

# The 1920's: era of social and cultural rebellion? essay sample

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Americans have never been shy about attaching labels to their history, and frequently they do so to characterize particular years or decades in their distant or recent past. It is doubtful, however, that any period in our nation's history has received as many catchy appellations as has the decade of the 1920's... " the Jazz Age," " the Roaring Twenties," " the dry decade," " the prosperity decade," " the age of normalcy," " and simply the New Era"...

(page 198) In the second edition of *Taking Sides: Reconstruction to the Present*, William E. Leuchtenburg, a history professor, and David A. Shannon, an author, address their positions on how the 1920's received as much attention as it did and why it was tagged with such specific classifications, as noted in the quote above. Leuchtenburg argues that the twenties was an era labeled for its secularized growth of American society, " the demands by newly enfranchised women for economic equality and sexual liberation, and the hedonistic mood in the country, which produced a youth rebellion against the symbols of the Victorian authority"(page 198).

Shannon, however, does not support the popular notion that the second decade of the century was one praised because of the "' flapper,' ' saxophone,' ' bathtub gin,' ' and speakeasies'"(page 210). Using facts and statistics produced by the developed economy, Shannon further explains that the twenties were labeled by such " shallow" classifications, because of the boasting from the press during and following the decade. Leuchtenburg's " *The Revolution in Morals*," illustrates the 1920's as an era of dramatic change which would not only influence the future of America, but set a standardized profile of Americans to the rest of the world. He proclaims that Americans, especially the newer generation, had lost their reverence for

religion. Thus, society had no interest in the spiritual life, but rather in the secular life in which they were physically living in. A new revolution came about which focus was the life and time that people were going through at that moment, not Heaven nor Hell. The growing secularization of the country greatly weakened religious sanctions.

People lost their fear of Hell and at the same time had less interest in heaven; they made more demands for material fulfillment on Earth. (page 200) He uses women as an example and how the ideal above became their motivation to reach their goal of liberation that they had so long strived for. Their radical energy that sounded the blow of women's voices across the nation and throughout history. "The extreme feminists argued that women were equal to men, and even more so" (page 201). The energy that would later create a truly equal nation where women would share offices and professions with men, outside of the home. This radical wave was set by the Nineteenth Amendment that had recently been adopted during the Woodrow Wilson administration in 1920. Another law that went into effect were the prohibition laws that had ideally created a "dry" nation, but realistically was an unsuccessful bill. It was during this era that the Americans, growing new rebellious personalities, began producing alcohol, illegally, from their own homes, also known as "bathtub gin." Alcohol, being another focus of the era, resulted as sex being an even bigger focus.

The media of the era took its rights to the daring limits by producing literature on sex and psychology, a result of post-World War I. In the years after the war, psychology became a national mania... [Sigmund] Freud's

popularity had an inevitable effect on the 'revolution of morals.' It was assumed that unless you freely expressed your libido and gave outlet to your sex energy, you would damage your health... Americans in the 1920's became obsessed with the subject of sex. (pages 203-4) Music was another example that Leuchtenburg uses to portray the rebellious American spirit of the twenties, "the Jazz Age." It was the music of the black man, that was not only a hit among the black society, but the white society as well. Traditional dances were not as popular, in fact they were quite diminished during this era. Instead, the Jazz Age brought forth more contemporary, more sensual dances like the famous Charleston and the fox trot. Victorian dance forms like the waltz yielded to the fast-stepping Charleston, the Black Bottom, and the slow fox trots in which, to the syncopated rhythms of the jazz band, there was a "maximum of motion in the minimum of space." (page 205-6)

These dances, like everything else during the era created an incredible amount of controversy, like new things always do. While liberal Americans tried to take part in their new culture of hot dances, interest in sex and psychology, illegal production of alcohol, the enjoyment and distribution of alcohol, the American woman's radical and liberated soul, and the enjoyment of it all, conservatives, including the hard-core Republican presidents of the era, spoke against the mania that overtook the nation. Censorship bills were quite common among the states, that rather than completely extinguishing the fire of the new American rebellious spirit, it blew and made the flame grow. "Threatened by censorship bills in thirty-six states, the industry made a gesture toward reforming itself" (page 205). The American liberal became the icon of the era and for decades to come. David A. Shannon's "American  
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Society and Culture in the 1920's," on the other hand, reflects on the 1920's as a decade of "prosperity and economic growth" (page 210).

He argues quite strongly with the popular classification of the era as an age of partying and rebellion. He claims that it is unfortunate and naive to label such a prosperous decade as frivolous, thus meaningless one. To the writers who wrote and/or who are writing about the twenties, Shannon responds to their literature of the conjecture that Americans treated themselves to an all-you-can-eat rebellion buffet for a full decade is through and through ridiculous. He defends his position by proclaiming that the exaggeration of the exciting twenties, specifically made by writers, was a result of the great depression during the 1930's. The 1920's seemed to be a more attractive image, a "carefree existence" that had once existed but was now diminished because of the lack of moderation in finances and social culture, thus causing a dramatic drop in the "strong" American economy. The interpretation of the era is that America went on a hedonistic binge for approximately a decade. Obviously, such a characterization of an epoch is shallow and exaggerated...The great change in the conditions of society and the mood of the people after 1929 is the root of the cause of curious historiographical aberration.

