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Gin, Gentlemen, and Generational Conflict

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GIN, GENTLEMEN, AND
GENERATIONAL CONFLICT

Chloé Nurik

And there are certain definite duties of the student at Harvard...He must be a gentleman. A gentleman respects tradition. And the traditions at Harvard are quiet traditions. Nothing so bespeaks a vulgar and impoverished intellect as noise in word or action.

—*The Harvard Crimson*, 1926¹

*College Windows, a FLIRTATION,
Moonshine, gin, HALLUCINATION;
This is part of EDUCATION
Living in our GENERATION.
—The Punchbowl, 1925²*

During the 1920s, youth symbolized modernity, progress, and development as a young generation of Americans espoused new values and served as a lightning rod for social change. College men epitomized these transformations as they confronted the values of their educational institutions and asserted unique aspects of their identities, which they believed separated them from the previous generation.³ Through on-campus protests, open defiance of Prohibition, and a cavalier attitude toward academics, collegiates defined a new type of masculinity that challenged authority and prioritized peer approval. In addition to these changes, historians cite the increased prominence of college sports (particularly football) and fraternities as evidence of a dramatic transition from an internal, character-based model of masculinity to an external, personality-based model.⁴ However, a close examination of college records and student publications reveals that many young men attending Harvard, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania in this decade sought to retain key

aspects of character-based masculinity (such as honor, integrity, and self-sacrifice) while incorporating features of the more modernized version (such as social popularity, physical appearance, and self-indulgence). Their lived experiences call into question the existing historiography by suggesting that notions of masculinity did not shift in an abrupt or absolute manner in the 1920s.⁵ Campus activities that promoted male bonding and school spirit became more significant in this era but were also present in previous decades, revealing continuity in forms of masculine affiliation and rituals across generations. Furthermore, many young men at elite universities struggled to incorporate disparate and opposing notions of masculinity into their identities. They adopted a complex, multifaceted construct of manhood that simultaneously anchored them to the past and allowed them to embrace the new values of a modernized society.

PEER CULTURE AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

In the 1920s, due to increased enrollment in college⁶ and the establishment of a “network of peer relations,” youth suddenly burst onto the social scene and became influential in American society.⁷ The devastation of World War I significantly affected the mentality of young people, creating a profound sense of disillusionment coupled with an urgency to live life to its fullest.⁸ Consequently, members of the younger generation sought to differentiate themselves from the older generation, blaming their elders for leading the nation into war. In his 1920 article, “These Wild Young People,” John F. Carter Jr. makes the resentment of youth explicit:

I would like to observe that the older generation had certainly pretty well ruined this world before passing it on to us... We have been forced to live in an atmosphere of “to-morrow we die,” and so, naturally, we drank and were merry... We may

