

Sex and Youth in the Jazz Age

by Paula Fass

This is a short excerpt from Paula Fass' book *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). I have excerpted the chapter from *Major Problems in American History*, volume 2, edited by E. C. Hoffman and J. Gjerde (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2002). I wrote the footnotes.

Study Questions

1. How and why were patterns of dating changing in the 1920s compared to the era before the Great War?
2. Why was "petting" acceptable for many young people in the 1920s, while sexual intercourse usually was not?
3. Despite the new spirit of sexual experimentation, in what ways did the sexual mores [pronounced MORE-ays: look it up] reflect the standards of earlier generations?

"Most of 'em pet, I guess."

"All the pretty ones."

"Some do one night and don't the next—goddam funny."

"ALL of 'em pet. Good women. Poor women. All of 'em."

If a girl doesn't pet, a man can figure he didn't rush 'er right."

Lynn Montross and Lois Montross, *Town and Gown* (1923)

Students of modern sexual behavior have quite correctly described the twenties as a turning point, a critical juncture between the strict double standard of the age of Victoria¹ and the permissive sexuality of the age of Freud. Too often, however, the sexual revolution of the twenties has been described exclusively in terms of scattered data suggesting an increase in premarital sexual intercourse on the part of women. One is tempted to picture investigators hunting for that special morning between 1919 and 1929 when 51% of the young unmarried women in America awoke to find that they were no longer virgins. Instead, of course, investigators are forced to deduce revolutionary changes from small, though important, increases in what remained a minority pattern of behavior. This kind of thinking... overlooks... that changes in sexual habits, as in most other areas of social relations, are evolutionary....

College youth of the 1920s redefined the relationship between men and women.² In good part this resulted from a simple rediscovery—love is erotic. The remainder drew on an old assumption—that the goal of relations between men and women was marriage. Together the new insight and the old tradition resulted in a significant restructuring of premarital forms of sexual behavior as relationships were charged by a new sexual dynamism and a vigorous experimentalism. Sex for middle-class youths of the 1920s had become a significant premarital experience, but it continued to be distinctly marriage-oriented and confined by stringent etiquettes and sharply etched definitions. In the process of defining their future roles in the new

¹ They mean Queen Victoria of Great Britain, whose era is famous for its prudishness.

² It is important to note that Fass is talking about college kids here. The percentage of high school graduates in the population was much smaller than today, although it was growing rapidly. According to *Education Week* (10 June 2010), the national high school graduation rate did not pass 50% of all young people until 1940. And the number of those graduates who went on to higher education in the 1920s was quite small—although it too was growing.

society and within the context of already potent changes, the young helped to create the sexual manners of the twentieth century....

Dating was something definitely new in the ritual of sexual interaction. It was unlike the informal get-togethers that characterized youth socializing in the village or small town of the nineteenth century, for at such events there was no pairing early in an acquaintance. It was also unlike courting, which implied a commitment between two people. Dating permitted a paired relationship without implying a commitment to marriage and encouraged experimental relations with numerous partners.³ Dating emerged in response to a modern environment in which people met casually and irregularly, and in response to new kinds of recreations like movies, dance halls, and restaurants, where pairing was the most convenient form of boy-girl relation.⁴ Moreover, it developed as youths were increasingly freed from the direct supervision of family and community and allowed the freedom to develop private, intimate, and isolate associations. Dating opened the way for experimentation in mate compatibility. The lack of commitment permitted close and intimate associations and explorations of personality, and isolation and privacy laid the ground for sexual experimentation, both as a means for testing future compatibility and as an outlet for present sexual energies.

