

Paper Title: COLLEGIATE MASCULINITY AND THE RISE OF AMERICAN
YOUTH CULTURE DURING THE ROARING TWENTIES

Author's Name: Chloé Nurik

- 2016–2017 Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research Fellow
- University of Pennsylvania
- Chapter 1 of History Senior Honors Thesis

Chapter 1-“From the Outside:” Mediated Masculinity¹

Where people are not familiar with the genus undergraduate, they come to look upon him as a rather silly fellow. And where they do know what college men are like, they come to look upon the screen as a medium without regard for truth in its representation of life. Such pictures as the usual stories of the campus thus either make collegians out as fools or the movies out as liars.

-George Kent Shuler, *Motion Picture Classic*, 1929²

In the 1920s, when flappers were in their heyday and speakeasies flourished, a collegiate craze took hold. The image of the college male had great appeal and quickly became a cultural symbol as it represented the youthfulness, rowdiness, and economic prosperity of the decade. The American public devoured stereotypical depictions of young men who prioritized physical appearance, social popularity, and personal freedom above traditional values. As the demand for such material increased, films, advertisements, and novels delivered a powerful (and distorted) message about what it meant to be a man in this new era.³ While advertisements exploited and reinforced the image of the collegiate as a tasteful consumer of fashion trends, films and novels aimed to capture the attention of their audiences by dramatizing the conflict between characters who embodied either inner-directed (character) or performance-driven (personality) types of masculinity.⁴ These media depictions were nevertheless significant as they shaped the

¹ “From the Outside,” *Yale Daily News*, May 17, 1921, 2.

² George Kent Shuler, “Pictures and Personalities,” *Motion Picture Classic*, January-June 1929, 17.

³ Robert Hanke, “Theorizing masculinity with/in the media,” *Communication Theory* 8, no. 2 (1998): 185.

⁴ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Smithsonian Books: New York, 1984), 273-276.

consciousness and identity of young men who sought to reconcile the disparity between the idealized images they were presented and the reality of their lived experiences.

Commercial Branding of the College Man

In the aftermath of World War I, the nation experienced an era of unprecedented economic prosperity and material consumption. During the 1920s, President Calvin Coolidge famously declared: “The business of America is business... The man who builds a factory, builds a temple.”⁵ This grandiose statement echoed the nation’s preoccupation with wealth, consumption, and industry. In this “culture of abundance,”⁶ family incomes rose, and citizens were better positioned to spend their wealth.⁷ Additionally, changes in the credit economy allowed Americans to buy now and pay later, encouraging instant gratification and the pursuit of pleasure through consumption.⁸ Manufacturing data from 1918-1919 reveals that retail prices tripled since 1901, and spending for clothing alone increased 120.4 percent since 1901.⁹ Thus, heightened consumerism in this era helped to hasten the transition from the self-made man to the self-bought man as consumption became a marker of identity, social status, and masculinity.¹⁰

⁵ Richard C. Hoffman, “Corporate social responsibility in the 1920s: an institutional perspective,” *Journal of Management History* 13, no. 1 (2007): 59.

⁶ Susan Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 7.

⁷ “100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston,” Washington: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006. May 2016, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/uscs/1918-19.pdf>.

⁸ Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), 46.

⁹ “100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston,” <http://www.bls.gov/opub/uscs/1918-19.pdf>.

¹⁰ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 17.

In this climate, the college man became a commodity whose contrived image was marketed to the public for consumption and who was an eager consumer himself. Mass media and advertisements “spread the influence of college fashions and styles and turned the idea of youth into an eminently salable commodity.”¹¹ As the public became consumers of a constructed notion of collegiate masculinity, the persona of the “college man” became a national icon.¹² Students, who were still in the process of defining their own identity and masculinity, felt the weight of such expectations and the pressure to measure up to a constructed ideal.¹³ One telling editorial from *The Harvard Crimson* in this decade declared: “The ‘what’ and ‘why’ of everything the college man does is sifted, weighed and from it are deduced generalizations to fit a pattern rather than an individual.”¹⁴ While college men stressed their individuality, they were confronted with a culture that often denied it. Students lamented the rigid typecasting: “Of necessity [the college student] is a type, not an individual, and he has no actions or reactions of his own toward anything.”¹⁵ Thus, public fascination with the collegiate created a web of expectations, roles, and standards that the college man simultaneously absorbed and railed against.

Advertisers rushed to exploit the image of the collegiate for the sake of profits. Ad agencies played off the public’s idea that college men were heavy consumers who sought to secure their social status through the acquisition of material goods, particularly

¹¹ Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 126.

¹² “The College Man,” *The Pennylvanian*, April 7, 1923, 4.

¹³ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 5.

¹⁴ “Men of Clay,” *The Harvard Crimson*, April 27, 1922, 2.

