

Gender Dynamics

A Historical Perspective



General “Expectations”

In general, men were supposed to be the ones making money, while the women were expected to be at home and care for their children. What “jobs” men and women had were based on past historical roles and sometimes correlated with religious ideology. What it means to be a man or a woman is constantly changing, so this is a perspective on what it meant during these moments in history.

Additional fun fact: during this time, pink was considered the color for boys since it was a derivative of the striking reds many men wore, while blue was considered the color for girls because of its “softer” quality and association with the virgin Mary. This didn’t switch until around the 1940s and 50s.

The 1920s

Post women's suffrage and WWI, the youth of this generation made it a point to live how they wanted, rather than based off tradition. During the war, women picked up jobs and agency due to all the men being stationed away. Because of this, it was easier for women to organize and pilot social change.

The overarching idea of the woman as the homemaker and the man as the breadwinner was still present, but the views were shifting drastically. In more rural settings, these ideas were a reflecting of the growing gap between urban and rural North Carolina.

The “Jazz Age”

This is the era of the flapper. Women who raised their skirts, cut their hair, and took sexual autonomy were a staple of the 1920s. Papa Murphy's dissent about the Jazz Age implies the shift in traditional versus modern values. The idea of men being “the superior sex” or women being “the fairer sex” was slowly becoming obsolete.

However, it's important to note that men were still dominating the workforce, politics, and more. The woman's association with the home and children were far from disappearing.



Movie star Colleen Moore, considered to be one of the

The 1940s

The 1940s also showed a shift in tradition. The impact of the Great Depression and WW2 bled into this era. The men faced severe psychological trauma from the war, while the women were left to pick up the pieces of what was left. Both men and women participated in the war and the workforce, many of them being mothers. Patriotism was both femininity and masculinity.



Rosie the Riveter, an icon of American patriotism during WWII

Post War Ideas

The shift from war to peace was a tumultuous one and challenged previously conceived notions of masculinity and femininity. Many expected women to go back to their roles in the home, but many other women continued to work. The idea of family was more important than ever, and men had to adjust from being soldiers to being good fathers and reliable workers. Furthermore, past soldiers had to “rely on women” to look after them physically and emotionally. Emotions were still considered “feminine” at this time, so this resulted in men’s mental health research. While the prospect of stoicism remained, the effects of such ideas contradicted what was happening in reality.

Moments In the Show

- At the beginning, the stage directions say Billy and Daddy Cane stand “Man to man”. Going out to fight in a war and the experience that came with it was a huge part of masculinity at the time
- When Alice wants ask Jimmy out, it goes against what was considered the standard, which is why she keeps dropping hints for him to ask. When she finally asks him, this would have been a very bold move for the time period
- When the spirits are replaced by the men in Alice’s life during “I can’t wait”, all of them place the blame on her for the pregnancy and what she’s “Doing to Jimmy Ray”
- In the bookstore, Max is constantly the one to keep asking out the other women.
- Margo takes subtle measures for Billy to see her as the woman she is rather than confessing her own feelings

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