

In-Between the Lines: How ‘The New Woman’ of the 1920s Was Perceived Through Phillips Academy and Abbot Academy Students’ Writing

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“Ah, the extraordinary audacity of the modern women!”¹ The 1920s, a decade within the Progressive Era, marked a period when women’s roles in society were rapidly transforming. In the wake of the 19th Amendment for women’s suffrage in 1919, the ideal of the ‘New Woman’ began to spread among many Americans. The ‘New Woman’ was characterized by shorter hair, shorter skirts, makeup, and a greater political, intellectual, and sexual autonomy that challenged Victorian ideals of propriety. Student literary publications such as *The Mirror* and *The Courant* capture how contested this ideal was. Abbot Academy students used writing to frame the New Woman as both modern and civically engaged, while Phillips Academy students used writing to hypersexualize the modern woman, stripping her of her individuality and complexity, and invalidating her political and intellectual agency. Together, these sources show that suffrage alone did not guarantee women's cultural authority; the meaning of modern womanhood was defined and limited through forms of media that continued to police women’s visibility and legitimacy.

As an institution, Abbot Academy struggled with competing visions on whether to raise its students to be traditional housewives or independent, college-educated women. In a school-wide lecture, Mrs. Trowbridge condemned “the evils of modern dancing, the advantage of sensible dressing and sensible coiffure, the appearance of rouge and lipstick.”² The language of “evils” versus “sensible” placed the New Woman aesthetic as something very negative that any

¹ *The Mirror* (Phillips Academy), 1920-1921, 204, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/phillipsandoverm16phil>.

² *The Courant* (Abbot Academy), 1920-1922, 197-198, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/abbotcourant13abbo>.

sensible Abbot student would not partake in. This pattern characterized broader national debates as political gains, such as suffrage, were celebrated, but New Woman aesthetics were dismissed as frivolous. This contradiction of attempting to promote women's autonomy while limiting their aesthetic self-expression undermined the women's liberation movement. This demonstrates how the New Woman identity was contested even amongst women.

While their administration opposed modern femininity, Abbot Academy students used *The Courant* to assert the New Woman aesthetic as normal, claiming 'modernity' through media representation. This exemplified the phenomenon known as "peer society" in higher education institutions of the 1920s, in which students defined norms for themselves rather than accepting parental or institutional authority. Abbot students used their publication to establish and define trends amongst their peers. An editorial article titled "In Memoriam" noted that "individuals appear with [...] bumps in their coiffures" the result of "too often unsuccessful attempts at self-beautifying," and that "No one is immune to this strange disease, [...] [even] the most sensible girls in the school are just as susceptible as the most frivolous".³ By framing hair curling as universal, the article made the New Woman aesthetic a shared student reality rather than something "evil". Furthermore, articles in *The Courant* presented actions of beautifying as something students willingly chose to partake in, even at the risk of discomfort caused by "the torture of sleeping on patent wavers."⁴ The commonality of the modern woman aesthetic extended beyond editorial choices. Miriam Sweeney, an Abbot student who contributed to *The Courant*, preserved segments of her writing in her scrapbook alongside a photograph of herself sporting short hair and a flapper-esque dress, embodying the very image of the New Woman.⁵

³ *The Courant*, 398.

⁴ *The Courant*, 398.

⁵ Miriam Sweeney, "Scrapbook of Sweeney, Miriam, 1920-1923," Scrapbook Box 69, Andover Archives, Andover. See **Photograph 1**.

Despite their prevalence, aesthetics alone did not define Abbot Academy's New Woman, as students also asserted a desire to be involved in politics and larger American society. Q.E.D. declared: "Women are now taking such an important part in the affairs of the country that we feel ourselves most fortunate in having this opportunity of starting a club that will make us better informed citizens." Through statements such as this, Abbot students declared their desire to be politically engaged and educated members of society. Students embodied the notion that 1920s women pursued both aesthetic and political liberation simultaneously, challenging narratives that reduced the New Woman to frivolous individuals.⁶

Phillips Academy students in *The Mirror* denied women the validity of their newfound autonomy through satirical depictions. Whereas *The Courant* featured complex female characters, *The Mirror* lacked independent mention for women, with references linking "men and women" rather than addressing women as autonomous subjects, implying that women were not worthy of separate attention. The scrapbook of Martin Bovey, a Phillips Academy student, also helps further express a lack of focus on femininity, as his scrapbook never mentions women and focuses on hypermasculinized activities that excluded women, such as football and war.⁷ When women appeared in *The Mirror*, they were subjected to hypersexualization and were seen for their physical assets rather than their mental ones. A short story states, "Ah, the extraordinary audacity of the modern women!" The following narration lingers on the woman's "beautiful eyes," and calls her "brazen."⁸ This presentation of women as "audac[ious]" and "brazen" creates a cultural perception in which female confidence is equated with impropriety. This anxiety reflected broader national fears as American men saw women's growing emancipation as a threat

⁶ Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974): 377-378, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1903954>.