¹⁵ “Men of Clay,” 2.

high-end luxury items.¹⁶ This advertising strategy fueled stereotypes of well-heeled students who prioritized the pursuit of pleasure and material possessions above all other concerns.¹⁷ While youth of lesser fortune may have envied these students, they also sought to emulate them.¹⁸ Advertisers pushed this idealized persona since it was compatible with their overall goal of increasing profits.¹⁹ Historian Daniel Clark notes the rise of ad copy depicting college themes²⁰ as “advertisers used college associations to embody ideal qualities applicable for other types of men.”²¹ Thus, the college male became firmly fixed in the public’s mind as a consumer and as the consummate symbol of a new standard of masculinity.

Advertisers utilized the images and lexicon of college men to sell products both to students and the public at large. In many of these ads, the college man became a mere caricature. For instance, a 1925 issue of the University of Pennsylvania’s humor magazine *The Punchbowl* featured an ad for a restaurant that grabbed students’ attention with the headline: “The World Envies You.”²² This ad proclaimed that the “University Man” is one who “lives life as it should be led. He gets four years-wait a minute, this

¹⁶ “Let Your Allowance Pay For a Harley-Davidson Motorcycle,” *The Harvard Crimson*, October 7, 1921, 5.

¹⁷ “Poor Princeton,” *The Harvard Crimson*, February 15, 1922, 2.

¹⁸ Nicholas Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 188.

¹⁹ At this time, there was an interest in proving to businesses that advertising (still in the formative stage in the 1920s) could provide additional profits for companies. Advertisers, many of whom were college graduates, used the image of college to promote an idea of success. See Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 38.

²⁰ Daniel Clark, *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood, 1890-1915* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 22.

²¹ Clark, *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood, 1890-1915*, 172.

²² “The World Envies You,” *The Punchbowl*, 1925, 53.

isn't a jail sentence—a glorious, exultant, friendly fraternal life.”²³ Advertisers thus associated the college man with a life of leisure, pleasure, and consumption, traits they knew the public would find appealing.

A review of print advertisements from this decade indicates an increased focus on physical appearance and a modernized masculinity built on external traits. This new construct of manliness required the manufacture of products to meet heightened needs. An ad from a 1925 issue of *The Harvard Crimson* illustrates the objectification of the college man for the purpose of selling products.²⁴

²³ “The World Envy’s You,” 53.

²⁴ “Hovey’s Men’s Shop,” *The Harvard Crimson*, May 9, 1925, 4.

THE HARVARD CRIMSON

Today
Regatta

SIZES
34 to 46

All Sexton union suits have full faced neck.

All Sexton union suits have taped armholes, giving extra comfort and wear.

This is the famous Sexton web belt. See how it comes around the front of the suit, allowing perfect freedom of movement.

The exclusive Sexton "Balloon Seat"—so called because it is shaped like a balloon. The most comfortable and practical seat ever devised on a union suit.

SIZES
34 to 46

Copyright 1922 by Sexton Mfg Co

Sexton
UNDERWEAR
AND NIGHTWEAR

Figure 1.1: This ad from The Harvard Crimson links college students and consumption.²⁵

²⁵ "Hovey's Men's Shop," *The Harvard Crimson*, May 9, 1925, 4.

This ad visually dissects the student for the public's eye, identifying retail products that would improve the appearance of different parts of his body.²⁶ Instead of being portrayed as a whole individual, arrows point out distinct physical features, reinforcing the notion that this man is targeted for consumption. As the ad portrays the man gazing at himself and appreciating his own physique, an externally based notion of masculinity was promoted. It is noteworthy that this ad was placed in a student newspaper, indicating that students actively participated in creating (and perpetuating) their stereotyped image as consumers.

College students absorbed the messages they received about the importance of cultivating a particular appearance, and retailers took advantage of the perceived social pressure to conform. In fact, on-campus retailers openly acknowledged the exploitative nature of their relationship with students. In a 1921 issue of *The Harvard Crimson*, AUGUST, Inc., a clothier, welcomed the class of 1925 with a half page ad that delivered the following humorous message: "You are the Sheep, We are the Wolves/Come in and be devoured."²⁷ College students were, in essence, behaving like sheep who willingly allowed themselves to be consumed by opportunistic retailers for the sake of improving their social appeal and status. Thus, advertisers contributed to an appearance-based version of collegiate masculinity that was increasingly tied to consumer goods.

These ads told college men that their purchases had a direct bearing on their masculinity and public image. Internal traits were second to external presentations as the "Parable of the First Impression" dictated the portrayal of college men.²⁸ This advertising strategy emphasized that

²⁶ It should also be noted that this ad plays on queer signifiers and homoerotic undertones.

²⁷ "AUGUST, Inc.," *The Harvard Crimson*, September 29, 1921, 8.