be fire, but it was they who made us play with gunpowder.⁹

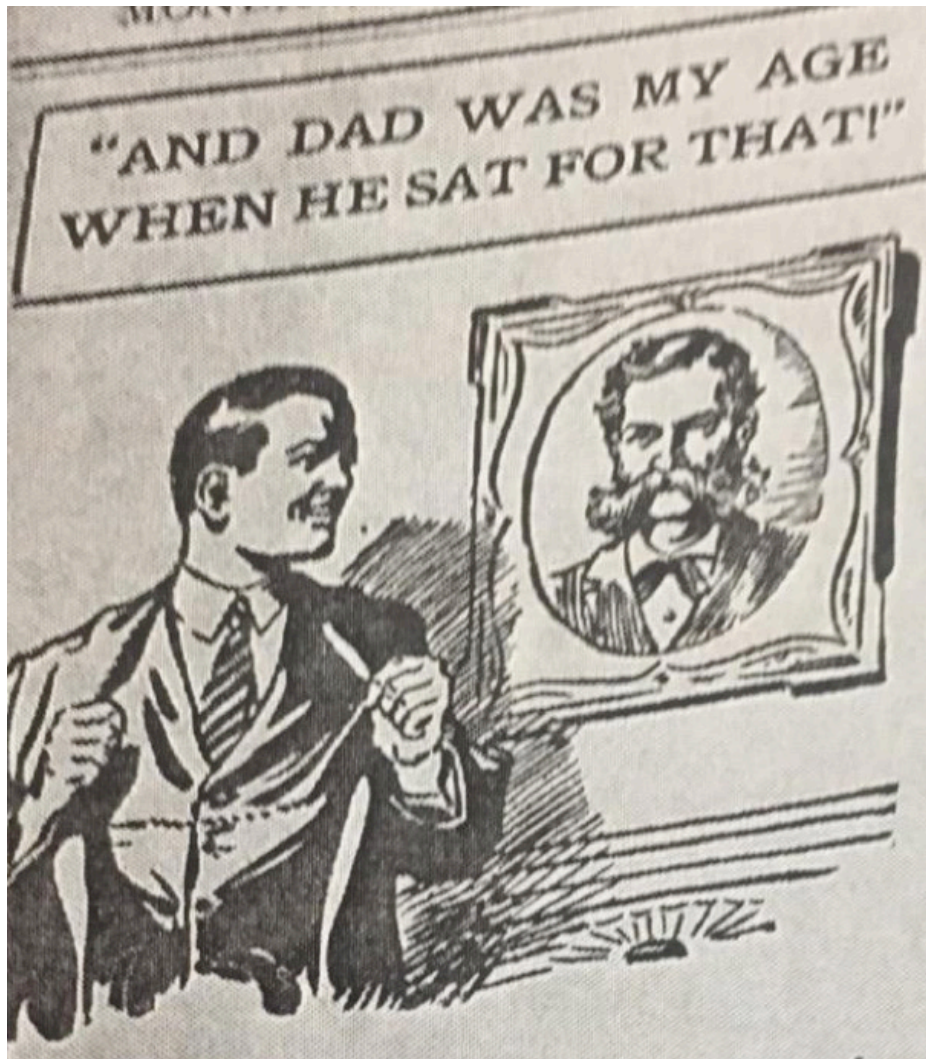
In this indictment, Carter distances youth from the older generation, a dynamic that fueled the importance of peer affiliations.

The primary sphere of influence for youth shifted from authorities to peers, a transition that was especially dramatic for college men who operated within a subculture separate from the outside world.¹⁰ From the time freshmen arrived on campus, they confronted a new social order and sought the acceptance of their peers. In 1925, Yale's *Eli Book* provided the following advice to freshmen: "here in college we find ourselves in a world teeming with men of about our own age whom we meet at every turn, going to the same places, doing pretty much the same things, living all about us in the Oval. From among these we are going inevitably to choose our associates and our friends."¹¹ As reflected in this statement, students valued college as an avenue through which they could form social connections, strategically positioning themselves for later success.¹² The locus of influence naturally shifts from parental authority to peer approval when youth leave for college. However, this transition may have been more dramatic during this era, as young men felt compelled to differentiate themselves from the older generation and empowered themselves through the expansion and idealization of youth culture.¹³

In their eagerness to identify with peers, college men emphasized modern values, adopting habits of dress and behavior that helped them fit in.¹⁴ They conformed to a set of standards that defined a new type of masculinity, setting them apart from their fathers.¹⁵ A 1923 ad featured in *The Harvard Crimson* captures this tendency.¹⁶ As a young, clean-shaven man compares himself to a picture of his heavily mustached father, he draws attention to the contrast in their appearances: "And Dad was my age when he sat for that!"¹⁷ On a superficial level, this ad conveys the message that a more youthful look can be achieved by

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purchasing the featured shaving cream. However, on a symbolic level, the dual image in the ad exaggerates the clash between generations of men who subscribed to different values. Young men grounded themselves in a changing world by highlighting these contrasts. By rejecting certain characteristics they saw in their fathers, collegiates defined their identities in opposition to these images and aligned themselves with their peer culture.¹⁸



This ad plays off a stark contrast between a young man and his father.

