presence of sexually-charged motion pictures in the twenties certainly influenced the culture which watched them. Some found them instructional, such as the young man quoted by historian David Kyvig as saying, “It was directly through the movies that I learned to kiss a girl on her ears, neck, and cheeks, as well as on the mouth.”¹⁹ The greater fear of the opposition was that movies would promote sexual activity among the young, a concern which also had some basis in reality. Kyvig quotes a sixteen-year-old high school girl who said, “I know love pictures have made me more receptive to love-making...I always thought it rather silly until these pictures, where there is always so much love and everything turns out all right in the end, and I kiss and pet much more than I would otherwise.”²⁰

Yet that same culture also produced and formed a willing market for these films, proving that the movies were not solely responsible for the major shift in the perceived degradation of morality. More than anything, the success of racy movies exposed an interest which already existed. Author Gordon Craig prophesized, “In time there will be found a much lower stratum of our sentimentality and rubbish to which it will be possible to appeal...but already it is doing its best and appeals to the very lowest that can be found in us.”²¹

Motion pictures were attacked by numerous groups hoping to protect traditional ideas of morality. The American Social Hygiene Association wrote, “There is still too much playing up of sexual immorality because ‘sex’ in a title or on a billboard spells dollars to the commercialists of filmdom.”²² Indeed, filmmakers did find these films profitable, and would often change original, “clean” titles of adapted stories to more suggestive sounding titles. In a survey of theater owners in 1922, “twenty-two of the respondents claimed that their audiences were larger when ‘sex-pictures’ were being shown.”²³ Theater owners described the demand and tolerance level for these movies, and how it differed between audiences from “the city” and the “neighborhood,” and the survey concluded, “the industry is trying to give its customers what they want, even though they may want questionable products.”²⁴ There is no doubt that many people wanted their products, or that motion pictures had an influence on some people’s behavior, particularly the young. The pressure of reform groups and religious leaders combined with public sex scandals involving film star Fatty Arbuckle and others in the twenties finally led to the formation of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America in 1922. Led by Harding crony William Hays, the association was formed to “self-regulate” the content of movies without the interference of the Federal government. The MPPDA was greeted warmly by defenders of “traditional” values and provided for some limitations on content. However, Hays worked *for* the motion picture industry, and his interests lay in its success. He admitted, “the motion picture industry today is the greatest sales force in the world,”²⁵ and that industry would continue to both shape and reflect American values.

Motion pictures weren’t the only form of entertainment to raise eyebrows in the twenties. Novels and plays challenged Victorian morals as well and drew as much criticism as motion pictures. Authors such as Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, Wallace Thurman, and James Joyce

wrote more boldly on sexual themes than conservative and religious groups were comfortable with, and the success of the sex novel and play was disturbing to Victorian ideals. The connection between these forms of entertainment and real-life consequences was clear to reform groups like the American Social Hygiene Association.

In the novel and the drama sex relations are discussed with an abandonment of reserve that is morally pernicious. The idea of restraint and temperance is rejected and without yielding to the spirit of panic we must admit that venereal disease is on an increase and that this plague is being brought into homes where under normal conditions it would have been unlikely to enter.²⁶

The author definitively links the consumption of “morally pernicious” entertainment with the spread of venereal disease and a rejection of self-control. Not everyone was prepared to accept this thesis, however, and a variety of people offered different points of view. Marshall Beuick, an editor at the *People's Home Journal* explains, “the young people of America have a strangely limited knowledge of their sexual life. Thus, they seek reading that will make up for their deficiency in education.”²⁷ Throughout the twenties, public opinion increasingly defended natural human interest and curiosity regarding sex and separated it from the concept of sin and morality. “It is clearly ridiculous to criticize fiction for dealing with sex, or to talk about sex dramas and sex novels as if the presence of such an interest made them evil,” Henry Canby wrote in an effort to lend perspective to the issue.²⁸

