Leading the Life of a Modern Girl: Representations of Womanhood in Cuban Popular Culture, 1919-1929

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ABSTRACT

Lizabeth M. Lotz: Leading the Life of a Modern Girl: Representations of Womanhood in Cuban Popular Culture, 1919-1929
(Under the direction of Louis A. Perez, Jr.)

This dissertation looks at the central role the figure of the Modern Girl had on understandings of gender norms in 1920s Cuba. The international Modern Girl served as an embodiment of the varied challenges to the gender hierarchy. Within a generation, women throughout the island were cutting their hair, wearing short skirts, attending unchaperoned outings, and openly flirting with the opposite sex. Through her modern appearance, behavior, and attitude, the Modern Girl prompted debates over what it meant to be a Cuban woman, and moreover how the new version of womanhood related to notions of national identity. Popular magazines emanating from the Havana promoted the Modern Girl as the new model of ideal femininity. However, the outpouring of support for the Modern Girl did not indicate that Cubans had unconditionally embraced the changes in cultural practices. Rather, multiple versions of the archetype emerged, all varying in degrees of acceptability.

Rather than voicing disapproval directly, most public censure surfaced through the more indirect means of mockery and sexualization. This reaction was most common among male commentators who tended to glamorize and praise the Modern Girl, but did so by typecasting her as frivolous, superficial, and materialistic. These methods of critique served to undermine women’s accomplishments and opportunities, making them
appear harmless and unimportant. But they also reflected social angst towards the sudden transformations affecting Cuban society. In contrast, most female journalists and readers took cultural changes much more seriously than men by noting how modern trends related to modern women’s increased autonomy and practical needs. The figure of the Modern Girl thus provided women with an opening to contest, defy, and continuously redefine established gender norms. The lifestyle of the Modern Girl served as a means for women to express their new-found sense of freedom, while also making them more acutely aware of gender inequalities and providing them with a sense of empowerment to challenge the gender hierarchy.
To Daniel and Nicolas,
And to All the Strong and Inspirational Cuban Women in my Family
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Chapter One: The Modern Girl in Cuban Popular Culture

Introduction

During the 1920s, many young Cuban women turned to popular magazines in search of a model of modern womanhood. Those browsing through Carteles encountered an article on the allure of women driving automobiles and another on how to become a movie star.1 Hoping to gauge the acceptability of cutting their hair in short bobs, female readers searched through Bohemia for the opinions of prominent writers commenting on the latest-international trend reaching the island.2 Unsure of beauty regimens, adoption of emergent trends, and comportment within interpersonal relationships, women often wrote to Bohemia’s advice columnists for guidance. Those perusing Social found images of modern women parodied in the daring drawings of caricaturist Conrado Massageur. They discovered depictions of female sexuality, such as the November 1926 cover of a young woman seductively lowering her bathing suit strap to uncover her tan line, as well as those of athletic women pursuing an active lifestyle. With the illustration, “Miss H.Y.C.,” Massageur informed readers that he was just one of the many Cubans who imagined the modern woman as an attractive, bobbed-hair woman, holding trophies won in competitions at the Havana Yacht Club.3

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1 Gonzalo G. de Mello, “Silueta” Carteles 4:12 (December 1922), 40; Carlos L. Gartner, “¿Como poder entrar en el cine?” Carteles 4:12 (December 1922), 22.

2 “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia (February 17, 1924- March 9, 1924).
Popular media exposed Cubans to a vast array of modern representations of womanhood in the form of fashion and beauty columns, editorials, advice columns, short stories, advertisements, and illustrations. Celebrated on the pages of magazines as a new type of woman, the figure resonated with a Cuban public familiar with the promise of modernity. During its formative years, the newly-independent republic developed between a national identity shaped by its Spanish-colonial past and a modern sense of nationhood tied to a relationship with the United States. The role of women was central to the discourse on modern nationhood. The accomplishments of feminist movements, both abroad and at home, combined with the educational, occupational, and cultural opportunities afforded to women drove much of these discussions.

The emergence of a new type of modern woman, a figure known as the flapper in the United States and the garçonne in France, further impacted the cultural and gender norms of countries across the globe. Contemporary observers as well as modern-day scholars termed this international image of a modern woman, “the Modern Girl.” In 1926, writer María Monvel explained in “La flapper y la garçonne,” how despite the lack of a standarized term in Latin America for women embodying modern characteristics, the persona of the Modern Girl became a member of its societies. There was no term in the

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3 Conrado Massgeur, Social 11:11 (November 1926), 1; Conrado Massgeur, “Miss H.Y.C.” Social 11:11 (November 1926), 12.

