Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper

John Held’s drawings of the flapper are what one usually visualizes when one thinks of the 1920s, very much as Charles Dana Gibson’s drawings of his wife conjure up the 1890s for us. This parallel is hardly accidental; to the extent that single images can characterize eras then surely both men captured what now strikes us as significant about their ages. Moreover, that both images were of women is not a superficial coincidence. In any epoch, what woman is perceived to be by men, by other women and by herself, and the way in which she wants to be perceived, all tell us a great deal about perception in that period.

An even more striking fact about this parallel domination of decades by images is that the flapper was the utter antithesis of the Gibson girl’s long hair, high brow, thirty-six-inch bust, narrow, anatomically precise waist, broad hips and well-concealed legs. As an ideal physical type the Gibson girl was contradicted in every particular by the flapper, who bobbed her hair, concealed her forehead, flattened her chest, hid her waist, dieted away her hips and kept her legs in plain sight. The flapper could hardly have been a more thorough repudiation of the Gibson girl if that had been her intent, as, in a sense, it was.

Both the flapper and the Gibson girl were ideal types and as such they were emulated to greater or lesser degrees by many women. More importantly, however, both epitomized the then prevailing conceptions of woman and her role, and these conceptions were opposed to each other. The Gibson girl was maternal and wifely, while the flapper was boyish and single. The Gibson girl was the embodiment of stability. The flapper’s aesthetic ideal was motion, her characteristics were intensity, energy, volatility. While the Gibson girl seems incapable of an immodest thought or deed, the flapper strikes us as brazen and at least capable of sin if not actually guilty of it. She refused to recognize the traditional
moral code of American civilization, while the Gibson girl had been its guardian.

The thoroughness of the difference between the two images is remarkable in view of the short time that separated their ascendancies. Both were distinctly and indigenously American, but there the similarity ends. The Gibson girl strikes us as old-fashioned, clearly part of the 19th century, the girl who married your grandfather, perhaps, or great-grandfather. The flapper, on the other hand, seems less remote, distinctly modern, the first of the 20th century types.

Moreover, those who were disturbed by social tendencies in the 1920s, the critics of the so-called "revolution in morals and manners," were aware that what appalled them about the flapper, her behavior and her dress, was precisely her modernity. They saw her for what she was, the utter repudiation of the Gibson girl, that is, of traditional morality and femininity. They saw, too, that she was not an isolated phenomenon but an extreme manifestation of changes in the life styles of American women. These changes were, of course, made visible in dress, and the critics responded to this surface revolution, and groped for its underlying causes. As defenders of the moral status quo, they harked back to the Gibson girl, while deploring her daughter.1

The Literary Digest throughout the 1920s concerned itself with "the present relaxation of morals and manners among young men and women," and reported the statements and counter-insurgency activities of the Pope, the Y.W.C.A., the Women's Auxiliary of the Episcopal Church, the editors of religious journals, educational leaders and college editors. A number of articles made perfectly clear how much importance was attached to the impending "demoralization" of the country.2

It emerges from these articles that modesty, chastity, morality and traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity all were perceived as indivisible and, in some sense, interchangeable. The anxiety that all were being undermined appears to have been fairly widespread. Thus, modern dress and modern behavior were attacked simultaneously. Appeals to the authority of tradition were made. A movement toward sumptuary legislation, for example, seems to have had some force, as well as one toward censorship of dancing. There was little geographical pattern to these movements, nor does the information contained in the articles in The Literary Digest suggest that the contributors' viewpoints might have been isolable in terms of age, or of rural or urban background. Their profes-

1In a letter to the New York Times (Feb. 25, 1920, p. 26) Andrew J. Haire expressed it this way: "Dear God, give us back our women!"

2Cf. "Is the Younger Generation in Peril?" LXIX (May 14, 1921), 9-12, and passim; "To-Day's Morals and Manners—the Side of 'The Girls'," LXX (July 9, 1921), 34-42; "The Case Against the Younger Generation," LXXIII (June 17, 1922), 40 ff.
sions and the tone of the magazine do suggest, however, that the struggle between modernism and traditionalism was mostly waged within the large American middle class.

The morality under attack had been at least partly protected by the reserve of women of that class. Female education in the 19th century underscored "the importance of purity, health, hygiene, and the rigid control of sexual desire." Marriage was the pre-condition of physical love, but even then the enjoyment of sex was forbidden. Women were supposed to be the unwilling victims of animal desires, resigned to sexual intercourse solely for the benefit of the continuation of the race and because it was an inevitable concomitant of marriage.³

Therefore, when President Campbell of Sterling College, Kansas, remarked in the Digest that "This [younger] generation is sex mad," he was saying something very significant from his point of view. That there were, among the young, girls who were no longer willing to postpone intercourse until after the exchange of vows and who enjoyed it, constituted a threat of major proportions to American society. If women would no longer guard morality, who would? The college presidents, deans, student editors, religious leaders and others who wrote to the Digest, by and large, thought they were witnessing nothing less than the decline, decay and fall of civilization as they had known it. When the flapper raised her skirts above the knee and rolled her hose below it, the naked flesh of the lower limbs of respectable women was revealed for the first time since the fall of Rome; the connection of the two events was not seen as coincidental.