The grimness, despair, and drabness of America in the 1930's probably prompted writers to look back at the previous decade with a kind of nostalgia for a more carefree existence and led them to look fondly and too long at what were actually superficialities. (page 210) It is important to note that Shannon's aim is not to eliminate the flappers, the jazz, and the media from

this age, but rather to transcend these symbols of the era and look beyond the facade that sets the profile of the 1920's. For example, Shannon discuss the finances and the economical situation of the United States during a time that had proceeded World War I. At this time the United States had become a world power after its victory as an Allie against the Austro-Hungarian regime, where not only was it the pop culture and the fashion creator for the rest of the world, but it was also very prosperous and well-to-do financially and economically. During the postwar era, before the 1930's when the United States faced a dramatic drop in the stock market, the 1920's faced minor " dips" that caused and helped the changes that occurred during the decade. For example, during World War I, many of the women stopped wearing corsets and dress with excess material, because the material and the finances were needed for the war.

Thus, to no one's surprise, when the war had ended, and with women winning new liberation after the Nineteenth Amendment was put into action, the result was a new fashion that required less than half the material originally needed to make dresses that were popular before the war. This set the mode for the flapper era, but economically it was a negative impact on job opportunities for textile workers, designers, and seamstresses. " The world market for textiles declined when women's styles changed. A dress in 1928 required less than one-half the material that a seamstress needed to make a dress in 1918" (page 211). Then how did the twenties become such a prosperous age? Shannon uses the automobile as an example that reflects greatly on the development of American standards and way of life. After 1915 when the American inventor, Henry Ford built his infamous Model T, <https://assignbuster.com/the-1920s-era-of-social-and-cultural-rebellion-essay-sample/>

the automobile industry in the United States grew more and more, especially after the war when the demand for cars and jobs grew, thus people were getting more jobs, while becoming a leading international automobile producer. Cars seemed to be one of the “ new age” things to have; anyone who was anyone at the time, owned a car.

The ownership of the automobile resulted in the development of the American home and the family, itself. For the time period, Americans were technologically one of the most developed countries in the world. The use of electricity, the radio, and appliances like vacuums, irons, and washing machines had grown immensely during this era. Shannon also remarks that because of the high demand for these appliances meant that the labor cost and opportunity was high as well, thus creating more jobs and simultaneously causing greed and over production of products, which would result in the great depression of the 1930's. Finally, a point that Shannon concludes his essay with is the logic of education at the time. Since, the war had just ended, soldiers were returning with no prior education to fulfill the only job opportunities on the market. In result of the demands, the soldiers went to colleges and universities, causing an overflow, however, fulfilling the jobs that were needed to run the high demand product corporations and also setting a new example for generations to come. “...Enrollments increasing from about 600, 000 in 1920 (larger than usual with soldiers returning from World War I) to about 1, 200, 000 in 1930.

The greatest increase came to the vocational fields...” (page 218) After carefully reading both of the reflective essays, I came to the conclusion that

although Leuchtenburg's essay seemed more entertaining and fun with his descriptions of the "Roaring Twenties," Shannon's arguments seemed much more in depth and more realistic. I think that Shannon really added a third dimension to the twenties by describing the financial status of the era which, in turn, helps us as readers get a better understanding of why the depression of the 1930's was such a dramatic one. I also think that Shannon really hits the target when he described the individual of the twenties. By 1929 the typical American had become a mass man. He worked for a huge industrial corporation; he bought mass-produced articles made by the large corporation; he more than likely lived in an apartment house or in a small residence that differed little from thousands of others; he read mass newspapers; he attended Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movies and listened to national radio programs; he avidly followed the athletic exploits of Babe Ruth and Red Grange- and wondrously, he voted for Herbert Hoover because the Great Engineer praised "rugged individualism." (page 218)

Personally I find this description to be an acceptable, logical, and practical profile of the American individual of this era. This paragraph sums both essays, because Shannon does not denounce the existence or the influence of the flapper and the jazz age, but he does change the focus from the popularly labeled image to a more practical, yet hidden, image of the 1920's. The 1920's was a decade of rebellion and prosperity. It was a celebration of America's grand victory as an allied force during World War I and an exploitation of finances and demands of the part of the corporations and the American society. With a stable financial and economic foundation, Americans had the time to focus on building culture and media. A new

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personality was invented, the liberal American. Women were now individuals with rights and freedoms equal to men.

The evolution the new sexual woman had come about and in collaboration with the new black-influenced music, jazz, the flapper was created. The focus was no longer on the middle-aged group in society, but rather on the younger group that was setting new trends for their nation and the rest of the world. The "in" was booze, jazz, the Charleston, and the flapper while the passé was the prohibition law, classical music, the waltz, and the dominant man. The 1920's was truly a revolution of a new America and its ideals, that would be interrupted by the Great Depression and World War II, but would pick up in the 1960's where America would face more challenges but with a matured point of view.