²⁸ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 210.

social success (especially with regard to wealth) and societal worth hinged on appearance. In fact, scholars have traced how the “Parable of the First Impression” served to usher in “a culture of personality.”²⁹ In his work, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity*, Roland Marchand explains: “In the parables of the First Impression...a smile or a smooth shave replaced old-fashioned character as the key to success.”³⁰ The focus on appearance was especially impactful for “business-oriented youths” who understood that image could transform reality.³¹ As ads suggested that a first impression made all the difference between success and failure, college men took extra care in shaping their external presentation. This pressure is illustrated by a series of ads that ran in various issues of *The Harvard Crimson* in 1924. Some of the slogans and taglines included: “Your Clothes might as well speak for you as against you”³²; “Good Clothes Won’t Make You but They’ll Take You”³³ and “Your Appearance is the World’s Opinion of You.”³⁴

As the identity of the college man became linked to consumerism, some men embraced these values and incorporated a consumption ethic into their conceptualizations of masculinity and identity. However, in some cases, consumerism complemented an impulse toward character instead of hastening the transition to personality. This complex application and internalization of consumerism is evident in the way that students talked about their universities at this time. For instance, students at the University of Pennsylvania framed the idea of positive publicity for their campus as “sellvertising,” calling upon other students to “utilize the best possible methods of

²⁹ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, 210.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

³² “Your Clothes might as well speak for you as against you,” *The Harvard Crimson*, May 17, 1924, 4.

³³ “Good Clothes Won’t Make You but They’ll Take You,” *The Harvard Crimson*, June 14, 1924, 6.

³⁴ “Your Appearance is the World’s Opinion of You,” *The Harvard Crimson*, May 31, 1924, 2.

salesmanship” to recruit new members to their university.³⁵ Students defined this concept as a means of publicity: “Let us sell Pennsylvania by selling ourselves. That’s ‘sellvertising.’”³⁶ In recognizing their college as “a particularly saleable commodity,” young men (eagerly) allowed themselves to be commodified to serve the greater good of the university.³⁷ By connecting self-commodification with duty to one’s university, students selectively applied patterns of consumption to their life in ways that linked traits of both character and personality.

However, in most instances, consumption was a way for students to embrace modernized values and to secure social prestige. Individualism gave way to conformity with regard to clothing, appearance, and grooming products.³⁸ In contrast to notions of character, which stressed personal values and internal sources of validation, consumerism encouraged “success as a man” to be defined based on “the superficialities of dress and appearance.”³⁹ Since most young men were concerned about fitting in with their peers, they felt compelled to engage in excessive consumption. In essence, to succeed in the world of their peers, college men found it necessary to “be able to afford the things which made for conformity.”⁴⁰ This imperative was realized by collegiates from Harvard, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania, an elite group of young men who had access to disposable income.

While there was a large increase in the number of students attending college in the 1920s, most students at elite universities still came from privileged backgrounds.⁴¹ Tuition was high,

³⁵ “Sellvertising,” *The Pennsylvanian*, March 13, 1925, 2.

³⁶ “Sellvertising,” 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 226.

³⁹ Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 27.

⁴⁰ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 230.

⁴¹ Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities*, 186.

which barred many students who could not afford to attend school.⁴² In 1927, between tuition, books, and fees for “clothing and miscellaneous,” students at the University of Pennsylvania paid \$815 a year.⁴³ It should be noted that this amount was more than the per capita income in 1926 (\$770).⁴⁴ While some students worked to pay their way through school, it has been estimated that only 15% were self-supporting.⁴⁵ Thus, the majority of students at elite universities had the motivation and means to indulge their material desires. Historian Nicholas Syrett notes: “Indeed, a good deal of money was often necessary to pay for the tuition, clothing, entertainment, automobiles, vacations, and Greek-letter-society dues necessary to measure up to one’s peers.”⁴⁶

Students attending these universities often relied on large stipends from their parents to spend on clothes and material goods.⁴⁷ A review of student newspapers from Harvard, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania during this era reveals an increase in the number and prominent placing of advertisements for large ticket items in the weeks before big football games against school rivals. Some ads enticed students to purchase a vehicle (to transport friends to an away game) or to consider buying a fur coat (to keep warm in the stadium bleachers). In fact, the Raccoon coat (which typically cost between \$350 and \$500) became a staple of the college man’s wardrobe, simultaneously serving as a symbol of school spirit and elitism.⁴⁸ This craze was so prevalent that in 1928, jazz musician George Olsen and his big band released a recording

⁴² Ibid., 188.

⁴³ “Tuition and mandated fees, Room and Board and other educational costs at Penn since 1900: 1920-1929,” University of Pennsylvania, accessed September 11, 2016, <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/tuition/1920.html>.

⁴⁴ “1926 American Income, Almost 90 Billions, Breaks Records,” *News-Bulletin of the National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc.*, February 21, 1927, 1.

⁴⁵ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 135.

⁴⁶ Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities*, 188.

⁴⁷ Martin Tinker Buel to Mr. Buel, 15 January 1925, Harvard University, HUD 924.86.