Furthermore, this "new woman" threatened not only traditional morality, but made an assault on the prerogatives of traditional masculinity as well, the final section of the modesty-chastity-morality-masculinity equation. Women were now competing with men in the business world to an unprecedented degree. Moreover, whereas the saloon had been a male preserve, women now drank with men in speakeasies. Women had now taken to swearing and smoking, using contraceptives and in general refusing to bear the burdens and accept the limitations as well as the prerogatives of femininity as it had long been understood. Women were now obtaining financial and, therefore, other kinds of independence in record numbers from their fathers and their husbands.⁴

⁴ See, for example, U.S. Bureau of Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, "Population," Vol. V (Occupations), Washington, 1933, Tables 1-4, pp. 272-73, for impressive gains in the numbers and percentages of women working between 1890 and 1930, particularly married women. These figures also show impressive increases of women working in the "transportation and communication," "trade," "public service,"
The grounds on which the new woman was defended could only have served to heighten the fears of the "viewers with alarm." That women were now merely "yielding to normal human impulses" suggested that the nobility of women's impulses or their ability to resist them had weakened since the Gibson girl. It was said that the morality of the older generation no longer merited respect because that generation had fouled up the world; but arguing thus signified that authority itself was being challenged.

Again, modern clothing was defended as lighter, more flexible, better suited for busy, athletic women. But this, too, meant a dangerous change from the Gibson girl, who kept herself busy only with her need to appear decorous and reputable, and who had not engaged in active sport. Women now had business other than clothes, the details of which some even considered "petty." It became clear, too, that Eve was no longer willing to take the rap for the unclean thoughts aroused in men's minds when she discarded all but the meagerest, flimsiest clothing; she would wear what she liked and what suited her.

What was being challenged and defended was the Victorian-American conception of sexuality and of the roles of men and women with respect to each other and to society. Primarily a middle-class code, it was at least the acknowledged general standard. It held men to be the aggressor, woman the endurer in sex and in other activities; the children that resulted from this male aggression and female passivity were born and raised by the woman. It was a two-edged as well as a "double" standard, allotting to men all the liberties and prerogatives, but stigmatizing them as less moral creatures than women.

Freud wrote, and many of the correspondents of the Digest would have agreed, that for men to exercise sexual restraint is essential for the establishment, progress and maintenance of civilization. The first civilized man was the one who could deny himself the sexual satisfaction of putting out a fire by urinating on it, for it was he who mastered fire and used it, by taming the fire of his own passions. Since woman was physically incapable of extinguishing the fire this way, she was its proper guardian, so man took him a wife to stay by the hearth, to regulate sexuality.

But woman's new assertiveness, her unwillingness to keep the home fires burning, was a two-fold danger: it threatened to liberate destructive

"professional service," "domestic and personal service" and "clerical" sectors which over-matched massive declines in "agriculture" and "manufacturing and mechanical" during this period. The report says: "In the percentages presented . . . two very important facts stand out strikingly. The first is the marked increase during this period in the proportion of all women—and particularly in the proportion of all married women—gainfully occupied. The second is the striking increase in the proportion which married women form of all gainfully occupied women . . ." (pp. 271-72).
sexual fires and to let the fire of civilization die out for want of tending. What's more, the death of the Gibson girl, the rejection of the traditional family relation by the new American woman was a personal tragedy for the American male; he had found his love untrue.

Moreover, men had been culturally conditioned to being the initiators and to finding women the passive recipients of sexual advances. The new tendencies in dress and behavior portended an inversion in this scheme, and men reacted vehemently. The flapper costume was seen as a sexual assault, and it was obvious to the men that they were its objects.

A congeries of social and psychological factors, therefore, are bound up in the question of dress and the deeper questions of behavior and values which it symbolized. By looking at the tendencies which affected clothing one can find out a great deal about the women who were wearing it. The flapper, however, is such a familiar image to us that we need to examine her closely to realize what a complete break she represented with almost every major style in the west since the Middle Ages began.

The flapper wore her hair short in a "Ponjola" bob, a style initiated in this country by the dancer Irene Castle in the mid-1910s, but still considered radical at the end of the war. For hundreds of years women's hair —whether worn up or down, natural orwigged, powdered or oiled— had been long. The flapper covered her head and forehead with a cloche-style hat, tweezed her eyebrows, and used a whole range of other cosmetic devices, including trying to make her mouth look small and puckered, "bee-stung" like Clara Bow's. Her dresses were tight, straight, short and rather plain, with a very low waist, usually about the hips, low necks for evening wear, and short sleeves, or none at all. She wore nude-colored


6 It is interesting and probably significant that it is in this period that the image of the woman as "victim" in American literature in a period darkened by the Gibson girl's shadow (Stephen Crane's Maggie, Theodore Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt, David Graham Phillips' Susan Lenox) was replaced by woman as "the first great American grasping BITCH" (according to Dennis P. Kelly), that is, the flapper, in Fitzgerald (Daisy), Hemingway (Bret), Faulkner (Temple Drake) and others. If the American woman had turned on him, the American man would stigmatize her defection in deathless prose.

7 In further explanation of the vehemence of the reaction, the specter of homosexual-ity was also raised; that is, women were now dressing and behaving more like men, blurring the traditionally obvious superficial distinctions and increasing the chances of a mistake, i.e., making sexual advances toward or arousing desire in a person of the same sex. Cf. John C. Flügel, The Psychology of Clothes (London, 1930), p. 202. Freud also suggested that women bobbed their hair in order to compete with men for men's attention, due to the increase in overt homosexuality resulting from the trench experience in World War I. In any case, it is probably true that women were trying to attract men's attention, among other purposes, when they adopted male aggressiveness and changed their dress. In order to be nearer men, women needed to be more like men in certain ways so as to be admitted to the male arena.
silk or rayon stockings which she often rolled below the knee, or omitted altogether in hot weather, and high-heeled cut-out slippers or pumps. Underneath her outergarments she wore as little as possible. The corset was replaced by a girdle or nothing at all, and a brassière-like garment was worn to minimize the breasts.