Anchored by their social communities, emboldened college men challenged institutional authority and envisioned themselves as the vanguard of cultural change. Their sense of self-importance is evident in a speech by Hannibal Hamlin on Yale's Class Day in 1927: "CLASSMATES—You are the apostles of change...You are 1927, typifying nothing and representing everything...The Class of 1927 is pointed to as the end of an old era, as the beginning of a new era, and as the transition between the two."¹⁹ Hamlin's impassioned speech suggests that collegiates recognized this era as a liminal period between old and new values. They viewed themselves as both unique and the product of generations who came before them. Elite universities fostered a sense of connection to the past by reminding students of their place in a long lineage of cultivated leaders. Schools expected students to appreciate their pedigree and to make the institution a cornerstone of their identity. Yale collegiate E. J. Begien made this agenda evident in his address to the freshman class of 1926: "You are coming to New Haven to be for four years a part of that process whereby Yale men are made...[and] each man... will add to the store for the generations to come."²⁰ These socially conservative institutions promoted Victorian values, and collegiates carried the mantle of their school's legacy upon their shoulders. While college men in the 1920s still clung to an institutional identity that offered them social prestige (expressing pride about being a "Yale Man" or a "Harvard Man"),²¹ they also railed against the old order and tested the bounds of established authority.

BOYS BEHAVING BADLY

College men of this era had a reputation for self-indulgence, personal vanity, and lack of restraint.²² In mass media representations, collegiates were depicted as rambunctious, rebellious, and immoral.²³ While this portrayal was stereotyped and flat, a review of student records reveals that it held more

than a grain of truth. Archival sources indicate that college men bonded with each other by transgressing laws, bending rules, and behaving mischievously. These peccadilloes were a central way in which young collegiates enacted their masculinity, illustrating the connection between behavior and gender construction.²⁴ Feminist theorist Judith Butler explains that individuals rehearse, perform, and repeat gendered actions in order to fulfill social scripts.²⁵ Men of the 1920s “performed”²⁶ their manhood through rebellious actions during Prohibition, a so-called “Dry Decade.”²⁷ Historian Paula Fass identifies alcohol consumption in this era as a ritualized masculine behavior: “unlike the other moral issues of the twenties, drinking was a male-centered problem...Drinking had always been a male prerogative.”²⁸ Collegiates consumed alcohol at parties and at football games, openly demonstrating their disregard for the law.²⁹ They used alcohol as a signifier of manly defiance and carefree living. Historian Nicholas Syrett explains that since drinking in the 1920s represented “a defiance not only of the college administration but also of federal law,” drinking became a key way to demonstrate masculine bravado within one’s peer group.³⁰ For example, the 1927 Yale Class book included humorous comments from students that linked college life with alcohol consumption. When asked, “What do you think is Yale’s greatest need?” a student responded, “Repeal of 18th Amendment.”³¹ When asked, “What is your chief regret in regard to your college career?” one student said “Prohibition,” while another quipped, “Not drinking more.”³² Rather than feeling the need to hide the fact that they engaged in this illegal activity, collegiates at Yale (and other Ivy League schools) openly flaunted their drinking habits. By failing to enforce the law, school administrators provided an opportunity for collegiates to bond through rebellious acts.

Many college men broke with the gentleman-like conduct stressed by their upbringing and were prone to mischievous behavior. They played practical jokes, engaged in demonstrations, and took collective action over minor grievances. For

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instance, students at Harvard, who were tired of being served the same food, protested through an “egg rebellion.”³³ Yale athletes, celebrating a football victory over Harvard, carried away the goalposts as “Souvenirs.”³⁴ In the classroom, students often created chaos, showing little interest in academics and minimal respect for their professors. In fact, students sometimes threw objects (such as raw eggs) at their professors during lectures.³⁵

During this era, school-wide rituals became immensely popular, particularly those that pivoted on class rivalry. At the University of Pennsylvania, these events occurred with such regularity that they became a routine part of college life: “Throughout the school year, the freshmen would struggle to meet the challenges set by the sophomores as a rite of passage into the privileged world of the University.”³⁶ One annual ritual in the 1920s was an event in which sophomore and junior architecture students at Penn fought over the right to wear smocks (to signify the dominance of their class), resulting in mudslinging and tearing clothes off one another.³⁷



This 1929 photo at the University of Pennsylvania shows the Smock Fight.³⁸ According to scholar Amey Hutchins, students “hurled eggs and mud.”³⁹



Students at the University of Pennsylvania engaged in the annual Pants Fight to show their class pride.⁴⁰