⁴⁸ Deirde Clemente, “Caps, Canes, and Coonskins: Princeton and the Evolution of Collegiate Clothing, 1900–1930,” *The Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 1 (2008): 25.

highlighting the trend called “Doin’ the Raccoon,” which specifically referenced students at Ivy League universities.⁴⁹ The lyrics went:

College men, knowledge men,
Do a dance called raccoon;
It’s the craze, nowadays,
And it will get you soon.
Buy a coat and try it,
I’ll bet you’ll be a riot,
It’s a wow, learn to do it right now!

Oh, they wear ’em down at Princeton,
And they share ’em up at Yale,
They eat in them at Harvard,
But they sleep in them in jail!

From every college campus comes the cheer: oy-yoy!
The season for the raccoon coat is here, my boy!⁵⁰

As students sang along, they acknowledged their role in setting fashion trends and confirmed that they belonged to an exclusive club whose members had the resources to satisfy personal indulgences.

Thus, earning peer respect came at a high fiscal cost, which required many students to spend lavishly. In fact, a class report from Harvard’s Class of 1928 shows that in their senior year, 42% of students racked up annual expenses greater than the average income of Americans at that time.⁵¹ Students spent money on leisure activities, and a 1924 report from *The Harvard Crimson* estimated that college men traveling to the Yale game would spend \$40,000 collectively

⁴⁹ George Olsen, “Doin’ the Raccoon,” Song, 1928.

⁵⁰ George Olsen, “Doin’ the Raccoon,” Song, 1928.

⁵¹ “Annual Expenses,” Harvard Class of 1928, First Report, Harvard HUD 328.1B, 1929, 30.

on their trip.⁵² Thus, many students readily pursued material possessions and instant gratification.

College Masculinity in Novels and Films

Although novels were an established medium by the 1920s, they surged in popularity and notoriety once they embraced the collegiate craze. College men burst onto the scene in an unprecedented way in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*.⁵³ This novel of boyhood transition gave rise to "Fitzgeraldism" (a fascination with youth culture) and increased the public's demand for such depictions.⁵⁴ However, authors like Fitzgerald exaggerated elements of college life to capture the interest of readers. Their stories presented young men, on the cusp of adulthood, in a limited manner as either subscribing to traditional masculinity or eagerly embracing modernized standards.

Through the experiences of Amory Blaine, the protagonist of *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald exposes a rigid view of masculinity and the impact of peer influence on developing identity.⁵⁵ Under the tutelage of his more experienced college friends, Amory learns to categorize students based on key characteristics that they manifest. Amory views men as belonging to either one of two camps: "The Slicker" or the "Big Man."⁵⁶ As outlined on their list, it is clear that "The Slicker" represents the ideal collegiate while "The Big Man" possesses

⁵² "Crimson Statistician Estimates That 3500 Harvard Men Will Spend at Least \$40,000 on New Haven Pilgrimage," *The Harvard Crimson*, January 21, 1924, 8.

⁵³ Kirk Curnutt, "Youth Culture and the Spectacle of Waste: This Side of Paradise and The Beautiful and Damned," in *American Fiction Between the Wars*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), 288.

⁵⁴ "The Untouchable Cured," *The Harvard Crimson*, June 18, 1924, 2.

⁵⁵ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 26.

⁵⁶ Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Scribner's, 1920), 39.

traits that make him socially undesirable.⁵⁷ However, the bottom line---the key discriminating feature that separates these two group of men---hinges on whether or not their hair is slicked.⁵⁸

"THE SLICKER"	"THE BIG MAN"
1. Clever sense of social values.	1. Inclined to stupidity and unconscious of social values.
2. Dresses well. Pretends that dress is superficial—but knows that it isn't.	2. Thinks dress is superficial, and is inclined to be careless about it.
3. Goes into such activities as he can shine in.	3. Goes out for everything from a sense of duty.
4. Gets to college and is, in a worldly way, successful.	4. Gets to college and has a problematical future. Feels lost without his circle, and always says that school days were happiest, after all. Goes back to school and makes speeches about what St. Regis' boys are doing.
5. Hair slicked.	5. Hair not slicked.

Figure 1.2: These categories from *This Side of Paradise* indicate how students relied on grouping in order to identify themselves and their peers.⁵⁹

This humorous categorization suggests that college males linked physical appearance with social desirability and future success. Through Amory's interactions with his classmates, F. Scott Fitzgerald reveals the emphasis on externally-based notion of masculinity and the power of peer influence.⁶⁰ The tips that Amory receives on how to achieve social success in college reinforce superficial values as he is told that what is on the outside counts and that one *can* judge a book by its cover. Even though *This Side of Paradise* was semi-autobiographical, Fitzgerald (a

⁵⁷ Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, 39.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 28.

graduate of Princeton University) presented a limited glimpse into college life, reinforcing stereotypes of college men as self-indulgent, shallow, and vain.⁶¹ Novels such as *This Side of Paradise* dramatized the elements of the college experience that were likely to make a good story and presented college men through a narrow lens.