The term “flapper” originated in England as a description of girls of the awkward age, the mid-teens. The awkwardness was meant literally, and a girl who flapped had not yet reached maturity, dignified womanhood. The flapper “was supposed to need a certain type of clothing—long, straight lines to cover her awkwardness—and the stores advertised these gowns as ‘flapper-dresses.’”8 It was in postwar America that these gawky, boyish flappers became the aesthetic ideal.

The major component of this ideal was a displacement of exposure and emphasis from the trunk to the limbs, “in order that the long lines and graceful contours of the arm [and leg] may be fully appreciated.” The aesthetic ideal was, in a word, youth:

Long slender limbs and an undeveloped torso are typical of immaturity, and, if modesty has departed from the legs, it has now moved upwards to the body, where any display of the (formerly so much admired) characteristics of the fuller figure is discountenanced. The bosom must be small and virginal, and maturity . . . is concealed as long as possible.9

This abandonment of the traditional female aesthetic paralleled the rejection by many women of the passive sexual, social and economic role from which it had derived its force and relevance.

All the previous kinds of clothing for women in the west were appropriate for the kind of woman who existed at that time, but there was no precedent for dressing the woman who seemed to be emerging in the 1920s. But even without such a precedent, a proper dress for her needs was found. It was much more light and comfortable than women’s apparel had been for a long time, there were many fewer garments and the fabrics were less stiff and rigid, offering great flexibility and freedom of movement. A greater variety of fabrics, colors, types of clothing, and designs were available than ever before. Bones and stays and long skirts seemed to have gone forever.

Economy, simplicity and durability were the watchwords. Inexpensive clothing that stayed out of one’s way and could be cared for easily was increasingly in demand and manufacturers made it available. Basic colors became important because of the economy and simple elegance they

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8 Elizabeth Sage, A Study of Costume (New York, 1926), p. 216. See also, O.E.D.
offered; black and beige were the most popular in the 1920s. Infinite permutations of a limited wardrobe were made possible by a multitude of inexpensive and attractive accessories such as stockings, shoes, gloves, handbags and costume jewelry. As a number of observers remarked, even the poorest women had it in their power to dress comfortably and attractively for an active life with minimal cost and care.\textsuperscript{10}

The Lynds observed that in Middletown, at least, furnace-heated houses and enclosed automobiles seemed to have obviated much of the function of clothing as physical protection. Moreover, it seemed to them that its moral function, at least for women, had been modified considerably. They cited the Middletown high-school boy who confidently remarked that his generation’s most important contribution to civilization was the one-piece bathing suit for women. Middletown’s women and girls had shortened their skirts from the ground to the knee and their “lower limbs have been emphasized by sheer silk stockings; more of the arms and neck are habitually exposed; while the increasing abandonment of petticoats and corsets reveals more of the natural contours of the body.” A high-school girl in Middletown typically wore to school only a brassière, knickers (an undergarment), knee-length dress, low shoes and silk stockings. Though some in Middletown felt that these developments were “a violation of morals and good taste,” a revue staged in the high-school auditorium featured locally prominent recent high-school alumnae dancing with backs bare to the waist and bare thighs.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, the contrast between the amount of clothing ordinarily worn by men and by women in the 1920s is suggestive:

Men still cover the body modestly from chin to soles, but women are (or were) rolling up from below, down from above, and in from the sides. In summer, men wear four times as much clothes by weight as women.\textsuperscript{12}

A certain amount of qualification is necessary here. Obviously not every American woman was a flapper, nor was the flapper herself uniform throughout the decade. Nevertheless, what was true of the flapper was true of fashionable women fairly generally, and somewhat less true of a whole range of women not strictly fashionable, but not totally out of it either. Perusal of the Sears, Roebuck catalogues for the decade is very suggestive in this respect. These catalogues were, presumably,


\textsuperscript{11} Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd, \textit{Middletown} (New York, 1929), pp. 159-60.

\textsuperscript{12} Stuart Chase, \textit{Prosperity—Fact or Myth?} (New York, 1929), p. 66.
important to women in areas and situations in which being strictly fashionable was not vital for their careers or social acceptance, such as women on farms or in towns out of the reach of the large urban department stores. But the styles in these catalogues, not only in dresses but in hats, coats, shoes, lingerie, cosmetics and accessories, were no more than three months behind what was readily available in New York department stores.

Moreover, the language of the descriptions of the items in the catalogue echoed *Vogue*, seeking to sell the garments by virtue of their fashionable-ness, their exactness in duplicating what was in New York shop windows and on Parisian manikins. Even the designs that Sears characterized as conservative were quite modish. And most importantly, the prices ranged from quite low to moderate, making it possible for most of the women who got the Sears catalogue to be very well dressed for a modest outlay.

Thus, the flapper was an ideal to be emulated, which it was possible for many women to do quite easily, and which they seem to have done. But what was the relation of this ideal to reality? Why did women seek to emphasize freedom and play down femininity in their dress? What made it possible and necessary for them to do so? One of the most frequent defenses women made of the current modes was their convenience. But convenience for what?