The presence of natural interest expressed by Canby and curiosity elicited by ignorance as described by Beuick highlighted the necessity of sexual education. As Dr. Mosher's survey illustrates, American children had no consistent, accurate source of information regarding sex and reproduction, and some were completely ignorant about their own bodies and development.²⁹ When asked what her knowledge of sexual physiology was before marriage, one respondent replied, “None to speak of... So innocent of the matter that until I was eighteen I did not know the origin of babies.”³⁰ There were vast differences in the way individual children were educated, or kept ignorant, of sexual and reproductive matters, and natural curiosity helped to feed the popularity of sexually-themed entertainment. Dr. Frank Crane, reluctant to condemn entertainment for addressing sexuality, yet advocating a solid education offered by more appropriate sources, wrote “Apostles of the hush school take their stand... that literature should recognize nothing in a human being between the ankles and the chin... Sex relations... should be explained. But the person to teach these subjects is the physician, the parent, or the teacher, and not the novelist, or the poet, or the preacher,”³¹ Opposition to sex education was fierce, however, and went so far as to convict Brooklyn grandmother Mary Ware Dennett of obscenity for writing a sexual education pamphlet which was widely circulated for over ten years before her conviction.³²

Throughout the 1920s debate on sexuality, the question of the younger generation's moral standing arose. Conservative and religious groups warned of the dire consequences of “immoral”

entertainment and activities. Author David Young, describing the ultimate fears of the Victorian generation, wrote “The consensus of opinion was that the children became too precocious about sex matters, that there was a general demoralizing effect on modesty and purity, that a disregard of marriage ties was fostered, and that the authority of teachers and parents was materially lessened.”³³

While the conservatives concerned themselves with virtue, another large segment of society looked to the effects of unrestrained sexuality on social refinement. Professor and critic Henry Seidel Canby wrote, “The youth who discusses coldly topics upon which age is warmly reticent has become a commonplace of satire.”³⁴ Although not necessarily offended by sexual content, its overexposure began to be viewed as crass and tasteless by many. Judge Lindsay wrote, “During a recent trip to New York...I went to a notorious play...It was composed of a raw title, raw sex situations, and mediocre acting. It served no valid artistic end,” objecting not to the sexual content of the play but the lack of redeeming artistic qualities.³⁵ *Time Magazine* also noted the waning public interest in overtly sexual material in its 1928 article “Diluted Sex,” detailing the decline of sexual content in magazines such as *True Story*.³⁶

The young generation of the twenties had its defenders. Many authors of the time noted with amusement the similarity of the moral charges brought against the young to those of nearly every previous generation. Educators who were regularly exposed to teens and college age students often argued in favor of their values and behavior. H. Thomas Bates, a superintendent of schools, stated “My conclusion is that despite the fact that sex is unduly emphasized by fashions and the dance hall, we hear and know of no more immorality than at previous periods in the history of society.”³⁷ Some quickly pointed out the generation’s role as consumers, not originators, of sexually charged materials. Thyosa Amos, Dean of Women at the University of Pittsburgh, explained “the social curriculum is being attacked because of social standards...the attack is unwarranted...no student wrote the sex play, no student wrote the present vulgar obscene songs; no student photographed the immoral film...all those are the gracious gifts of a commercialized society.”³⁸ Overall, defenders of youth in the twenties did not view the sexual expressions of the era as a sign of immorality and degraded values. Instead, they saw the age-old fear of an older generation in conflict with changing times. Judge Lindsay wrote, “At present, the opposition Youth meets from the Older Generation constitutes a malign suggestion that what youth is doing is wholly futile and wrong.”³⁹

