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“What’s a Crush?”

A Study of Crushes and Romantic Friendships at Barnard College, 1900-1920

What’s a crush?” asked the “Crush Chorus” in Barnard College Class of 1911’s Freshman show, *Through the Hedge*, a parody of *Alice in Wonderland*:

Listen, Alice, we will tell you, you who are unversed
in college ways,
What this thing is, this affliction, that comes to us in
Freshman days.
Your [sic] so innocent, your so innocent
That you cannot surmise
What’s a crush, what’s a crush,
Oh! What’s a crush.

When your heart goes pitter-patter
Just to meet Her on the stairs,
When She smiles upon you kindly
Tho to speak you do not dare
When you jealously, when you jealously
Look upon a rival claim
That’s a crush, that’s a crush,
Yes, that’s a crush (1).



The editors of “The College Dictionary,” found in the Barnard Class of 1907’s yearbook, also tried to define the crush:

Crush: an epidemic peculiar to college girls. It usually appears at some time during the freshman year and lasts anywhere from 20 days to 3 months. It is caused by a Junior or Senior microbe and is characterized by a lump in the throat, a feeling of heat in the face and an inability to speak. No remedy has been found for this disease. It must be allowed to run its course. Common sense, snubs and sage-tea have proved ineffectual (2).

The subject of the crush was not new in 1907, of course, nor was it exclusive to Barnard. The crush pervaded women’s college culture, and was discussed even outside of the women’s colleges themselves. A letter to the *Yale Courant* in 1873 suggests male interest in the subject, as it describes “smashing,” the early term for a crush:

When a Vassar girl takes a shine to another, she straightaway enters upon a regular course of bouquet sendings, interspersed with tinted notes, mysterious packages of “Ridley’s Mixed Candies,” locks of hair perhaps, and many other tender tokens, until at last the object of her attentions is captured, the two become inseparable, and the aggressor is considered by her circle of friends as—smashed. The mortality, so to speak, resulting from these smashings is frightening to contemplate. One young lady, the “Irrepressible,” rejoices in more than thirty. She keeps a list of them, in illuminated text, framed and hung up in her room like a Society poster. How . . . such a custom should have come into vogue passes masculine comprehension (3).

Barnard College dancers pose during the Greek Games, which spontaneously developed when the Class of 1905, then sophomores, challenged the freshman to an informal athletic contest. (Image courtesy of the Barnard College Archives.)

Indeed, one wonders what the Yale men of 1873 must have made of such a practice. To have an intimate companion was one thing, but this account of the customs at their sisters' and girlfriends' colleges must surely have puzzled, if not alarmed, many men. The intensity of these very real courtships and involvements certainly bothered the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, a collegiate women's group, which appointed a committee in the early 1880s to investigate the practice of smashing, although they ultimately omitted any reference to the custom in their final report on college life (4). Alice Stone Blackwell, daughter of feminist Lucy Stone, commented upon the committee's findings, and declared, "My theory is that it comes of massing hundreds of nervous young girls together, & shutting them up from the outside world. They are just at the romantic age, they see only each other, & so their sentimentality has no other outlet" (5).

Blackwell's assessment, however, does not explain why the crush was so prominent at Barnard. Barnard was in New York City, just across Broadway from the all-male college at Columbia University. Barnard students, unlike those at the other "Seven Sisters" women's colleges, lived at home and were never isolated from the possibility of male companionship. That the crush flourished at Barnard, and not only at women's colleges such as Vassar or Smith, suggests that there is more to the crush than lack of an appropriate, *male* "outlet." Some women clearly felt they could carry on heterosexual relations while pursuing women romantically as well; others were intent upon, as one lovelorn student put it, "This maiden who I love, to woo."

Lillian Faderman, in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), found "the last breath of innocence" in understandings of women's relations in the first decades of the twentieth century (6). While "romantic friendships" with other women had been deemed almost essential in women's lives during the nineteenth century, they were increasingly viewed with suspicion as the century came to a close. Women's colleges remained one of the last bastions of romantic friendships between women; indeed, the basic structure of the colleges encouraged such relations.

The college provided the social hierarchy and power structure in which many crushes were embedded, and romantic friendships were woven into the rituals of college life. Classes were paired—Juniors with Freshman, Seniors with Sophomores—and members of the elder class acted as "sisters" to help and advise the younger ones. As freshmen and sophomores developed crushes on juniors and seniors, the crush, as historian Helen Horowitz notes, "linked an erotic element to a power relationship" (7). The *Barnard Bulletin*, in 1919, offered an account of a sister-class party: "Many were the heart-rending appeals, many the lovelorn glances from wooing Freshman to arctic Junior . . ." (8).