Several of the rituals at Penn became so popular that they drew spectators from the city of Philadelphia to the campus. However, the level of rowdiness was sometimes difficult to contain, and there were a few occasions when such events brought negative attention to the school. Such was the case with the annual “Pants Fight,” an end of the year event that started in 1922 in which freshmen and sophomores engaged in a brawl, culminating in the losers being stripped of their pants.⁴¹ In May 1923, when a group of enthusiastic freshmen publically advertised this fight by appearing on a trolley car wearing only their undergarments, “they drew gasps of horror from maids and matrons by trying to board a Woodland Avenue trolley car in which girls and women were passengers,” and they were promptly arrested for their indiscretion.⁴² School administrators valued inter-class rivalries, which expanded in the 1920s, as a way of promoting class unity and school spirit. In fact, the annual “Flour Fight” and “Poster Fight,” which were physically dangerous (sometimes resulting in concussions and broken bones), were routinely at-

tended by faculty spectators who cheered and hissed at participants during the event.⁴³ It seems that university administrators and collegiates alike viewed these organized fights as a natural part of manhood and as a way for new students to prove their worth as college men.⁴⁴

The majority of these rituals were intended to provide an outlet for expressing the playful vitality of youth and to foster male bonding. However, some incidents erupted into widespread rioting that created chaos and spilled over into the local community.⁴⁵ Rioting at Harvard, Yale, and Penn had a contagion effect, starting on one campus and then spreading to the others in succession.⁴⁶ In 1925, *The Harvard Crimson* published an editorial that applauded a recent incident of rioting at Yale: “Judging by newspaper accounts of it, the annual freshman riot at Yale was a great success.”⁴⁷ These comments endorsing the rebellious behavior of Yale students may have encouraged collegiates at Harvard to act in a similar manner. Archival records indicate that rioting at Penn increased in frequency over the course of the decade with one riot in 1920, two riots in 1928, and four riots in 1929.⁴⁸ Some students regarded these incidents as a source of amusement and an outlet for their pent-up energy.⁴⁹ This tendency is exemplified in the aftermath of a riot in 1929, as students justified their behavior by stating: “We didn’t have any fun for a long time.”⁵⁰ Thus, their pursuit of pleasure sanctioned the destruction of property and sometimes even led them to block authorities from controlling the situation.⁵¹ Students at Penn were suspected of burning down a fraternity house and then jeering at firemen when they arrived on the scene.⁵²

A well-publicized riot between Harvard students and the local police force in 1927 illustrates how peer bonding in collegiate communities empowered men to act in a disruptive way. While attending a show at University Theatre, students (who may have been intoxicated)⁵³ threw “eggs and vegetables at the actors” and produced a “shower of coins” on the stage.⁵⁴ As students left the show, a “great deal of horseplay from the

crowd” resulted, and when police rushed to the scene, they hit a student over the head with a stick.⁵⁵ During the subsequent legal proceedings, collegiates took a bold stance: they defended one another in court by shifting the blame to local police officers rather than taking responsibility for their own actions.⁵⁶ Students testified that the police officers were deliberately violent towards them and were overheard bragging to one another: “we licked [the collegiates] good and proper.”⁵⁷ An editorial from *The Harvard Crimson* entitled “Riot or Assault?”⁵⁸ reinforced the perception that the students were victimized by declaring: “there was no riot until wagon loads of police charged the crowd...The police, in other words, created a riot before quelling it.”⁵⁹ Testimony offered by both sides suggests that generational *and* class differences played a part in fueling the conflict between these men.

In some instances in which young men acted out, authorities allowed them great latitude and were reluctant to impose sanctions even when their infractions were dramatic. Following the Freshman Riot of June 4, 1923, Yale parents and administrators exhibited ambivalence about enforcing institutional compliance, suggesting that masculine standards of behavior were in flux.⁶⁰ During this event, freshmen threw bottles out of their dorm windows, dumped buckets of water outside, shot firecrackers at lamps, threw burning paper, and even destroyed city property, forcing the fire department to come.⁶¹ Administrators estimated that 341 of the 789 members of the class (a staggering 43%) participated in the riot.⁶² School officials initially felt pressed to respond in a harsh manner, as these students not only vandalized public property but also stepped outside the bounds of what was considered appropriate conduct of a Yale Man.⁶³ After much deliberation, administrators decided to ban participants from sports for the first term of the following year.⁶⁴ While this was the most lenient option out of several considered,⁶⁵ it was enough to trigger a wave of protest letters from parents who, in almost every instance, insisted that *their* son was being punished

too harshly, was an honorable boy, and had barely contributed to the ruckus.⁶⁶ Under pressure from angry alumni and parents, school authorities quickly overturned their ruling.⁶⁷