In his 1924 novel *The Plastic Age*, Percy Marks addresses the disparity between societal preconceptions of college life and the reality of this experience. Soon after arriving on campus, protagonist Hugh Carver realizes his mistaken illusions about college and begins to struggle within himself to define his identity. He initially manifests the traits of character-based masculinity and strives to act morally when confronted with the temptations of college life-- personal glory, women, and alcohol.⁶² However, over time, Hugh attempts to please his peers by trying out for sports and subscribing to their superficial norms. In the end, Hugh's mentor reminds him about the importance of traditional virtues: "As for serving your college, you can always serve it best by being yourself, being true to yourself...that means being the very fine gentleman that you are."⁶³ The imperative to be a "very fine gentleman" is significant as it demonstrates that when young men wandered into the territory of new masculinity and experimented with behaviors consistent with the personality model, they were instructed to return to the model of character.⁶⁴ Marks thus reinforced the binary model of masculinity, highlighting the importance of character-driven traits to his audience.

⁶¹ Pearl James, "History and masculinity in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This side of paradise*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 1 (2005): 2.

⁶² Percy Marks, *The Plastic Age* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 179.

⁶³ Marks, *The Plastic Age*, 280.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

While novels presented masculinity as an artificial choice between character and personality, the public envisioned these scenarios to be faithful representations. After the publication of *The Plastic Age*, author Percy Marks received hundreds of letters praising him for “tearing the veil of hypocrisy from around the depravities of college life, berating him for spoiling the game by publicizing it, or seeking further specification about what really happened to clean-cut boys sent to Ivy League colleges to be perfected as gentlemen.”⁶⁵ While these reactions differed, they all involved a readiness to take the content of his work at face value as there was little information about the college experience at this time. *This Side of Paradise* earned F. Scott Fitzgerald instant critical acclaim largely because this novel indulged the public’s curiosity about college life, a heretofore unexplored and fascinating topic. E.W. Osborn, literary agent of the *New York World*, declared that Fitzgerald’s work was “one of the season’s brilliances and bewilderingly interesting.”⁶⁶ In a similar vein, Burton Rascoe, a reviewer from the *Chicago Tribune*, noted that “it is the only adequate study that we have had of the contemporary American in adolescence and young manhood.”⁶⁷ Although these novels were fictionalized versions of college life, the American reading public was so eager to become informed that it naively regarded these works as authoritative.

During the 1920s, college-themed films satisfied the public’s voyeurism by featuring a hedonistic lifestyle packed with athletic competition, co-ed parties, and unbridled material consumption.⁶⁸ However, similar to the images presented in novels, films flattened

⁶⁵ “Back Matter,” *PMLA* 95, no. 6 (1980): 1195.

⁶⁶ “Is Fitzgerald’s Rising Star a Comet?,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, January-June 1920, 21.

⁶⁷ “Is Fitzgerald’s Rising Star a Comet?,” 21.

⁶⁸ Wiley Lee Umphlett, *The Movies Go to College: Hollywood and the World of the College-life Film* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1984), 16.

May 2017 Final paper Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research Fellowship
Chloe Nurik 2017, University of Pennsylvania

characterizations of college men, painting a distorted picture of youthful masculinity. The binary model of male identity was a recurrent trope in films that featured the collegiate experience. Protagonists were either portrayed as men of integrity who were inner-driven and exercised self-restraint or men who cultivated their social image and popularity.⁶⁹ While films consistently portrayed both models on-screen, they presented them as opposing and mutually exclusive ideals. Thus, a dichotomy between competing models of masculinity was projected on-screen, obfuscating the complex and nuanced reality of male identity.⁷⁰

Although films such as *College Hero*, *The Freshman*, *College*, *The Sophomore*, *The Drop Kick*, and *The Fair Co-Ed* presented a simplistic view of college life and college men, they were immensely popular.⁷¹ While watching these films, audiences gained entry into a world set apart from their own, absorbing images of modernized young men who operated outside the bounds of parental supervision but within the dictates of a powerful peer culture. In her doctoral dissertation “Searching for the Fountain of Youth: Popular American Cinema in the 1920s,” Cynthia Lee Felando notes that in spite of their minor differences, these films followed nearly the same storyline, making them highly predictable and formulaic.⁷² The recurring plot may be

⁶⁹ Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age*, 4.

⁷⁰ It should be noted that the theme of double identities was prominent in the 1920s, an era in which masculinity was rapidly being redefined. These films helped to address underlying cultural anxiety regarding the plastic nature of identity formation and the hidden traits of men. The notion of having a dual identity was reassuring to viewers as this created a partition between those masculine qualities that were socially acceptable and those that were socially undesirable (and perhaps even threatening). There was little cross-over between the different sides of these characters as their stories were not about integration but about irreconcilable internal tension. Thus, the message of these films was that individuals had the power to shape their own identities and to either to disavow or become consumed by aspects of self that were problematic. See *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Film, directed by John S. Robertson (1920; Hollywood: Famous Players-Lasky Corporation); *The Mark of Zorro*, Film, directed by Fred Niblo (1920; Hollywood: Douglas Fairbanks Productions).