Various rituals surrounded the crush, some of which were probably modified due to Barnard's commuter status. Filling a crush's hot-water bottle at night as an act of service might be out, but a Barnard girl could still suggest trips to the theater and could still engage in the traditional barrage of notes, candy, and flowers.

A mock advice column in 1913's *Mortarboard* suggested more useful ways of expressing affection:

Dearest Editors:

In my heart I have conceived a most ardent affection for a member of the Junior class. Would it be out of place for me to present her with a bouquet of American Beauty roses as a slight token of my mad love?

As ever, most devotedly yours,
SIMPLICITAS

ANSWER: No, little Freshman, that would not be the best way to indicate your excessive admiration. Somehow Juniors do not seem to be particularly fond of flowers. I have actually heard of a case where a Junior jumped thru a window to escape a little sister who was bringing her a floral offering. For the present, endeavor to show your affection in less ostentatious fashion, by giving up your seat in the crowded lunch-room, by offering to look up history references for her, etc., etc. And save the bouquet for your next matinee idol (9).

But students continued to offer flowers and to declare their love in verse. In one poem, "to be sung by Linda at twilight," Linda bemoaned her own failings—her professed lack of beauty and talent—and declared in despair:

In fact there's nothing I can do
This maiden who I love, to woo.
My heart, within her hand, it lieth,
Why won't you love me Fl-r-nce Wy-th? (10)

Of all the rituals of college life, however, the all-women dances were among the most important, and descriptions are often erotic. In a tale from *Smith College Stories* (1900) by Josephine Dodge Bacon, Biscuits Kitts is forced to take a freshman for whom she has no feelings to the sophomore reception while "visions of the pretty little freshman she had in mind on filling out her programme flashed before her with irritating clearness" (11). In another of Bacon's stories, Theodora Root, filled with nostalgia on the eve of her graduation, recalls her first college ball: "how the Gym had looked the night of the sophomore reception: all light and music and girls and a wonder of excitement . . . how she had such nice partners and some of the girls were so lovely and had such white, beautiful shoulders" (12).

Despite the openness about, and general acceptance of, crushes in the college culture, the crush received a fair share of criticism. Though female educators put great faith in the power of women's attachments, seeing positive possibilities arising out of the bonds of sisterhood, the crush was worrisome. Dean Virginia Gildersleeve of Barnard spoke to students about college friendships in 1914: "Not only do they make the rest of your life more joyful," she said in the gathering for Academic Chapel, "but they add a lustre to college and make you love it." On the path to true friendship, however, pitfalls abounded: "One is sentimental indulgence, which makes you mope in corners and withdraws you from broader activities. One is losing of your individuality Another is the over-demonstration of affection." Most girls probably recognized Gildersleeve's description of a crush (13).

Gildersleeve was not rejecting the notion of romantic friendships; she believed it quite proper "for us to hope to make ourselves more worthy of our friend and the feeling she inspires" (14). In the early years of the twentieth century, students adopted much the same approach. As Helen Horowitz argues in *Alma Mater*, "College opinion against the 'crush' demanded only that the upper-class student not misuse her position or the freshman take it too seriously" (15). The strongest critics saw the crush as a failed ideal of friendship, with some holding out the possibility that the immature crush would develop into a nobler friendship. For example, in a 1909 editorial on the crush, the editor of the Barnard campus newspaper declared, "An evil has been growing year by year, in our life at Barnard," but relented in the second paragraph: "the crush is here, so let us try to bring good out of the evil. It is," she conceded, "capable of maturing into a true and lasting friendship, when the crushee has grown older and put aside the first foolishness of her devotion" (16).

Just a few years later, in 1913, a Barnard newspaper editorial shows the influence of new psychological understandings that left little room for “romantic friendship.”

The girl . . . who has a ‘crush’ is either a person trying to make herself conspicuous, or else she is an *unhealthily emotional, or possibly hysterical*, girl who has not learned that every ordinary disappointment is not a cause for passionate despair, nor each pleasant jaunt for ecstatic rejoicing, nor yet every charming and admirable person for lover-like rapture [author’s emphasis] (17).