As revealed in their letters, Yale parents ascribed the riotous behavior of their sons to youthful impulses and did not consider their actions to reflect poorly on their character. This attitude suggests that they adopted changing views of masculinity, granting greater tolerance for behaviors that might have been considered unacceptable in their own generation.⁶⁸ Through their interference, the older generation validated peer influence and endorsed the concept of adolescence as a distinct stage of life that extended through the college years.⁶⁹ This tendency is evident in the way that a Yale parent admonished the administration (rather than his own son) by appealing to a naturalized view of gender: “Extra curriculum activity furnishes the main outlet for the surplus team of youth, and by repressing it, you destroy your safety valve and thereby increase your hazard...boys will be boys.”⁷⁰ When the young men involved in this riot committed acts of defiance, their parents excused their poor behavior and irresponsibility rather than upholding the institution’s moral code. This attitude not only signaled a shift in the expectations of male behaviors, but also reflected a sense of elite privilege. These incidents illustrate how manifestations of college masculinity reflected a complex mosaic of on-campus culture, class values, and broader social changes.

SECRET SOCIETIES AND FRATERNAL MASCULINITY

College men prioritized forms of exclusive male bonding at this time due to a confluence of factors. At the turn of the century, an influx of immigrants to the United States from eastern European countries led to increased cultural heterogeneity.⁷¹ Penn’s Quaker heritage and its greater degree of diversity made the process of absorbing these students less disruptive (and less threatening) than at Harvard and Yale, institutions that prided

themselves on their traditional Anglo-Saxon roots.⁷² As their social environment was altered by newcomers from more diverse and less desirable backgrounds, it became more important for students to carve out special spaces for themselves on campus.⁷³

Yale University, with “its distinctive—and professedly meritocratic—social system,” bestowed prestige upon a select group of students who were “tapped” for membership into secret societies during the spring semester of their junior year.⁷⁴ Societies such as Skull and Bones, Scroll and Key, Wolf’s Head, and Elihu represented a longstanding tradition at Yale, but membership took on special meaning in the 1920s as a way of reinforcing class distinctions within the student body.⁷⁵ Since selection for senior societies was based heavily on a student’s contribution to the Yale community through leadership positions, the competition to rise to the top of the school’s social hierarchy was fierce.⁷⁶ However, this system became self-perpetuating as certain groups of students were denied leadership opportunities (and sometimes even membership) in extracurricular clubs. Students who had come to Yale directly from public schools (rather than preparatory schools) and those who were Jewish were at a disadvantage, as the former were rarely “tapped” for membership and the latter were altogether excluded.⁷⁷ Social class was clearly required for initiation. Yale’s secret societies thus ensured a separate social space—one of enviable distinction—for young men of means who reflected its Anglo-Saxon ideal.

Select clubs were also a part of the undergraduate culture at Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, albeit to a lesser degree. Through the years, generations of Harvard men vied for spots in Final Clubs such as Porcellian, AD, Fly, Spee, and Delphia, which mirrored Yale’s senior societies in function and status.⁷⁸ These Final Clubs had a long-standing tradition of selecting well-groomed men from the most prominent social circles, favoring students who were legacies or came from elite boarding schools.⁷⁹ Many of those selected, such as Theodore Roosevelt, went on to become national leaders, highlighting the

importance of this avenue for establishing connections.⁸⁰ Penn also established senior societies, including the Mortarboard, Friars, and Sphinx in the early twentieth century.⁸¹ Although these clubs were not cloaked in the same mystery as those at Yale and Harvard, they were also based on leadership and sociality. Thus, there was an imperative at all three universities for students to develop their social capital so that they might be recognized as the quintessential collegiate by their peers.⁸²