Spanish language for this type, Monvel explained, not because a Latin American version did not exist, but rather because “we have not given her a name.” Cubans referred to her simply as *la mujer moderna* and *la muchacha moderna*, as well as by her international monikers flapper and *garçonne*. She appeared in a variety of forms in the mainstream media, mainly coming to life in the personification of upper and middle-class women leading lives of leisure.

Young women coming of age in Cuba during the 1920s faced very different experiences, depending on their rural or urban setting, class status, and racial identity. This affected their possibilities for self-determination, understandings of social position, and everyday interactions and socialization. But more than ever before, women bonded with each other over their common identity as women living in a modern Cuba. The comforts and conveniences associated with the upper classes did not apply to everyone of course, but through the representations, information, and messages found in popular culture, women living in rural regions felt connected if only vicariously to the so-called realities of those in cosmopolitan centers. They looked towards nearby towns and cities for models to adopt, while women in provincial urban areas set their eyes on Havana. This idealization of an external standard of modernity continued as those in the capital turned their gaze outward towards the United States and Europe. As a result, aspiring to the lifestyle of the Modern Girl through the emulation of Hollywood films, European fashion trends, and U.S. products became an attainable goal.

Even though women of all ages, marital status, classes, and races incorporated some characteristics of the Modern Girl, most representations of the iconic figure

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5 María Monvel, “La flapper y la garconne” *Social* 11:11 (November 1926), 39, 74-75, 92.
presented her as an attractive, young, white, unmarried, urban, and middle-class woman. However, no single definition of the Modern Girl existed. Rather, fluid and contested versions of an archetype emerged, all varying in degrees of acceptability. Male and female writers expressed divergent views, with their stance often differing from one another as well from their own individual body of work. Women across the island also conveyed their distinct beliefs and behavior through individual letters, advice columns, and personal ads. Despite the multiple representations of modern womanhood, most of the opinions put forth favored the incorporation of the Modern Girl into the Cuban reality.

Some women took on many of the traits of the Modern Girl, while others assumed only some characteristics. Invariably, women who experienced emergent liberties through modern fashion trends, changing dating practices, and wider social freedom related to at least some aspects of the Modern Girl lifestyle. Despite the numerous depictions, certain types of appearances, behaviors, and attitudes identified women as a Modern Girl. These included the widely-accepted and practiced trends of wearing bobbed hair and short skirts, attending unchaperoned outings, and openly flirting with the opposite sex.

Cuban women thus created and adopted their own versions of the Modern Girl, incorporating different personas depending on their individual circumstances, objectives, and social standing. Conflicting advice on becoming a Modern Girl reflected broad societal views on appropriate gender norms, while also revealing the friction that existed between traditional and modern notions of Cuban womanhood. However, the juxtaposition of the modern and the traditional was not clearly divided into two opposing
camps. The cultural intellectuals of Havana wholeheartedly embraced modern values, which resulted in a near total absence of traditional representations within the mainstream media. By identifying themselves as citizens of a modern and cosmopolitan nation, Cubans logically had to accept the vast cultural changes affecting women’s lives. However, the outpouring of support for the Modern Girl did not indicate that Cubans had unconditionally embraced the shift in cultural and gender norms. Rather, censure of the modern values associated with the Modern Girl materialized in the shape of mockery and overt sexualization. Belittling, exaggerated, and dismissive remarks functioned as a form of subtle rejection, while sexualized representations devalued and objectified women. These methods served to undermine women’s accomplishments and opportunities, making them appear harmless and unimportant. But they also reflected social angst towards the sudden transformation of idealized Cuban womanhood, and facilitated critique that certain types of modern women had transgressed too far over the bounds of appropriate behavior.