Increasingly in the postwar years, and as part of a long-term economic trend, women, whether married or single, were working to support themselves or to supplement their families' incomes. Moreover, they were penetrating all kinds of businesses and professions previously barely touched by ladylike hands. The economic independence, greater opportunity and ability to find personal satisfaction outside of the home life in which women had traditionally found fulfillment were both consequences and reinforcing causes of the social and sexual independence women were now beginning to exercise and which expressed itself in dress.

The ideal woman now, for those who did not work as well as for those who did, was self-sufficient, intelligent, capable and active. She possessed skills and had acquired needs unknown to her mother. The influx of well-educated single and married middle-class women into the professions, public service and business resulted in the creation of a new class of women who constituted a growing and lucrative market, especially for clothes. This market could easily be tapped if the right clothes were found, and they were. These working women were shrewd buyers, had more money to spend than their stay-at-home sisters, and greater need to spend it. Thus, the economic power of this group meant that working women increasingly became the standard-setters for other women in dress. Whether or not they bought a particular design in their lunch-hour
shopping expeditions to the downtown stores could make or break a manufacturer, or a retailer.

Contemporaries were well aware that the entrance of women into the business world in large numbers was producing a radical change in clothing. For example, a home economics teacher wrote in 1926 that

With the entrance of women into the business world the demand came for comfortable dress which did not hamper the wearer in any way, and would hold its own no matter in what situation its owner found herself. It must have lasting qualities as well, for the business woman, like the business man, must not be bothered with constant repairs. It must be easy to put on. The designers set to work and the one-piece slip on gown was the result.\textsuperscript{13}

All of which is true enough, and, indeed, the importance of the time-saving factor cannot be overemphasized. But the need for a change in clothing derived from more than the simple fact that now many women were working for a living and before they had not been.

Edward Sapir characterized woman as traditionally understood as "the one who pleases by being what she is and looking as she does rather than by doing what she does." As the "kept partner in marriage," she used fashion to emphasize perpetually her desirability. She was a status symbol, an "expensive luxury."\textsuperscript{14} Veblen's analysis of fashion,\textsuperscript{15} from which Sapir took off, applied very specifically to the Gibson girl.

According to Veblen, the importance of clothing is that one's expenditures on dress are always out where they can be plainly seen. Fashion is thus a popular and universal outlet for conspicuous display, especially since failure to come up to expected standards in this area can be mortifying. Thus, too, clothing's commercial value is largely determined by its fashionableness rather than by its utility. It is fashionable clothing that communicates to the onlooker what the wearer wants known about himself, that he is wealthy, nonproductive and leisured. For women especially, clothing demonstrates that the wearer does not and need not work and, indeed, cannot because of the impracticality of her attire, such as long hair, large hats, high-heeled shoes, elaborate skirts and draperies, corsets and so on. For Veblen then, the Gibson girl's femininity was bound up in her inability to do anything useful, symbolized and reinforced by her dress.

The Gibson girl was the manikin for the fashionable clothing which testified to her husband's ability to free her from work and on whom he

\textsuperscript{13} Sage, p. 215.

\textsuperscript{14} Edward Sapir, "Fashion," in Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (New York, 1931), VI, 142.

\textsuperscript{15} Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class (New York, 1934).
hung the symbols of his prosperity. She was in this sense responsible for the "good name" of her household, living testimony to its economic as well as its moral respectability; this was her job. For the Gibson girl her grooming itself was her profession; to be her husband's "prized possession" was her career.

But in the postwar years many women were no longer content with this role of expensive chattel nor with the physical, economic, social and sexual limitations which it imposed on their lives. Many women could no longer "be satisfied with their [husbands'] esteem and with such agreeable objects as homes, gardens, and pretty clothes."16 For one thing, the work environment itself induced many women to shift their emphasis toward practicality in dress. Energy was channeled into social modes of behavior. A premium was put on correct behavior and attire for the social situation, while less value was placed on attractiveness alone.

Thus it was possible to write in 1930 that "There seems to be . . . no essential factor in the nature, habits, or functions of the two sexes that would necessitate a striking difference of costume—other than the desire to accentuate sex differences themselves. . . ."17 The tendency in the 1920s was toward the blurring of many such differences in dress. This drive toward greater simplicity and practicability in dress gained impetus from the change in life style that many women underwent. The advances and demands of technology enabled women to get the kind of clothing they needed. The growth of the sporting life had a similar effect. Tennis could not be played in croquet costume, any more than business could be conducted effectively in parlor dress. For women, athletics, like business, was no longer quite the frivolous matter it had been, and women brought a new seriousness to dress.

The economic independence that came with jobs meant that there were fewer "dependent women," either daughters or wives. The sacred institutions of the home and the family were being eroded: "For city dwellers the home was steadily becoming less of a shrine, more of a dormitory."18 Women now dressed, not for doting fathers or loving husbands, but for the competitive arena and a social situation. While for the housewife such situations may be more or less infrequent, the career woman is exposed to them daily; she is continually surrounded and observed by her male and female peers and superiors.19

The new office situation made constant demands on women and necessitated a dress and grooming appropriate for it. Perfumes as well as

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17 Flügel, p. 201.
19 Murray Wax, "Themes in Cosmetics and Grooming," in Roach and Eicher, p. 44.
natural body odors, for example, had to be minimal in "the enforced intimacy of heterosexual office work," so that the "physical being" may be de-emphasized and "the social role and the office" stressed. Sexuality had to be understated in order for the work of the office to continue smoothly. The career woman had to "conceal and control" her femininity, to "reduce herself to an office" by minimizing her "natural shape, smell, color, texture, and movement and to replace these by impersonal, neutral surfaces."20 Hence, for example, the popularity of the colors black and beige in the 1920s.