⁷ Martin Bovey, "Scrapbook of Bovey, Martin '1920," Scrapbook Box 77, Andover Archives, Andover.

⁸ *The Mirror*, 204.

to their own status.⁹ The poem “A Good Suggestion” extended this perception by warning, “The modern girl we cannot kiss,/ ‘Tis fatal now to gain this bliss./The rouge and paint and scented powder,/ That serve to make her beauty louder, / Form on her face a deadly chowder. /Let man beware of this!”¹⁰ This poem presents the modern woman as a threat and makeup as a tool to deceive men, rather than forms of women’s self-expression. This pattern was also seen in a satirical cartoon in *The Mirror*: “LEATHER DEALER: Girls are wearing so few clothes now, I don’t sell many trunks. SPORTING GOODS DEALER: And I sell more for the same reason.”¹¹ This cartoon satirizes women’s shorter attire that allowed for freer movement and pursuit in physical activities such as sports, but chooses to present this lack of restrictive clothing as overt and sexual. All of these examples from *The Mirror* paint the New Woman as a ‘frivolous’ sex icon, instead of possessing intellectual or political seriousness.

Within the all-female space of Abbot Academy, students normalized the New Woman aesthetic through *The Courant*. In contrast, Phillips Academy’s all-male student body used *The Mirror* to invalidate and ridicule women’s claims to modernity. However, both schools represented a privileged subset of American society. Higher education was usually reserved for middle and upper-class youth, and that was especially the case for women.¹² For example, Abbot students were expected to gain a “fineness of spirit, beauty of the soul” that was essential to “good breeding” and future prospects such as marriage through their education.¹³ In fact, the New Woman these elite students debated remained largely inaccessible to working-class and immigrant women who faced different constraints.¹⁴ In other words, the debates over the New

⁹ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, (New York: Free Press, 1996), 191-222.

¹⁰ *The Mirror*, 28.

¹¹ *The Mirror*, 204.

¹² Fass, *The damned and the beautiful*, 119-167.

¹³ Susan McIntosh Lloyd, *A Singular School: Abbot Academy, 1828-1973* (University Press of New England, 1979), 220, accessed January 26, 2026, <https://archive.org/details/singularschoolab00lloy>.

¹⁴ Fass, *The damned and the beautiful*, 119-167.

Woman in student publications reflected elite experiences, while other forms of women's labor and identity remained largely invisible. While Abbot students chose discomfort to achieve hair and clothing styles, working-class women didn't have the time or leisure for such experimentation. The flapper image obscured the reality that the majority of women led lives dedicated to necessity rather than aesthetic rebellion.¹⁵ Despite their limited outlook on wider American society, examining these geographically close institutions illustrates how women debated their own modernity while men dismissed the debate. These conversations reflected national dynamics in which popular media erased the political activism of the New Woman in the suffrage era through the image of a flapper, thereby diminishing women's political gains.¹⁶

In conclusion, Abbot Academy students refused to separate aesthetic self-expression from political engagement, attempting to normalize modern femininity within their all-female institution. Phillips Academy students used satire to reduce women to sexual objects and dismiss their political gains. The critical difference was whose interpretation held power. Women's liberty remained confined by cultural expectations while men's ridicule circulated widely throughout popular media. This mirrored national patterns where stereotypes of women erased their political activism in the 1920s after the suffrage movement. Despite being geographically close institutions, these schools produced radically different visions of modern womanhood. This divergence reveals that suffrage alone could not guarantee women's authority to shape their own image. The fight for gender equality extended into everyday spaces such as student publications, where the definition of equality was contested.

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¹⁵ Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views," 372-393.

¹⁶ Nancy F. Cott, "Feminist Politics in the 1920s: The National Woman's Party," *Journal of American History* 71, no. 1 (June 1984): 43-68.

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Appendix



Photograph 1. Miriam Sweeney in flapper-style dress and short hair, circa 1920-1923. Scrapbook of Sweeney, Miriam, 1920-1923, Scrapbook Box 69, Andover Archives, Andover.