This dispute over acceptable gender norms was pertinent to the majority of young women living within Cuba. Aspirations to the lifestyle of the Modern Girl were real, and not an invention of the media. Iconic representations of modern womanhood resonated with young women throughout the island, despite the fact that their actual circumstances differed greatly according to social and racial factors. This was in part a result of the mainstream media’s glorification of the privileged life of cosmopolitan, middle-class women. Held up as the standard of beauty, modernity, and style, Cuban women of even modest means attempted to emulate the Modern Girl in their actions, beliefs, and manner of dress. As a result, young women often turned to popular magazines for guidance on
taking on a modern identity. The numerous variations of womanhood illustrated within the pages of Cuban publications afforded young women tremendous flexibility and creativity. They facilitated women’s construction of a self-identity that corresponded with their social communities’ understandings of gender norms, their own moral universe, and their material conditions. Young Cuban women were thus able to accept certain aspects of the Modern Girl, which they combined with the numerous other messages they received on appropriate behavior. These developments during the 1920s allowed for women to gain a certain degree of autonomy, which they expressed through the lifestyle of the Modern Girl. However, becoming a wife and mother remained the ultimate goal according to national gendered expectations. The gap between the freedoms gained in women’s formative years and the reality of marriage and motherhood was connected to the expressions of disillusionment, as well as the popular fascination with suicide, adultery, and divorce as forms of escape.

**Background**

Young women reaching adolescence in the late 1910s and early 1920s encountered a society vastly different from that of their mothers. These women belonged to the baby boom generation, the byproduct of the hope and revival that accompanied the postwar years. The increased prevalence of educated Cuban women in the wage-labor force and social arena presented young women with new models of womanhood. Just as significant as breakthroughs in the areas of education and work was the newfound freedom young

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6 Between 1899 and 1907, the population under five more than doubled, soaring from 8 percent to 20 percent. United States War Department, *Informe sobre el censo de Cuba, 1899* (Washington, D.C., 1900), 258; Cuba, *Censo de la república de Cuba bajo la administración provisional de los Estados Unidos 1907* (Washington: Oficina del censo de los Estados Unidos, 1908), 546.
women encountered in the social sphere. Affecting regions of the island in varying
degrees, greater accessibility and mobility became possible through elements of
technology, including the telephone, automobile, and electrical appliances. Nevertheless,
the emphasis on modernity espoused by Cuban intellectual and political leaders engaged
men and women throughout the island in a debate over notions of modernity and
*Cubanidad*. Central to this debate were the changes in women’s position in society and
its consequences on gender norms. The entrance of women into previously all-male
realms offered women more options, while also heightening societal anxiety over the
shifting gender roles of daughters, mothers, and wives.

Popular culture, principally in the form of the mass media, cinema, music,
literature, and advertisements, provided a platform for the debate over acceptable gender
norms. The introduction and rapid development of the radio, cinema, and music industry
transformed notions of entertainment and socializing. These public forums also provided
Cubans with new and diverse gendered representations through movie scripts, visual
images, and musical lyrics. An increase in literacy exposed a large percentage of the
population to the representations found within novels, short stories, newspapers, and
magazines. The first decades of the century produced a boom in publishing with not
only hundreds of widely-circulated books, but dozens of newly-established magazines
and newspapers, among them some of the nation’s most well-known publications.

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7 Literacy rose significantly between 1899 and 1919. Among individuals ten years and older it increased
from 44 percent to 62 percent, among women ten years and older it increased from 42 percent to 61
percent, and among women of color it increased from 30 percent to 54 percent. United States War
Department, *Informe sobre el censo de Cuba, 1899* (Washington, D.C., 1900), 262; Cuba, *Censo de la
Bohemia, Carteles, and Social, general-interest magazines targeted at the white elite and upwardly-mobile middle class, offered Cubans throughout the island a glimpse of the cosmopolitan lifestyle of large urban centers, at home and abroad. Bohemia, undoubtedly the most popular and mainstream, boasted within its advertisements that it had the largest circulation in Cuba. Carteles and Social carried pieces of interest to a wide audience, but more so than Bohemia, they played up their connection to international socialites. Modeled after Vanity Fair and Vogue, Social also served as the vehicle of the Grupo Minorista, an intellectual and political organization. In contrast, the satirical publications of La Política Cómica, Muecas, and Crítica, which viewed their audience as that of the working and middle-class, urban man, ridiculed varied aspects within Cuban life. Their use of mockery offered valuable insight in that their blunt and brutal commentaries uncovered hidden social sentiments and fears. These publications not only stood the test of time,⁸ but during the 1920s they included among their editors and writers many of the most prominent Cuban intellectuals of the twentieth century. Using these magazines as a platform to express opinions on national issues, these men and women became leading figures during the establishment of the new republic.