While sexuality never disappears in the office situation it is usually muted and controlled, turned "from a raw physical relationship to a civilized game."21 The exposure of some parts of the body does not contradict this principle. The parts exposed were those most remote from the explicitly sexual areas, while the waist was lowered and the breast bound to make their existence and exact location matters of some guesswork. The lowering of the forehead, shaping of eyebrows and emphasis on make-up tended, among other things, to make the eyes appear larger, more "battable," stressing the seductive, coquettish aspects of sexuality. Finally, it has been argued that exposure removes the aura of mystery which clothing lends to the female body, thereby making it possible for both sexes to concentrate on business, sexual curiosity and urge to display satisfied.

The office became a kind of hunting ground in which males were captured and tamed in their native habitat. But it was more important that a proper uniform for the office as social situation be devised. Clothes are a kind of communication, establishing a relationship between wearer and observer before a word has been exchanged. They evoke, if properly used, a predictable set of responses concerning identity, values, moods and attitudes. The importance of dress to the hurried world of business thus becomes clear: it can be a useful shortcut to acquiring information about others and telling them about oneself. One knows whom he is dealing with even in the most fleeting contact, what the hierarchies are and the status of persons on a day-to-day basis. Clothes, as a social uniform, identify the players and the name of the game as well.

The working woman, married or not, had a big economic edge over the nonworking woman, which she could use in sexual competition as well, aided by her greater proximity to men, her presence in the male arena. This put a great deal of pressure on women who did not have jobs to seek them. Moreover, there were often family economic needs compelling them to do so. Most growing families could use more money, and

20 Ibid., p. 39.
21 Ibid., pp. 42-45.
parents are able to spend less and less money on themselves as their children grow older, until the children become self-supporting. The long-term trend has been for families to have fewer children and for women to have them earlier in life so as to be able to return to work at the time of the family's greatest economic need.

Most observers in the 1920s remarked that the housewife herself seemed to be emerging toward emancipation. Smaller, centrally heated houses were easier to clean, and many other families lived in apartments. Canned and frozen foods began to dominate the American diet, along with store-bought baked goods. Out-of-home housekeeping services and the availability of inexpensive mechanical and electrical devices in the home also tended to ease the housewife's burden. But the liberation of the housewife had just begun in the 1920s, hardly approaching the proportions it would later assume.

Nevertheless, the housewife's emancipation had gone sufficiently far to cause some concern in Middletown for the diffusion of activities once centered about the home. Technological advances were accepted, but always with a proviso: "fresh encroachments tend to be met by a reassertion of the traditional noli tangere attitude toward the 'sacred institution' of the home." At Middletown's Chautauqua, a speaker observed:

We seem to be drifting away from the fundamentals in our home life. The home was once a sacred institution where the family spent most of its time. Now it is a physical service station except for the old and the infirm.

If many people were wary and worried about where it would all end, women, by and large, seemed pleased that the boundaries of their universe now extended past the front gate.

Clothes were not only the symbol of this partial emancipation, but one of the tools which made it possible as well. As one woman wrote to The Literary Digest:

Think of the ease of laundering the simple modern clothes, and of the time saved in fitting. Manufacturers turn out gowns in sizes by the gross, and almost any figure can wear them with little or no alteration.

The ready-to-wear industry meant that Middletown's housewives no longer made their own or their families' clothes. The vast majority of them did only washing, ironing and occasional mending. The sales

22 Siegfried Giedion characterizes the 1920s as the first decade in the "time of full mechanization." Mechanization Takes Command (New York, 1948), passim.

23 Lynds, pp. 177-78.

of yard goods and notions were down sharply compared to a generation before, and notions departments all over the country had begun carrying hardware, soap, sanitary goods and the like, in order to survive. While Middletown’s home economics courses still emphasized sewing, it was clear that for the foreseeable future Middletown’s girls should have been taught the art of buying.

The impact of ready-made clothing on Middletown’s home life was a reflection of the growth of the ready-to-wear clothing industry in America. The uneven movement of this sector of the economy toward rationalization pointed to a time not too far off when all Americans could be well- and fashionably-dressed within weeks of the debut of styles in Paris or New York. One expert remarked that the consumer no longer needed to be concerned overmuch with utility, durability or colorfastness when purchasing clothing; mass production, he argued rather sanguinely, enabled manufacturers to ensure the quality of their products.

The combined effects of rationalization and prosperity had facilitated the diffusion of fashions and increased the market for them. Moreover, the high initial profits accruing from the introduction of a successful design put a premium on rapid and thorough distribution, quick turnover and the marketing of new styles as soon as they were born. Had it not been for large inventories, this process might have been even more rapid than it was.

Clothes-making, once a function of the home and the job of the homemaker, had now become clothes-buying, dependent on the family’s or individual’s earning power. The Lynds reported that as late as 1910, newspaper advertisements for yard goods had been numerous in Middletown, while there had been almost none for ready-made dresses. By the 1920s the position was reversed.