⁷¹ Umphlett, *The Movies Go to College: Hollywood and the World of the College-life Film*, 16.

⁷² Cynthia Lee Felando, “Searching for the Fountain of Youth: Popular American Cinema in the 1920s.” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1996), 200.

summarized as follows: A young man who has been instilled with traditional values arrives at college and is regarded as an outsider until he adopts the behavioral norms and habits of an appearance-based masculinity that enables him to fit in with his peers.⁷³ A crisis of conscience occurs which makes him question his true identity (i.e., “which kind of man *am* I?”) and then, character-based masculinity ultimately prevails as he comes to appreciate the importance of these qualities. When the storylines are distilled in this manner, it appears that filmmakers were delivering a moral message to the American public, one that confirmed character as an essential feature of manhood. While the habits of the new man (with his bold, devil-may-care attitude) were captivating and fun to watch, he challenged the societal status quo and the generational hierarchy. These films thus reminded audiences of the virtues of the traditional man whose version of masculinity promoted societal order, institutional respect, and industriousness.⁷⁴

Films presented the collegiate in an uncomplicated and exaggerated manner but were still instrumental in shaping the identities of a generation of young men.⁷⁵ *The Freshman*, a 1925 film featuring comedian Harold Lloyd, parodied the powerful influence that film images had on college men of this era who incorporated the behaviors and grooming habits presented on-screen.⁷⁶ At the start of *The Freshman*, the audience is introduced to Harold Lamb, a gullible young man who is preparing himself for college by obsessively scrutinizing a film about student life. Harold rehearses a silly handshake that he sees on-screen (absorbing an inaccurate

⁷³ Felando, “Searching for the Fountain of Youth: Popular American Cinema in the 1920s,” 200.

⁷⁴ White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America*, 27.

⁷⁵ Umphlett, *The Movies Go to College: Hollywood and the World of the College-life Film*, 38.

⁷⁶ *The Freshman*, Film, directed by Fred C. Newmeyer (1925; Hollywood: The Harold Lloyd Corporation).

representation) and daydreams about becoming the most popular man at school.⁷⁷ As he stands next to a poster of the film, Harold tries to measure up to the ideal man, and his imagination leads him to replace his own image with that of the big man on campus. When his mother speculates on the cause of Harold's odd behavior, she quickly recognizes the influence of film: "I guess he learned it at that movie show-'The College Hero'-he saw it six times yesterday."⁷⁸ Hence, even before entering Tate College, Harold has studied what it means to be a (successful) college man.



Figure 1.3: In *The Freshman*, Harold Lloyd plays a college student who looks to the movies as a social guide.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *The Freshman*, Film, directed by Fred C. Newmeyer (1925; Hollywood: The Harold Lloyd Corporation).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

In *The Freshman*, the irony of a film-within-a-film serves to underscore how important media depictions became for college men as they compared themselves to images on-screen and developed a relational identity. Just as Harold is influenced by the film *he* is watching, young men in the audience were being influenced by what they saw. Harold's impressionable nature reflects how college students looked to media representations as social guides.⁸⁰ In *The Movies Go to College*, Scholar Wiley Umphlett explains that media-related sources shape Harold's expectations of himself: "his daydreams of success have been inspired by the fiction he's read, the movies he's seen, and the athletic heroes he's worshipped."⁸¹ While Umphlett's statement reflects Harold's mentality, it applies to young men in the audience, as well. Embedded within each college film was a message about how to behave, what to wear, and who to befriend, a collective of information used to construct the male identity in this era.⁸²

As previously noted, college films routinely displayed the conflict between the character-based masculinity of the protagonist and the personality-based masculinity of his peers. Contradictory aspects of masculinity were split off and embodied within different characters in college films. The inability to integrate features of these models invariably forced the young protagonist to experience stress as he attempted to cement his male identity and confront his true values. Further, by externalizing this conflict as a problem between the protagonist and others (i.e., making it interpersonal rather than intrapersonal), college films underscored the societal tension that arose when old and new models of masculinity collided.

⁸⁰ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 290.

⁸¹ Umphlett, *The Movies Go to College: Hollywood and the World of the College-life Film*, 38.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 27.