While fraternities were less selective than these senior societies, they were also an important part of campus culture, providing a way to assert aspirational masculinity. Although fraternities had existed for a long time at these elite universities, they increased in status and prominence during this time.⁸³ In fact, the 1920s witnessed a large growth in fraternity membership, indicating the rising popularity of this form of male homosociality.⁸⁴ Nicholas Syrett notes both the continuity and progression of this tradition:

The seeds of 1920s fraternal masculinity had been planted long before the dawn of the twentieth century: the reverence of athletics and of other extracurricular involvement, the exclusivity...None of this was particularly new. Novel, however, was the degree to which all of these elements were emphasized among fraternity men... Fraternity men's actions were by definition the most cutting edge, the most worthy of emulation—in short, the most collegiate. To be popular on campus, one played by fraternity rules almost without exception or one did not play at all.⁸⁵

Fraternities had special appeal because they not only perpetuated social distinctions within the student body, but also provided a clear model of masculinity, regulating standards of behavior at a point when ambiguity, uncertainty, and role confu-

sion characterized college life.⁸⁶ They offered young, impressionable men the chance to bond with others who held similar values and behaved in comparable ways.⁸⁷ During rush, fraternities enabled student-judges to exclude classmates who did not meet their subjective notions of social worth. An article from the *Yale Daily News* described the process of selecting fraternity brothers, declaring: “The essential requirements are...conventionality and conformance to a certain social standard.”⁸⁸ Here, it is important to note that students constructed these standards so that the fraternities mirrored their own values. Thus, through this process, fraternities reinforced a limited notion of masculinity that was passed down from one generation of brothers to the next, ensuring continuity and conformity within the system.

From the start, fraternities aimed to promote a specific form of masculinity. In fact, the process of rushing was likened to dating, in which a potential brother experienced “calling and hold-offs.”⁸⁹ As students attended smokers⁹⁰ at the most prestigious fraternities, “judges” would question them about their family background, financial status, dating life, and activities.⁹¹ Fraternities looked for students who, in addition to having the right pedigree, demonstrated a fun-loving nature and a certain mischievousness endemic to masculinity at this time. In a 1923 letter to the editor of the *Yale Daily News*, a recruit recalled how he was spurned during this process. When the student explained at a fraternity house that he did not drink alcohol, his interviewer promptly “emptied his mouthful of cigarette smoke into [his] face and passed onto the next candidate.”⁹² Thus, in this situation, peers selected the type of men with whom they wanted to associate, favoring those who displayed a similar rowdiness and disregard for institutional authority.

Fraternities had a significant impact not only in determining which traits were socially desirable, but also in raising the social capital of those men selected to join, setting in motion a self-perpetuating system of elitism. An editorial from *The Pennsylvanian* noted, “seldom is it that a worth-while man does not

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receive a bid from at least one house.”⁹³ This statement reflects the belief that if a collegiate was not pursued by at least one fraternity, he was not considered to be socially desirable. Such a rejection was perceived by other college men as a sign of personal deficiency rather than a reflection of a flawed selection process that favored cronyism.

Since men on campus were judged on their fraternity affiliation, freshmen felt pressured to get in with the good crowd from the start of their tenure in college. A 1923 editorial from *The Pennsylvanian* acknowledged that successful rushing mattered to freshmen “because it will have a great bearing on the three and one-half years that remain of [their] college career.”⁹⁴ The social clout of fraternities (an intangible quality) was concretized through the fraternity pin, which became a coveted possession. As a status symbol, it elevated the prestige of its owner through his conspicuous display of the pin. In fact, the fraternity pin carried so much social currency that it was featured prominently

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Advertisers used the image of the fraternity man to emphasize the importance of consumerism and appearance.⁹⁵

in collegiate films of this era such as *The Fair Co-Ed*. Some men regarded their fraternity membership as a key marker of their masculine identity, granting them social prominence on campus. In *The Plastic Age*, Hugh Carver notes that his pin was “a sign that he was a person to be respected and obeyed; it was pleasant to be spoken to by the professors as one who had reached something approaching manhood.”⁹⁶ Since fraternity culture promoted material consumption, appearance, and social conformity, advertisers played off these ideas to convince college men to buy their products.⁹⁷ These ads revealed the ways in which fraternities endorsed and encouraged modernized elements of masculinity that were socially oriented and appearance-based.⁹⁸