With the isolation of relations, the young were forced to rely on their own judgment in determining the degree and limits of permissible eroticism. It was this latitude for self-determination that produced the haunting rear of sexual promiscuity in the jeremiads⁵ of the twenties. The fear was unfounded. The young were thrown back on their own resources, but they were not free, either from the influence of childhood training or, more immediately, from the controls and sanctions of their peers. Basing their actions on an unyielding taboo against sexual intercourse and an elaborate network of peer norms and standards, they proceeded to open up the possibilities of sexual play without overstepping the bounds of family prohibition and peer propriety. After investigating female conduct in the late twenties, Phyllis Blanchard and Carlyn Manasses concluded that “very many girls draw a distinct line between the exploratory activities of the petting party and complete yielding of sexual favors to men.” In the behavior of young men and women in the twenties, this charting of distinctions was as important as the exploration. The two ran a parallel course, for the young experimented with eroticism within a clear sense of limits, thus tasting a little of the fruit and enjoying the naughtiness of their bravery without seriously endangering the crop.

“Petting” described a broad range of potentially erotic physical contacts, from a casual kiss to more intimate caresses and physical fondling. Even such limited eroticism would have automatically defined a woman as loose and disreputable in the nineteenth century. To the Victorians, who divided good women from bad, revered ideal purity, and were suspicious of female sexuality, all forms of eroticism on the part of women could be equated with [sexual intercourse]. Even in the twenties, it was not unknown for reformers to introduce legislation that

³ If I weren’t convinced that it would make me uncomfortable, and you extremely uncomfortable, I would ask the class how this compares to today’s “hook-up” culture.

⁴ Notice that there was no thought in the 1920s of public gay relationships. Much was changing, but some beliefs and behaviors change more rapidly than others.

⁵ This is an awesome word. I urge you to look up the definition.

would prohibit petting and define it along with fornication⁶ as illegal as well as immoral. But the young drew distinct boundaries between what was acceptable erotic behavior and what was not. Petting was the means to be safe and yet not sorry, and around this form of sexual activity they elaborated a code of permissible eroticism.... A casual first date might thus entail a good-night kiss, but greater intimacies and a certain amount of erotic play were permitted and expected of engaged couples. "Erotic play," as Ira Wile rightfully observed, had "become an end rather than a means," and the strong "distinctions made in petting recognize that erotic activity may or may not have coitus⁷ as a goal." The young first [decided to permit] eroticism and then imposed degrees and standards of acceptability....

Dating and petting were, moreover, distinctly marriage-oriented in the twenties. Since mating was one of the chief aims of both rituals, immediate sexual satisfactions had to be carefully weighed in view of long-term goals. And while virginity in a bride was no longer an absolute prerequisite for most men, it was still considered desirable. For men, female chastity appears to have taken a back seat⁸ to considerations of compatibility, but there was still some ambiguity on this point, and the devaluation of virginity in the bride was probably related to a growing acceptance of intercourse among engaged couples rather than to a tolerance of casual promiscuity. Women too continued to display considerable anxiety about the consequences of lost virginity. These multiple ambivalences reinforced the sense of acceptable limitations on sexual indulgence.

For most youths, this meant an acceptance of eroticism with very clear limits of permissible expression. Petting established a norm that deviated from that of the family but was still not antagonistic to its basic taboo. The majority could pet because it filled the need for response in a specific relationship, and in filling that need they believed they had the security of peer-group opinion. Of course, many ambivalences remained. But by the 1930s these sexual definitions had congealed into a dependable norm, a norm which, in the words of one investigation, provided ample room for "spontaneous demonstrations of affection." In their study of sexual behavior on the thirties campus, Dorothy Bromley and Florence Britten discovered that the fact "that a girl should feel she can give within limits or permit exploratory intimacies without compromising her essential virginity is one of the phenomena of the contemporary younger generation's mores." During the twenties, peer pressure to pet was still strong, and behavior patterns were, as a result, less stable, more inhibiting, altogether more full of anxieties. Probably many youths petted less to express personal needs than to conform to group standards and to demonstrate what Ernest Burgess called "the outstanding attitude of modern youth"—their "self-consciousness and sophistication about sex."...

⁶ Another word to look up if you don't know it.

⁷ Coitus: sexual intercourse

⁸ An interesting choice of words, as we shall see next time.