The rise of the jobbing system, lending some rationality to the industry, was not favorable to the formerly common individualism and creativity. But it seemed perfectly well suited to the new, simpler styles. So, too, did mechanization. If the emphasis on cost-cutting reduced opportunities for individual workmanship, the popular modes left little room for such virtuosity in any case. Both the industry and the market moved toward simple, stylish, ready-made garments made quickly and distributed rapidly. The Sears, Roebuck catalogue for the fall-winter, 1929-30, featured a dress described in these terms:

26 Ibid., p. iii.
27 Sapir, pp. 141-43.
Paris Sends You This Dress In the Smartest French Manner. . . .

From Paris to you . . . speeded across the ocean . . . rushed to our style studios in the heart of New York . . . Reproduced with deft rapidity . . . Adapted with exquisite skill to the needs and tastes of American women . . . Parisian Style!!

Mass production was manufacturing luxury for all: Paris originals, in two colors, available to all of the tens of thousands of women who wanted them, for only $10.95, postpaid.

Perhaps the greatest single fact that had made all of this possible was the implementation of the idea that women came in sizes, seven of which would fit half the women in the country. A bell-shaped distribution about two of the sizes was manufactured and bought by the department stores, a very efficient and profitable way of dressing the women of America.

The sizes developed were especially good for young figures, which is perhaps further explanation of the emphasis in this period on youthful styles: “It is estimated that approximately 90% of the young people between the ages of fifteen to nineteen may be fitted by the standard sizes for these ages, that about half the adults from 20 to 44 may be cared for with standard sizes, but that only a third of the population from the age of 45 up may be properly fitted with such standard sizes.” 28 It seemed that technology was peculiarly suited to the needs of the young woman.

Although mass production in the apparel industry in the 1920s gave impetus to the drive toward simplicity and uniformity, it also worked in the direction of variety and multiplicity. It now became possible to offer consumers at reasonable prices a wide range of fabrics, textures, colors and styles, and also a greater number of types of garments, that is, clothing suited for specific occasions and needs, such as formal evening wear, town and afternoon dresses and suits, business wear, sports outfits, work clothing and many others. This diversification, and the diffusion of fashionable clothing, too, had the effect of breaking down the patent outward manifestations of class: “Only a connoisseur can distinguish Miss Astorbilt on Fifth Avenue from her father’s stenographer or secretary.” 29

But the industry which had worked such a miracle on the face of America seemed utterly vulnerable to something called fashion, over which it had little control. Carried far forward and, alternately, overwhelmed by its uncharted ebbs and flows, the ready-to-wear industry was more victim than giant. It seemed unwilling to adapt for its own needs

28 Nystrom, p. 463.
29 Chase, p. 65.
the marketing techniques (notably market research) which had gone so far toward regularizing the automobile industry, among others, in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{30} If fashion could be controlled, American manufacturers were not the manipulators. The obvious place to look for the men pulling the threads is Paris.

The French clothing industry held roughly the same position in the French economy that the automobile industry now occupies in the United States. The establishments ranged from highly individualistic and creative to a very few mass production operations on the American model. Each of the 25 largest houses alone accounted for from 500 to 1000 new designs annually.

But the size of the industry did not disguise its lack of modernity. It relied almost entirely on accumulated prestige, the originality of its designers and the manual proficiency of the French seamstress. France was ill-equipped to compete with American mechanization in the large-volume production of simple styles; it hoped and agitated for the return of the more detailed, elaborate styles which would bestow the advantage once more to its skilled workers. The flapper, American in origin, was a bitter pill for the Parisian couturiers to swallow. Though partly sold to the world by Paris' prestige, this same prestige was put behind annual efforts to dethrone the flapper, efforts which did not succeed until 1930.

After World War I, Paris was faced with an unprecedented demand from a new clientele more interested in the correctness than the uniqueness of its dress. This, and the tubular silhouette, forced Paris to give up its emphasis on exclusiveness. Much of this financial pressure came from America and the incentive to sell to American manufacturers for duplication here was very great; the old fears of style piracy were overcome. Paris found itself reproducing its own models for sale to manufacturers all over the world. Several of the most successful Parisian houses got that way precisely because of their ability to sell in the American market. This was true of Lelong, Chanel, Premet and Patou, whose adoption of American modes and sales techniques led them to dominance of the French domestic and export markets.

In fact, Paris' more dismal moments came at precisely those times when it tried to buck American trends. The most notorious example was Paris' reaction to the short skirt, which it detested. During the depression of 1921-22, Paris predicted unequivocally that the short skirt was on its way out and that the straight silhouette would be altered as well. The reaction of the American industry to these pronouncements was characteristically sheeplike. Textile mills rejoiced at the anticipated use of greater yard-\textsuperscript{30} Nystrom, p. iv.
age, while apparel manufacturers distributed garments with longer skirts to their customers, the wholesalers and retailers who, in turn, tried to pass them off on the consumer.