The 1927 film *The College Hero* is an example of the technique of using two different characters to represent opposing types of masculinity. The story centers around the sports adventures of the protagonist Happy who manifests features of inner-driven masculinity (such as integrity and loyalty) and his (unlikely) friend Jim who displays traits associated with externally-based masculinity (such as charisma and popularity).⁸³ The movie depicts the two as polar opposites with regard to their actions, physical presentation, and ultimate fate. When Jim sees Happy achieving social success, he becomes envious and trips him on the football field, thereby making him ineligible to play in the “The Big Game.”⁸⁴ Jim’s underhandedness contrasts dramatically with Happy’s integrity, leaving viewers to question who the *real* college hero is. It is noteworthy that the storyline does not explore the possibility of Jim adopting some of Happy’s traits that he admires. Instead, the differences between these two men remain intact and lead to irresolvable tension. *The College Hero* thus depicted masculinity as a static aspect of identity that facilitated artificial categorization and triggered conflict between different types of men.

College films sometimes captured the inner tension that occurred as young men shifted from one model of masculinity to another while attempting to stabilize their identity. As these storylines layered aspects of social and internal conflict, they presented characters with greater depth who struggled within themselves to reconcile competing notions of masculinity. For example, in the 1927 film *College*, the protagonist Ronald emulates the school’s football hero but then wins back his girlfriend by displaying traits of virtue and gentlemanliness that typify his original character-based masculinity.⁸⁵ The 1929 film *The Sophomore* similarly exhibits this

⁸³ *The College Hero*, Film, directed by Walter Lang (1927; Hollywood: Columbia Pictures).

⁸⁴ Felando, “Searching for the Fountain of Youth: Popular American Cinema in the 1920s,” 200.

⁸⁵ *College*, Film, directed by James W. Horne (1927; Hollywood: Joseph M. Schenck Productions).

process of reversion. In this story, Joe Collins, an impressionable young man, adopts a model of new masculinity that earns peer approval but conflicts with the homegrown version of manliness that he has taken with him to college.⁸⁶ When he suddenly finds himself running in the wrong direction on the football field, Joe announces both to himself and to viewers: “Folks—there’s been a slight mistake-I’ve been following the wrong man-.”⁸⁷ On a literal level, this scene is simply about the football game, but on a symbolic level, it reflects the internal confusion experienced by the collegiate as he struggled to define his identity. When college men (like Joe) felt pressed to “follow” new ideals and cultural norms, they had difficulty sorting out who they truly were.⁸⁸

Reactions to Media Representations

Some students objected to the lack of realism in films, particularly with regard to the storylines and simplistic characters. Archival data from several sources indicate that college students believed these films distorted their experiences and misrepresented them to the public.⁸⁹ As a result, students took advantage of opportunities to express their objections. One example of this dialogue occurred in 1929 when *Motion Picture Classic*, an industry-based publication, ran a column entitled “What College Men Think of the Movies.”⁹⁰ The presence of this column in an industry publication suggests a simmering conflict between students and filmmakers. *Motion Picture Classic*’s publisher George Kent Shuler declared: “college men have suffered at the hands of the screen. It cannot be said that they suffered in silence.”⁹¹

⁸⁶ *The Sophomore*, Film, directed by Leo McCarey (1929; Hollywood: Pathé Exchange).

⁸⁷ *The Sophomore*, Film, directed by Leo McCarey (1929; Hollywood: Pathé Exchange).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “Brown Comes to Harvard Via Loew’s,” *The Harvard Crimson*, April 16, 1926, 4.

⁹⁰ “What College Men Think of the Movies,” *Motion Picture Classic*, January-June 1929, 18.

⁹¹ George Kent Shuler, “Pictures and Personalities,” *Motion Picture Classic*, January-June 1929, 17.

May 2017 Final paper Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research Fellowship

Chloe Nurik 2017, University of Pennsylvania

Offering students the opportunity to provide input, *Motion Picture Classic* asked young men throughout the country how they felt about college films. Walter L. Scott, a Dartmouth student cited in the article, noted the exaggerated elements of collegiate films: “The chief indictment against these movies is on the grounds of realism. College life is almost as real as any other life. All the drama and glamour of college doesn’t begin and end with the last-quarter, one-point football victory.”⁹² Several other students cited in the column voiced similar complaints, suggesting that films condensed the college experience, focusing on sports and relationships without examining other meaningful aspects of their lives. Further, as documented in the article, some students felt that cinematic masculinity was stereotyped. One contributor to the column explained: “The fallacy that Eve is in most instances good, while Adam is always in the wrong, is even more objectionable.”⁹³ This statement indicates that students recognized the limited depictions of masculinity in film, which contrasted with their experiences and worldview.⁹⁴

To expand their audience base, filmmakers adopted several strategies to involve students more directly.⁹⁵ Production companies aligned release dates for films with the start of the school year to optimize viewership in college theatres.⁹⁶ Some college films featured student athletes to “give game scenes documentary-like authenticity, to provide promotional hooks, and of course, as a means by which to design movies with ‘youth appeal.’”⁹⁷ Additionally, movie companies tried to elicit excitement and support among students by having movie stars attend campus events (such as when Clara Bow promoted her upcoming film *It* at the 1926 California

⁹² “What College Men Think of the Movies,” 18.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Felando, “Searching for the Fountain of Youth: Popular American Cinema in the 1920s,” 208.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

Berkeley-Stanford football game).⁹⁸ The on-campus presence of celebrities and favorable depictions of campus life were intended to “spark an energetic dialogue between university students and Hollywood.”⁹⁹ To create more accurate representations, filmmakers pressed to learn about the realities of college culture, but this goal required students to let them pass through the gates, which was not always an easy task.