Surpassing Barnard’s decidedly disgusted editor in denouncing the crush, however, was the “College Graduate” who penned a scathing attack on crushes in the 1913 *Harper’s Bazar* article, “Your Daughter: What are Her Friendships?” While criticizing characters such as the “heart-piercer” who likes to “play off one girl against another, and keep them at a high tension, overwrought and excitable, for many months until the nervous system will stand no more, and the girls collapse,” her strongest criticism was reserved for the mutual crush, which “frequently prevents a girl from marrying”:

Sometimes [the girl] is emotionally satisfied; sometimes she is influenced by the hysterical pleadings of her feminine partner; and sometimes the very fact that she has indulged in such assinine [sic] depravity deters her from making marriage vows (18).

The dissemination of new medical ideas about women’s sexuality encouraged the post-World War I transformation of attitudes towards women’s romantic friendships. The American public greedily devoured diluted versions of Sigmund Freud’s psychology and Havelock Ellis’s sexology. As Helen Horowitz notes, “sophisticated Americans learned in the early twentieth century that women have active sexual natures, not latent ones” (19). Consequently, intimate relations, including “crushes,” came under increased scrutiny and suspicion. If women were sexual creatures, surely they could be aroused by other women as well as by men. This new examination of women’s relations entered college women’s own consciousness. Students at women’s colleges increasingly distanced themselves from intimate relations with one another; they also increasingly resented the lack of men in their social activities. Lillian Faderman uses the novel *We Sing Diana* (1928), by Wanda Faiken Neff, to illustrate the profound change. Neff’s protagonist was a student at a women’s college in 1913, when “everyone engaged in romantic friendships, which were considered ‘the great human experience.’” Returning to her alma mater in 1920, however, she finds that now “undergraduate speech is full of Freudian vocabulary. Everything is attributed to sex. And ‘intimacies between two girls were watched with keen, distrustful eyes” (20).

In the years following World War I, the crush faded from college lore. Instead of plays like the one with the “Crush Chorus,” scripts—such as one in a 1922 student scrapbook—revolved around marriage.

The same scrapbook contained a bountiful supply of bridal shower invitations (21). And a small ad in the *Barnard Bulletin* advised, “Ask HIM to take you to Columbia’s Varsity Show!” (22)

Vestiges of the old attitudes and structures did remain in the 1920s: some dances were still all-female, and classes were still paired. Nevertheless, the shift toward heterosexual relationships as primary was clear. Although many earlier college women had thought of marriage—and many did, in fact, marry—there had always been the possibility of other intimacy in their lives. By 1920, however, affairs of the heart between women became increasingly suspect, closing the door on the last breath of innocence.



Dean Virginia Crocheron Gildersleeve, Barnard College class of 1899, became the dean of Barnard College in 1911, and held that post for thirty-six years. (Image courtesy of Barnard College.)

Endnotes

1. Stella Bloch (Class of 1911) Scrapbook, Barnard College Archives (BCA), New York, NY. Stella, in copying the song, originally wrote the words “Her” and “She” in lower-case letters, but then, in a different color ink, capitalized them, suggesting the importance of “Her.” Consequently, I have retained the capitalization.
2. “The College Dictionary,” 1907 *Mortarboard* (Barnard College Yearbook), 160.
3. Quoted in Nancy Sahli, “Smashing: Women’s Relationships Before the Fall,” *Chrysalis* 8 (1979): 21.
4. Sahli, 22.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1981). For an important study of women’s romantic friendships, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s essay “The Female World of Love and Ritual,” in her book *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985).
7. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women’s Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 166.
8. “1919 Proposes and 1917 Disposes,” *Barnard Bulletin*, March 6, 1916.
9. “Oracle of Information,” 1913 *Mortarboard*, 154. The column comes under the headings: ADVICE TO LOVELORN FRESHMEN and RESTRAIN YOUR PASSION.
10. Stella Bloch Scrapbook, BCA. The poem is found on a page titled “THE GREAT C_____.”
11. Josephine Dodge Daskam Bacon, *Smith College Stories*, reprint (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Pres, 1969), 252. The collection was originally published in 1900. Faderman quotes the same source on 300.
12. Bacon, 326.
13. “College Friendships,” *Barnard Bulletin*, April 8, 1914.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Horowitz, 167.
16. Editorial, *Barnard Bulletin*, March 31, 1909.
17. Editorial, *Barnard Bulletin*, December 1, 1913.
18. College Graduate, “Your Daughter: What are Her Friendships,” *Harper’s Bazar* (October 1913): 16.
19. Horowitz, 282.
20. Faderman, 298-99.
21. Dorothy McGrayne (Class of 1922) Scrapbook, BCA.
22. *Barnard Bulletin*, February 27, 1920.

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