As the first generation entering adulthood after the war of independence, young men and women of the 1920s were invested in the creation of a modern republic. The social, cultural, economic, and technological changes that took place during the first twenty years of the republic resulted in the advancement and prosperity of a large number of Cubans within urban sectors. The expansion of the educational system and economic growth offered a growing number of men and women professional opportunities in

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⁸ Among the longest-running publications, Bohemia (1910-present), Carteles (1919-1960), Social (1916-1938), and La Política Cómica (1916-1931).
commerce, education, medicine, law, journalism, and politics. Young Cubans embraced the new prospects found in urban centers, especially within Havana, but they expressed their discontent with the political system by calling for reform. In the early 1920s, Cuban intellectuals, including among them leading feminists, came together in a national social reform movement that called for social and economic programs, the curtailing of U.S. influence, and the elimination of government corruption. Their hopes were high during the 1920s, but they quickly became extinguished with the depression of 1929, the political repression of Geraldo Machado, and the political uncertainty of the 1930s.

The transformative period of the 1920s facilitated the prominence of women in public life within the political arena, workplace, and classroom. A number of feminist organizations formed during this time period, resulting in the creation of an influential feminist movement within Cuba. Feminists expressed the diverse views of the movement in popular magazines such as Bohemia, Social, and Carteles as well as in the feminist publications, La Mujer and La Mujer Moderna. Women representing thirty-one organizations throughout Cuba came together in 1923 and 1925 at the National Women’s Congresses to call for a variety of rights and reforms. These upper and middle-class activists had designated themselves as the representatives of all Cuban women. Some of their reform efforts, such as suffrage and education, would benefit Cuban women from all echelons of society, while reform pertaining to work conditions, the prison system, and prostitution would affect the lives of lower-class women. The rhetoric women used in the congress speeches echoed that of other reformers within the national reform movement, in that they evoked the need for “moralization” and “regeneration.” It was within these congress speeches that feminists called upon the frequently venerated
concepts of motherhood and morality as a justification for women’s greater participation in the national realm. By arguing that as mothers women were better suited for certain reform tasks and occupations, feminists prompted the entrance of middle-class women into professional sectors.

After independence, female education received increased attention and funding. Many of these educated women entered occupations previously designated for men. Politicians, intellectuals, policy makers, and feminists alike argued that innate female characteristics made women better suited to certain professions, including teaching, nursing, and social work. Similar correlations between motherhood and women’s work dominated discussions in the United States, as well as those within other Latin American countries. A new public space was opening up for women, but as they simultaneously gained ground, they became confined to specific areas. Designating only certain jobs as

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9 Speeches on motherhood and morality from the First National Women’s Congress, Stoner Collection, Reel 2, Document 40, April 1923; Speeches on motherhood and morality from the Second National Women’s Congress, Stoner Collection, Reel 3, Document 43, April 1925.

10 In 1899, only 1,400 women over the age of fifteen had obtained a formal education, while by 1919 it had reached to almost 14,000. Moreover, an increased number of women were attaining degrees in higher education. For example, in 1929, there were 1,300 female students at the University of Havana out of a total of 5,600 total students. United States War Department, Informe sobre el censo de Cuba, 1899 (Washington, D.C., 1900), 385; Cuba, Censo de la república de Cuba: año de 1919 (Havana: Maza, Arroyo, y Caso, 1920), 606; K. Lynn Stoner, From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Woman’s Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 134.

acceptable for women became a means to not only limit women’s public position, but to continue defining female roles within a traditional framework. As a result, identifying particular occupations as “appropriate” proved to be restrictive as well as liberating. The labeling limited women’s overall advancement within the public sphere, but it allowed numerous women to enter the workforce and political sphere under the guise of performing a socially-accepted task.

Teaching became the principal “appropriate” occupation, since working with children was seen as motherly, nurturing, and feminine. Throughout Latin America, the recruitment of women into the teaching profession initially had been a direct result of labor shortages and the need for cheap labor.\textsuperscript{12} However, linking education with motherly roles facilitated its rapid transformation into an occupation designated for women. Over time, the entrance of women in the field of education became acceptable and even expected, since it was argued that their so-called motherly instincts made them better suited for the profession. Arguing that school was an extension of the home strengthened their standing within the teaching profession by extending their jurisdiction to school boards and supervisory positions.\textsuperscript{13} With the entrance of women into the teaching profession, many more women obtained education past primary school, with normal schools the first institutions to graduate large groups of women. By the 1920s,