It is obvious that sexuality in America was embraced and enjoyed far more than earlier public discourse allowed, yet the twenties did have an impact on some people’s behavior that could be considered revolutionary. The generation which fought World War One was disillusioned by the senseless violence it had witnessed, and many young men and women began to question the conventional values they were brought up with. “Trial marriages” were spoken of as viable options for the practice of sexuality by a significant number of people, where just a few years earlier the concept may have shocked and appalled even the most liberal of minds. The concept of “open marriages,” or permissible adultery, was discussed and experimented with by some couples, testing

the limits of sexual progressivism in relationships.⁴⁰ The promotion of “companionate marriage,” as opposed to permanent “procreative marriage,” by such prominent figures as Judge Benjamin Barr Lindsay revealed the increasing mainstream acceptance of sexual relationships not intended to produce children, and an openness to dissolve those marriages when desired if they remained childless.⁴¹ However, Judge Lindsay also cautioned “The younger generation is able, without psychic strain, to adopt new sex conventions and standards which are often devastating in their effects on adults who attempt to adopt them suddenly.”⁴² He warned that these evolving forms of sexual relationships were not necessarily appropriate for the older generation, and related the personal stories of some couples for whom sexual experimentations had unexpected negative effects.⁴³

Without much in the way of reliable statistics, it is impossible to prove the concrete effects of the “sexual revolution” of the 1920’s on sexual activity, adultery, prostitution, and declining morality. The nation’s birth rate did decline from an average of 3.5 children in 1900 to 2.3 children in 1933, with the combined effects of contraception and a more thorough understanding of ovulation by the medical community.⁴⁴ The divorce rate, which nearly doubled between 1910 and 1930, is another indicator of change in attitudes, illustrating the increasing refusal of society to suffer unhappy conditions to satisfy social convention.⁴⁵

Historians have been challenged by how to interpret the remaining causes and effects. Writing just a few years after the end of the decade, journalist Frederick Allen describes the twenties as an “uneasy time,” when the initial breakdown of sexual taboos led to complete sexual obsession for a time, followed by the realization that some limits and restrictions may not be a bad idea.⁴⁶ His ideas were borne out over the following years, when a general public backlash led to a reigning in of overt sexuality in motion pictures and other forms of entertainment. Those segments of society which were not offended by blatant sexual themes simply became bored by them. As the younger generation matured, they retained some of the changes ushered in during the “roaring twenties,” no longer connecting women smoking or drinking with men with moral decline, or considering the use of cosmetics a sure sign of prostitution. Men were generally more tolerant of the idea of “experienced” women, and marrying a young lady who was not a virgin was no longer an outrageous concept. Professor Paula Foss described the phenomenon of “petting parties,” where “young people did quite a lot of erotic exploration — kissing and fondling,” but explained, “These parties always stopped before intercourse. In that sense they had imposed limitations created by the group presence.”⁴⁷

The increasing acceptance of contraceptive use likely began before the twenties, but open discussion and the campaign led by Margaret Sanger to remove legal barriers and provide education began shrinking family size, and almost certainly lowered the rate of illegitimate births in unmarried relationships. It is impossible to determine whether the availability of contraceptives increased the rate of premarital sexual relationships, so historians can only speculate that the sexually charged atmosphere, combined with an acknowledged prevalence of “petting parties” and the decreased risk of pregnancy, probably led to increased sexual behavior.

Yet as they left the decade behind, a new embrace of some traditional values occurred. Hemlines went back down, and the above-the-knee skirt of the flapper ceded to the floor-length gown of the thirties. Some couples found the aftermath of sexual experimentation and open relationships more difficult to bear than they had anticipated, and returned to the more conservative marital roles they had been raised under. The decades to follow would demonstrate occasional shifts in marriage, divorce, and birth rates, and varying acceptance of sexual themes in advertising and entertainment, but none as dramatic as those seen in the 1920s. Not until the 1960's would America again witness such a challenge to the established idea of sexual morality and expression among its youth, when against the backdrop of another war, an entire generation questioned their parent's values and rewrote the conversation on sexuality.

¹ Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, (Routledge, New York, 2000), 64.

² Clelia Duel Mosher, *The Mosher Survey-Sexual Attitudes of 45 Victorian Women*, (Arno Press, New York, 1980.), 9, 21, 99, 273.

³ Mosher, 23, 43, 90, 112.

⁴ Leonard Ayres, *The War With Germany: A Statistical Summary*, (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1919), 127.