But American women weren't having any. Sales of garments with longer skirts slowed drastically while women hunted for the shorter ones. If they did buy the longer-skirted dresses they wore them once and then had them altered more to their liking at the retailers' expense. Throughout the fall of 1923 and the spring of 1924 the complaints of retailers whose alteration expenses were skyrocketing could be heard all the way to Paris. Thereafter, skirts continued their uninterrupted rise until they reached the top of the knee in 1927.\(^{31}\)

This debacle had several less disastrous but equally intriguing counterparts. Throughout the 1920s, Paris predicted year in and year out that wider hats would be in, but they were always out. Every year between 1921 and 1928 the return of the tailored suit was heralded, but it never caught on. One observer commented with marked understatement that prewar claims to "fashion dictatorship" by several Parisian couturiers had been moderated by postwar developments.\(^{32}\)

But if Paris was no dictator, the relative success of the great skirt counter-revolution of 1929-30 becomes an intriguing problem. The chronology is straightforward enough. In 1928, Paris started a series of inroads on the dominant styles: an occasional head replaced the cloche with a turban or a wider brim; the austere tubular chemise dress had been embellished with bows and panels, godets and shirring; the straight high hem was superseded by an uneven one of "dripping, flaring panels or slithering trains of ribbon width dangling below." During the summer of 1929 in the showings of fall fashions by the Paris houses skirts plummeted toward the floor. One observer at Patou's first show that season reported that "All the women are squirming about in their chairs, tugging at their skirts. Already they feel démodée."\(^{33}\)

It was not that easy to make American women at home feel uncomfortable with what they were wearing. The gradual incursions on the flapper mode had met with signs of awakening resistance. The New York Times, for example, noted "the general disinclination to follow the dictum of Paris that skirts be longer" among the marchers in the 1929 Easter parade.\(^{34}\)

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 388.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 396.
\(^{34}\) New York Times, Apr. 1, 1929, p. 3.
The evidence for considering 1929 as a kind of transitional year in the dominant female aesthetic is suggestive rather than strong, but is worth noting. Apparently women were willing to modify the prevailing mode but manufacturers, burnt several times before, were unsure of their ability to predict the relative acceptability of a change and tried to follow events.

The industry was warned that it would not prove easy to sell garments in the new style. The Merchandise and Research Bureau predicted resistance to the longer skirt and the new waistline and urged the trade to put special emphasis on the changes to make them more palatable. A merchandiser advised putting stress on the trend "toward a more formal way of living" and the desire to have clothes with "more of a made to order look." Such talk, however, apparently did little to instill confidence among the retailers of the salability of the new styles: "Retailers as yet are on the fence waiting for the consumer response to indicate their buying policies."35

It was not long before resistance materialized. Revealed in the columns of the New York Times in letters to the editor, news stories and editorials, this resistance showed high sophistication, that is, an awareness of what clothing—especially the modes of the 1920s—represented to the wearer. Lucie R. Saylor's letter, which drew much support, merits lengthy citation:

It has taken many centuries of hard, slow struggle to attain the present degree of freedom from cumbersome feminine clothes. If we women are willing to give up that freedom and the moral victory it represents just because Parisian modistes issue arbitrary decrees and manufacturers want to sell more materials, we are scarcely worthy to have the vote and other hard-won modern liberties. Ankle-length skirts and confining waists—and the minds of those willing to wear them—belong to the Middle Ages or to the harem.

Several other female Times readers agreed. E.B.C. added that while the "society woman" or "grande dame" of whom little movement was required might be able to wear "Long, trailing gowns of fragile silks and velvets, trimmed with real lace . . . what about the hordes of women and girls who travel in the subways and work in offices?"36

The revolt was sufficiently serious to warrant a New York Times

Magazine article on it.\textsuperscript{37} Noting that Paris had chosen “femininity” at the expense of “comfort or bank accounts” the author went on to say that feminine was meant “in its narrowest and most thoroughly traditional sense,” a sense irrelevant to American women in 1929 but keyed to an idealization of French women before the fall, \textit{i.e.}, their contamination by modern ideas. The French couturiers had indulged in “an orgy of nostalgia.” But this same article struck an ambivalent note: “It would look as though women were persuaded that they were tired of simplicity and bored with freedom” and ready to accept a greater formality in some aspects or types of dress, especially evening wear. This hint of indecisiveness as to which role she wanted to play or perhaps her desire to play both if possible may be a vital clue toward an understanding of the American woman’s ultimate acceptance of a more “feminine” costume.

The uncertainty continued over the winter. The \textit{Times} observed that while the new modes were bought they were not worn except for formal evening wear. The Women’s Federation sponsored a debate on the subject of skirt lengths whose outcome was predictably inconclusive. Manufacturers were likewise insecure. J. J. Goldman, founder of Associated Dress Industries, reported that the long skirt was curtailing sales, but predicted that it would be accepted by spring. A showing of New York designs for the spring, held more than a month before the Paris exhibitions to demonstrate independence, was conciliatory in intent, setting the length at six inches below the knee and moderating other extreme measures taken in the fall. A partial retreat was in evidence as well in the spring-summer shows in Paris, but this was evidently not rapid enough to please American manufacturers and merchandisers who by now had become angry with Paris’ inability or unwillingness to develop clothes salable on the American market. The most recent experience in bucking consumer tastes at Paris’ behest was too much: “Our endorsement of the very long skirt and the bizarre details last Fall,” said Henry H. Finder, former President of the Industrial Council of Cloak, Suit and Skirt Manufacturers, Inc., “was a serious and costly mistake and we shall not permit it to occur again.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} Mildred Adams, “Revolt Rumbles in the Fashion World,” Oct. 27, 1929, V, 4 et bassim. Neither \textit{Vogue} nor \textit{Harper’s Bazar} (sic) seems to have found occasion to underscore the drastic changes from the styles of the 1920s or to suggest that there was any resistance to this change. The tone of both suggest their belief that such a revolutionary shift in aesthetics was the most natural thing in the world and far be it from mere mortals to question the edicts of Paris, which were inscrutable in any case.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that Paris had finally succeeded in doing what it had wanted to do all along: it had finally made the longer skirt stick. The Sears catalogues, starting with spring-summer 1930, reflected the winter compromises and were dominated by the new styles, with longer and fuller skirts, re-emphasized bust, waist and hips, tailored suits, prints and patterns, and larger hats. But the change had occurred in the American market. Some hypotheses on the nature of fashion may help illuminate these changes.