\textsuperscript{13} Speeches on the teaching profession from the First National Women’s Congress, Stoner Collection, Reel 2, Document 40, April 1923; Speeches on the teaching profession from the Second National Women’s Congress, Stoner Collection, Reel 3, Document 43, April 1925.
women dominated the teaching profession, and moreover they worked as nurses, office workers, store clerks, journalists, and performers.\textsuperscript{14}

The advancement of women within education and the workplace also provided women of color with more options. From 1907 to 1919, their presence within the professions almost doubled, rising from 8 percent to 15 percent out of the total number of women.\textsuperscript{15} Beginning in the late nineteenth century, middle-class blacks had created their own social networks through Afro-Cuban societies, publications, and intellectual circles. However, Cuban society was very much divided along racial lines, with Afro-Cuban voices, issues, and individuals of all classes rarely appearing within mainstream publications. In the few instances that the media depicted blacks, they represented them in satirical and simplified caricatures working in menial jobs, playing music in a band, and dancing the \textit{rumba}. Most often, the Afro-Cuban woman entered the imagination of Cubans as either the sexualized \textit{mulata} or the asexual domestic worker. Consequently, representations of Cuban women were almost always white, especially those of the Modern Girl. Glimpses of Afro-Cuban women’s experiences seeped through in the form of memoirs, personal ads, and advice columns, but very little of their story was related within the mainstream media.

The new roles and positions for women within the public sphere were invariably connected to the lifestyle and cultural space of Havana. Offering the best, and often only, available opportunities and resources in terms of education, work, consumer goods, and


\textsuperscript{15} This figure included an increase from 7 percent of all teachers to 14 percent. Cuba, \textit{Censo de la república de Cuba bajo la administración provisional de los Estados Unidos 1907} (Washington: Oficina del censo de los Estados Unidos, 1908), 514; Cuba, \textit{Censo de la república de Cuba: año de 1919} (Havana: Maza, Arroyo, y Caso, 1920), 629.
services, Cubans outside Havana turned to the capital in their search for solutions to daily problems. Advice columnists recommended products, doctors, schools, and salons found only in Havana, often encouraging women to move to the city or at the very least visit on a regular basis. Popular media published in the capital did more than just portray the advantages of city life. Representations of the Modern Girl emphasized that modernity, style, and culture for women was that which emanated from cosmopolitan centers. Fostering a sense of common identity, magazines offered Cubans access to modernity through fashion styles from abroad, coverage of prominent families, and reviews of cultural events. As a result, popular magazines not only defined the terms of modernity and culture, they invited Cubans throughout the island to participate in a shared national sense of accomplishment- only if thorough contemplating photographs, copying a fashion style, or writing in for advice.

Historiography and Theory

The cultural influence of the United States and Europe on Cuba has made studies on American and European women in the early twentieth century especially useful to my project. Those that connect women’s history to international patterns of consumption, notions of modernity, and the influence of the mass media provide essential context and analysis.16 Scholarly publications on the Modern Girl elsewhere in the world serve to

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ground my dissertation within the broader context and significance of the international figure. Works that look at Latin American feminist movements, Cuban women, and Cuba during the early twentieth century set up my framework for Cuban women’s political, educational, and professional advancements, while a few studies of women in Cuban literature offer valuable insight on how literary scholars explore issues of gender identities. My dissertation draws on these works as a means of comprehending the relationship between the political and social changes taking place in 1920s Cuba and the

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21 Catherine Davies, A Place in the Sun?: Women Writers in Twentieth-century Cuba (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); Vera Kutzinski, Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Nina Menéndez, “No Woman is an Island: Cuban Women’s Fiction in the 1920s and 30s” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1993).
representations of the Modern Girl. An assessment of the historiography accentuates the importance of my project. Arguably, a complete picture of Cuban women’s history during the early twentieth century is impossible without including a discussion of how negotiations of gender norms transpired, not only within the political and social sphere, but within the realm of cultural practices. By examining the discourse on women’s place in a modern society, greater insight is attained into the benefits and difficulties women encountered as they redefined gendered expectations. Moreover, we expand our understanding of how male-dominated societies react to challenges to heterosexual power relations.

