

Cultural Clashes of the 1920's-Introduction

The speakeasy. The flapper. Al Capone. Boosterism. Prohibition. Cars and consumer culture. The roaring twenties. Through these popular images, the colorful decade of the 1920s still resonates among generations that never experienced it. Yet the popular stereotype of this crucial decade largely obscures its greater cultural and historical significance. From a cultural and historical perspective, the 1920s were marked by a deep clash of cultures.

During the previous half century, the United States had undergone probably the most dramatic metamorphosis of its short history. It had transformed itself from a fragmented, regional agrarian economy into one of the most powerful industrial and urban economies of the world. The prospect of economic opportunity drew millions of immigrants from abroad into its factories and cities. The farmer, who had occupied a favored place in American mythology since the time of Thomas Jefferson, rapidly gave way to the industrialist, the capitalist, and the entrepreneur. The town, the cultural center of preindustrial America, rapidly gave way to the city. The Victorian value system that prioritized restraint and had dominated mainstream American life in the nineteenth century gave way (over a half-century of struggle) to the more relaxed morals of the twentieth century. In an increasingly consumer-based society, leisure and pleasure were now prized over hard work and self-denial.

The economic, political, and social changes of the past half-century manifested themselves in a widespread clash of cultures. As twentieth century modernity increasingly challenged Victorian traditions, this provoked a defense of older values. The watershed years for this fundamental transition in American culture were the 1920s. Although the various sides in the cultural debate cannot easily be defined, historians have noted a general division between those who embraced the new changes and looked with hope to the future and those who idealized the past and resisted cultural change. At the same time, the values of the new industrial economy as well as the lingering traditions from Victorian America suffused all sides in this cultural debate and blurred the lines between the various parties.

"Old" Culture	"New" Culture
Emphasized Production	Emphasized Consumption
Character	Personality
Scarcity	Abundance
Religion	Science
Idealized the Past	Looked to the Future
Local Culture	Mass Culture
Substance	Image