⁵ Stephen Fidler, "100 Years 100 Legacies- The Lasting Impact of World War I," *Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/ww1/contraception>, Accessed 4/11/16.

⁶ Kathleen Tobin, *The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control, 1907-1937*, (McFarland Publishing, North Carolina, 2001), 6.

⁷ "The Pill," American Experience, PBS. Chana Gazit. 2003.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peoplevents/e_comstock.html

⁸ Margaret Sanger, "How Shall We Change the Law," *Birth Control Review* 3 (July 1919): 8-9.

⁹ Tobin, 4.

¹⁰ Beatrice Hinkle, "New Morals for Old Women and the New Morality," *The Nation*, Vol.119, No.3098, (Nov.19, 1924) : 541.

¹¹ Hinkle, 541.

¹² Julie Willet, *The American Beauty Industry Encyclopedia*, (ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2010), 72.

¹³ Benjamin Barr Lindsay, *The Companionate Marriage*, (Wesleyan University Library, 1927) reprinted (Arno Press 1972), 16.

¹⁴ *Flapper Magazine*, (November 1922): 2.

¹⁵ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's*, (Harper and Row, New York, 1931): 80.

¹⁶ Allen, 80.

¹⁷ Steven T. Byington, "Clothes," *The Nation*, Vol.121 Issue 3132 (July 15, 1925), 89.

¹⁸ Hinkle, 541.

¹⁹ David Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940*, (Ivan R. Dee Publishing, Chicago, 2004): 96.

²⁰ Kyvig, 96.

²¹ Gordon Craig, "The Cinema and its Drama", *The English Review*, (February 1922.): 1.

²² American Social Hygiene Association, "A Good Start", *The Social Hygiene Bulletin*, Vol.9, (June 1922), 4.

²³ Donald Ramsey Young, *Motion Pictures: A Study in Social Legislation*, (Westbrook Publishing, Philadelphia, PA, 1922), 31.

²⁴ Young, 11.

²⁵ *Daily Illini*, University of Illinois, (June 6, 1928)

²⁶ American Social Hygiene Association, "Conference to Reaffirm the World's Moral Idea", *The Social Hygiene Bulletin*, Vol.9, No.7,(July 1922): 1.

- ²⁷ American Social Hygiene Association, "Today's Sex Novels", *The Social Hygiene Bulletin*, Vol.9 (September 1922): 2.
- ²⁸ Henry Seidel Canby, "Sex in Fiction", *The Century Illustrated*, Vol.105, (November 1922): 98.
- ²⁹ Mosier, 5, 47, 87, 111, 382.
- ³⁰ Mosier, 123.
- ³¹ American Social Hygiene Association, "Today's Sex Novels", *The Social Hygiene Bulletin*, Vol.9 (Sept. 1922) : 2, quoting Dr. Frank Crane, "Literature's Province," *NY Globe*, (Aug. 1921)
- ³² "The Sex Side of Life," *Time Magazine*, Vol.13, Issue 18 (May 6, 1929): 18.
- ³³ Young, 40.
- ³⁴ Canby, 98.
- ³⁵ Lindsay, 3.
- ³⁶ "Diluted Sex," *Time Magazine*, Vol.11, Issue 9, (Feb.27, 1928): 25.
- ³⁷ "In Favor of the Young Folks", *The Literary Digest*, (June 24, 1922): 38.
- ³⁸ "In Favor of the Young Folks", *The Literary Digest*, (June 24, 1922): 38.
- ³⁹ Lindsay, 18,
- ⁴⁰ Lindsay, 27.
- ⁴¹ Lindsay, 223.
- ⁴² Lindsay, 35.
- ⁴³ Lindsay, p.39
- ⁴⁴ *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, (Dec. 3, 1999,) Centers for Disease Control. 48 (47): 1073-1080.
- ⁴⁵ Allen, 100.
- ⁴⁶ Allen, 102.
- ⁴⁷ Linton Weeks "When Petting Parties Scandalized the Nation," *NPR History Dept.*, (May 26, 2015.)

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