However, fraternities were not solely linked to social status and superficiality; they also reinforced values of fidelity, civic duty, and scholarship. Some fraternities considered the moral standing of men before admitting them. Harvard’s chapter of Kappa Sigma summarized its selection process as follows: “We do not, therefore, pick men simply because they are athletes or literary wonders, but we try to get men of character.”⁹⁹ Fraternities also encouraged community engagement through chapter-based programs and activities. For instance, Kappa Sigma at Harvard revealed plans to maintain scholastic achievement through peer advising. Their “Big Brother” or “Daddy” system was “intended to bring the newly initiated and younger men into closer contact with the chapter work, and, through the watchfulness of one of the older brothers, keep the younger fellow up in his studies if need be.”¹⁰⁰ This program indicates that while promoting male bonding, fraternities also upheld the values of loyalty and service. One article from *The Pennsylvanian* explained that fraternities helped students “become better men; better qualified to assume positions of leadership; better qualified to help others.”¹⁰¹ Thus, fraternities sought to prepare men to take their place as leaders in business, industry, and professional fields.

COLLEGE SPORTS: INTEGRATED MODELS OF MASCULINITY

Similar to fraternities, college sports reflected a nuanced construction of masculinity that combined social appearance with internal convictions. Displays of male physicality were celebrated during the 1920s, giving rise to the “Golden Age of Sports.”¹⁰² Scholar Michael Oriard postulates that interest in football grew in an uncertain time of masculinity: “Concern about... football was inevitably highest when American life seemed softest, in the 1920s.”¹⁰³ Through football in particular, masculinity was publicly contested and proven.¹⁰⁴ In the aftermath of World War I, college educators received a national directive to focus on sports. The records of President Lowell of Harvard testify to the growing interest in college athletics. Among his archived documents is a 1920 message from P.P. Claxton of the United States Commission of Education stressing the importance of physical endeavors for young males: “The highest ambition of every boy should be to become a man as nearly as possible perfect in body, mind and soul; fit and ready for all the responsibilities of manhood... Every boy should want to excel in boyish sport, and win and hold the respect of his fellows.”¹⁰⁵ President Lowell retained this communication, which aligned with his commitment to expand athletic programs. College football had wide-ranging appeal, connecting to notions of nationalism, masculine strength, and fidelity, qualities that were especially prized at this time. One 1928 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* placed the iconic image of a pilgrim side by side with a football hero, suggesting that these male figures were both emblematic of America’s culture, past and present.¹⁰⁶

While football had already been an important part of college life, it became commercialized in an unprecedented manner during this era as college enrollment increased and universities invested in expanding their athletic programs.¹⁰⁷ The Yale Bowl, a massive stadium that could seat 80,000 individuals (the largest stadium since the Roman Coliseum), was constructed in prepa-

ration for future Yale-Harvard games.¹⁰⁸ By the 1920s, athletics often dwarfed academics, an increasingly common phenomenon satirized in *The Freshman*, a film in which Tate University was described as “a large football stadium with a college attached.”¹⁰⁹ The immense popularity of college football was further evidenced by its rapidly growing fan base. Oriard explains that “[a]ttendance at college football games increased 119 percent in the 1920s, exceeding 10 million by the end of the decade, slightly more than for major league baseball.”¹¹⁰ As further evidence of this craze, news pertaining to football was plastered across the front pages of *The Harvard Crimson* and *The Pennsylvanian* on a daily basis and given significantly more coverage than other stories.¹¹¹ As the weekends approached, these periodicals included glossy inserts that featured pictures of the school’s football team, biographies of individual players, and statistics about the home team and its rivals. Additionally, college newspapers regularly reminded students about upcoming games against important rivals and included ads that encouraged them to purchase cars, raccoon coats, and other big-ticket items in connection with attending these events.¹¹²