The idea that college was an insulated environment, separate from the outside world, is a recurrent theme in many student accounts of this era.¹⁰⁰ Students carved out a subculture for themselves and objected to intrusions from the outside, which in turn, produced articles, films, and research speculating about the presumed interests and sensibilities of the college man.¹⁰¹ An editorial from a 1924 issue of *The Harvard Crimson* spoke directly to this point as the author voiced his objection to the over-representation of college youth in mass media: “What college men need is more time to themselves and less interference from outsiders.”¹⁰² Students objected to being scrutinized but were also highly critical of being inaccurately portrayed, creating a predicament for those who were eager to learn more.

An aptly titled student editorial “From the Outside” demonstrates the way in which college students reacted to stereotyping. While the author acknowledged that there “is a grain of truth in each” collegiate stereotype, he nonetheless objected to the artificiality of these on-screen portrayals and the assertion of filmmakers that they accurately captured the college experience on-screen.¹⁰³ The editorial declares: “The point is that each of these ideas is a very

⁹⁸ Ibid., 210-211.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 200.

¹⁰⁰ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 226.

¹⁰¹ “College Publicity,” *The Pennsylvanian*, May 24, 1923, 2.

¹⁰² “Leave Us Alone!,” *The Harvard Crimson*, December 1, 1924, 2.

¹⁰³ “From the Outside,” *Yale Daily News*, May 17, 1921, 2.

minute portion of a very important whole... When this part is spoken, each recedes to the shadows of the stage and blends into a complex background.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, the author explains that while each specific image of the college man might have been valid, the composite portrayals of college men simplified their experience and distorted “the complex background” of college life.¹⁰⁵ This article indicates that students feared that distorted or overly simplistic portrayals in the media fostered unrealistic expectations and rigid stereotyping of the college man who was integrated, complex, and multidimensional.

Disgruntled over the way that films misrepresented them, students on various campuses staged on-campus protests against the film industry. In 1927, after Yale students discovered that Paramount planned to shoot a film on their campus, they blocked this filming from occurring.¹⁰⁶ When Paramount tried to switch the site of filming to Princeton University, this attempt was also unsuccessful as students at that location quickly organized a ban of college films in nearby theatres.¹⁰⁷ In another incident, virulence teetered on violence when a group of Harvard students vandalized a movie theatre to express their frustration over inaccuracies in the film *Brown at Harvard*.¹⁰⁸ These extreme actions (besides illustrating the mischievous nature of college men at this time) highlight the degree to which students objected to being misrepresented in the media as well as their willingness to take matters into their own hands.¹⁰⁹ It is notable that this latter element--the collective call to action which challenged institutions of authority--reflected

¹⁰⁴ “From the Outside,” 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Felando, “Searching for the Fountain of Youth: Popular American Cinema in the 1920s,” 221.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 222.

¹⁰⁸ “What College Men Think of the Movies,” 70.

¹⁰⁹ White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America*, 188.

a more modernized model of masculinity.¹¹⁰ Ironically, although these students felt maligned by their stereotyped personas, this incident mirrored the rowdy and reckless traits that college films often depicted. Moreover, the extent of their emotional reactivity indicates the power that students attributed to mass media as they felt compelled to both contest these representations and to assert their own perspective. This back and forth between students and the movie industry created a complex field of signifiers from which young men could selectively incorporate elements to flesh out their own identity, masculinity, and personality.

Conclusion

In the 1920s, college men burst onto the silver screen, newspapers, and novels, captivating the public and dramatizing the experiences of collegiates across the country. The public gravitated towards exaggerated portrayals of college men, eagerly accepting stereotypes and perpetuating a limited notion of what it meant to be a college man at this time. As college and youth became commodified, advertisers rushed to sell products linked to the college man, tying their products to this publicized caricature. While some students balked at these depictions and the efforts of advertisers, others readily adopted principles of consumerism and built their identities around this new model. At the same time, movies and novels foregrounded the experiences of college men in a circumscribed manner, presenting protagonists who subscribed either to the model of character or the model of personality, without integrating these concepts of masculinity. As a result, some students publically criticized mass media for these exaggerated

¹¹⁰ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 290.
May 2017 Final paper Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research Fellowship
Chloe Nurik 2017, University of Pennsylvania

depictions, in which they saw little resemblance to their own lives. However, other students recognized elements of their experiences in these portrayals and purposefully constructed their identities around the images they saw. In this manner, media of the 1920s acted as a dynamic force, significantly impacting the way that college men were perceived by society and the manner in which they defined themselves.