Although the machine threatened to obliterate class distinctions in dress, in a way it also helped to maintain them. The fact that of two identical garments one was mass-produced while the other was an "original" made by hand continued to give great prestige to the owner of the latter article: "The aesthetic value of a detected counterfeit in dress declines somewhat in the same proportion as the counterfeit is cheaper than its original."39 The spread of fashion through a community is a function of the size of the middle class, which feels urgently the need to distinguish itself from the rest of the population. Thus the fashion cycle gains impetus from the drive of members of key affluent groups to emulate their superiors and dissociate themselves from their inferiors; the larger the middle class, the more rapid the turnover of modes.

Talking about groups makes it easy to forget that a large number of individual decisions are involved which are made on the basis of personal circumstances, relationships and needs. Fashion is a way of enabling individuals to belong where they want to belong, and to cut themselves off from undesired associations. It is an instrument of social mobility. Moreover, it is a legitimized outlet for personal self-expression, particularly valuable for persons who feel they live in a society in which the individual is devalued. Fashion is a kind of safety valve for aberrant individual or group tendencies, such as, in the 1920s, class consciousness in a democratic society, sexual curiosity in a puritanical one or individuality in a mass culture.

New fashions, of course, do not always find favor with the fashion following; certain conditions have to be met by the style itself and by the persons proposing it. A style which is too far out of the mainstream of public values, which satisfies neither articulated nor inarticulate needs, is liable to be abandoned quickly or not taken up at all. This happened to the harem skirt, proposed in the 1910s, which apparently failed to pick up support because it symbolized an extreme form of the subjugation women were trying to escape. The farther out a style is, moreover, the greater the prestige needed by the initiator to make it catch

39 Veblen, p. 169.
on, but even the most modest innovation needs someone of stature behind it. What form of prestige is necessary varies according to social circumstances. By the 1920s the days of royal fashion plates were over and movie stars seemed to have replaced them as the great influences on American women.

This is no frivolous matter. The decision that a woman makes to follow one fashion leader and not another means that one has spoken to some important need and the other has not. When this process is repeated several million times, i.e., sufficiently often to become a fashion trend, then we are dealing not with individual variations and impulses but with what amounts to a major social movement in which aesthetic and moral values are undergoing drastic and rapid change. On the surface this process seems to go on effortlessly. But previous to the change many women had to be groping about, feeling dissatisfied (perhaps unconsciously) with what they were wearing, wishing for some style of clothing that expressed them better, their needs and their aspirations. Having undergone what amounts to a change in identity by the 1920s many women needed a change of costume in order better to communicate what they thought about themselves and wanted thought about them, who they were.

The styles that predominated in the 1920s were urban in genesis, but there is reason to believe that they spread widely into small towns and rural areas. The automobile placed many previously isolated areas within easy reach of urban centers, becoming a tool for the penetration of urban modes and values into rural life. The Sears catalogue put city styles into country mailboxes. The Lynds reported that urban styles had taken over Middletown, and that family income did not seem to matter so much as that people felt obliged to wear them, to dress up all the time. Mass circulation newspapers and magazines, movies and radio tended to telescope distances and blur distinctions between small town and big city behavior patterns.

A number of major economic, social and technological trends, therefore, seem to have had similar influences and effects on the dress and behavior of many American women in the 1920s. Events, too, such as the war, the winning of suffrage and the prohibition experiment may have had the same kind of implications. The 1920s seem to have witnessed the emergence of a new woman whose behavior and appearance constituted a major break with western, male-dominated civilization and was seen, in fact, as a dangerous threat to that civilization. The Lynds, among others, wondered if this woman’s rise would continue uninterupted and if the tendency toward greater emancipation and the dissolution of the home would go on.
For a short time, at least, their questions were answered by the Depression; the reversion or reaction toward more “feminine” attire was paralleled and facilitated by a retreat to the traditional family unit during the crisis period. The new woman seemed to go into eclipse during the period of anxiety, but the changed circumstances of World War II, including a manpower shortage, brought her out again.

Was the flapper a summer flower who withered in cold, hard times? Or was she a stage in a long-run development, temporarily retarded by crisis, while the men were able to haul the Gibson girl, or someone like her, down from the attic? Is the flapper, child of prosperity, the normal condition, or is the Gibson girl, daughter of scarcity, the real woman?40

The continuing and growing prosperity in the United States and Europe has afforded women, in this century, an opportunity to experiment with various life styles, value systems and social and personal roles. So far many different alternatives have proved satisfying to different women, ranging from traditional to avant-garde femininity. If prosperity continues it is likely that such diversity will be with us for the foreseeable future, but in the long run something more like the flapper than the Gibson girl will win out. The crisis would have to be very severe and the moral reaction very strong to induce modern woman to accept the values and limitations which she has already repudiated whenever she had the chance.

40 The New Haven Journal-Courier for June 21, 1967, published a chart (prepared by Harris, Upham & Co., a brokerage firm) which showed that skirts and the Dow-Jones Industrial Average have tended to rise and fall together and that the long-term tendency for both was upward. While this holds great promise for the future, no claim is made here that the point is proved.