Football became so visible that it naturally led to a glorification of the men who played it, increasing their popularity and prominence on campus.¹¹³ Since an athlete’s success “sold” his school to the broader public, students respected the sports heroes who brought honor to their institutions.¹¹⁴ An editorial from the *Yale Daily News* described school spirit as “the flames which burn at the altar of the God of football,”¹¹⁵ and an editorial in *The Harvard Crimson* remarked that athletes “cease to be mortal.”¹¹⁶ This deification elevated football to a sacred sport whose heroes were idolized by their peers. Percy Marks captured this tendency in his novel *The Plastic Age*. As a professor upbraids his students for their shallow values, he exclaims: “Who are your college gods?...They are the athletes...And they are worshipped, bowed down to, cheered, and adored.”¹¹⁷ The professor’s dismissal of “false gods” reflects the tension between the

older and younger generations, as youth often prioritized athletics over academics and challenged the importance of traditional values.¹¹⁸

However, while college sports featured externally-based aspects of masculinity (such as social status, physical vanity, and the pursuit of personal glory), they were also essential to campus life as they promoted aspects of character development in young men (such as loyalty, hard work, and honorable conduct).¹¹⁹ In fact, the football hero epitomized the ideal man because he straddled two worlds, the old and the new. He seamlessly manifested aspects of both the traditional model of masculinity and the more modernized version, earning both the praise of his elders and the esteem of his peers. The struggle to integrate these opposing forces is illustrated in F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story "The Bowl." In this tale, protagonist Dolly Harlan plays football for the good of his team as well as to attain popularity and prestige. When his girlfriend Vienna tries to get him to quit football, she exposes his need for male attention, which was satisfied through the sport: "You're weak and you want to be admired. This year you haven't had a lot of little boys following you around... You want to get out in front of them all and make a show of yourself and hear the applause."¹²⁰ However, Dolly rejects this view and frames his participation as a noble act: "If I'm any use to them—yes [I'll play]."¹²¹ Fitzgerald's story indicates that football not only served as a way of gaining popularity, but was also linked to traditional values, including self-sacrifice, loyalty, and filial obligation.

Elite universities endorsed athletic competition as a vehicle for promoting character development,¹²² often prioritizing this extracurricular activity above academics.¹²³ Mather A. Abbott, a crew coach at Yale, explained that a thorough and sustained involvement in athletics would help to develop "character and manhood" in college men.¹²⁴ Coaches like Abbott were entrusted with reinforcing moral values in the students they trained by modeling ideal behaviors themselves: "The coach is more than

a teacher; he is a character-builder; he molds personalities.”¹²⁵ By tying physical pursuits to personal virtues, college sports grew in importance and became self-justifying. Administrators held athletes to high moral standards and expected them to demonstrate honesty, great effort, and fair play when competing for their school. The “Athletic Code of Ethics,” which appeared in a 1922 issue of *The Pennsylvanian*, explained that the student-athlete must: “strive to carry more than [his] own burden, to do a little more than [his] share...To be unselfish in endeavor, caring more for the satisfaction which comes from doing a thing well than for praise.”¹²⁶ The imperative to maintain a “sportsmanlike ideal of honor” indicates that college sports promoted aspects of gentlemanly conduct among athletes, including honorable conduct and fair play.¹²⁷ By competing in this manner, sports produced “the greatest pride deep down in the individual that he is a Yale man or a Harvard man.”¹²⁸ Thus, college athletics provided students with a way to construct a nuanced concept of masculinity that integrated new and old values into their social repertoire.

CONCLUSION

The 1920s was a decade of youth, as the younger generation suddenly became visible and influential. Embracing new values, college students symbolized the broader national trajectory toward modernity and became objects of social criticism. As they emphasized the ways in which they were different from the previous generation, collegiates increasingly turned to peers to assert themselves and to shape their identities. In doing so, they challenged institutional authority, often created chaos on campuses, and prioritized the pursuit of social relations over academic studies. While these behaviors indicate new features of masculinity, there is also evidence of continuity in the extracurricular activities that collegiates pursued. Although senior societies, fraternities, and athletics had existed in previous generations, they became especially prominent during this era, fulfilling

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an even more essential social function. These opportunities for male bonding reinforced conformity within select groups and maintained a culture of elitism. As students stretched to meet the competing demands of parents, school administrators, and peers, they navigated disparate social systems and expectations, weaving together multiple forms of masculinity rather than adhering strictly to one template. For these college men, the shift to a modernized version of masculinity was not monolithic or abrupt but instead was fluid and integrative.¹²⁹

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Images

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