As a cultural history of gendered representations, my dissertation searches for meaning shared by contemporaries, rather than assuming the universality of Cuban womanhood. An understanding of gender norms as social roles and rules that are constantly renegotiated recognizes that certain historical time periods lend themselves to paradigm shifts in which individuals have an opportunity to contest dominant frameworks. The period referred to in this dissertation is that of the late 1910s through the 1920s, an era framed by the end of WWI and the Great Depression. This was a time of tremendous change internationally as well as within Cuba. The early years of the republic brought about optimism, educational and professional advancements, and defiance of the political status quo. Women benefited from this time of extreme flux, by joining their male compatriots in the classroom, workplace, and reform movement, while

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22 Most historical works that include a discussion of Cuban women focus on political and social issues. For two studies that analyze how U.S. imports influenced cultural and gender norms, see: Joshua Henry Nadel, “Processing Modernity: Social and Cultural Adaptation in Eastern Cuba, 1902-1933” (Ph.D. diss., The University of North Carolina, 2007); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
also seizing the chance to fight for their own rights. These tangible advancements brought about a vast array of transformations in women’s roles, attitudes, dress, and perceptions. This was not a concrete and permanent shift towards modernity nor was it viewed in terms of a crisis in which Cubans were forced to take sides, declaring themselves proponents of either modern or traditional gender values. Rather, it was a process of experimentation, questioning, and negotiation in which emergent possibilities and identities were explored in varying degrees, creating a fluid view of gender norms which further complicated notions of womanhood.23

Works that combine feminist theory with that of popular culture are especially useful in allowing me to frame my analysis as a means of understanding evolving gender norms and representations.24 At the core of the feminist movements, and feminist cultural studies as well, is the notion of ‘the personal as political.’25 As a result, courtship practices, fashion styles, and beauty tips become vital sources for analyzing the relationship between societal portrayals of women and their own gendered identities. But along with the value of using popular culture comes the challenges: questions of representations versus reality, reception, and composition of audience. Media theorists have debated the first point, questioning whether media outlets mirrored society. The prevailing consensus suggests that popular culture does not dictate or reflect societal behavior, but rather provides historically specific contested and contradictory notions of

23 Jocelyn Olcott makes a similar argument in regards to Mexican women in politics during the same time period. Olcott, Revolutionary Women in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1-26.


25 Hollows, Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture, 4.
womanhood. In regards to media effect, scholars have offered a multitude of theories. Most agree that the media may have a particular message in mind, but that the diverse background and active perception of the audience leads to multiple and complex meanings. This brings us to the last point of ascertaining the race, class, and gender make-up of the readership. Modern-day media outlets have the technology and marketing knowledge to produce intricate audience analysis. Circulation numbers and original letters to the editor could have provided similar data on Cuban magazines from the 1920s, data that has unfortunately been lost and become unavailable to present-day scholars.26

Nevertheless, vital information on the readership of the Cuban magazines used most prominently in this dissertation can be assessed through a close examination of the publications.27 The intended audience was mostly that of the growing middle-class, with the misleading assumption that this group was white, educated, and urban. The parties, sports events, and pictures of Cuban elites were often the focal point of the magazines, much in the same manner as the lifestyle of Hollywood stars and theater performers. Marketing techniques and appeals to audiences’ sense of upward mobility emphasized the social life of elite Cubans, giving the illusion that social status was not only desirable, but attainable. Through advice on beauty, fashion, and dating, magazines offered readers a way to embody the characteristics of modern, cosmopolitan women. Editorials on fashion styles emanating from Europe told readers from the provinces that they too could


27 I mainly refer to Bohemia, Carteles, Social, La Política Cómica, and Más Allá, although I use and cite numerous other lesser-known publications.
be chic, while foreign advertising, mainly from the United States, informed them it was possible only if they bought certain essential beauty products.

Advice columns, contests, and editorials also serve to gauge female readers’ geographical location, class status, social behavior, and at times racial make-up. As a result, the popularity and accessibility of the publications can be assessed by their longevity, as well as by the content of their articles, editorials, serial columns, and advertisings. Furthermore, careful examination reveals a great deal about the complex relationship between the mass media and the reader, one in which both journalists and readers expressed contested and contradictory views. Tracing the published works of specific authors further complicates understandings of the representations and messages presented to readers. Views varied from writer to writer, as well as within individual sources, with male and female writers often distinguishing themselves from one another. Advice columns in particular, illustrated how reactions to societal norms differed, while also revealing the beliefs and concerns of female readers in a more intimate and direct manner. Despite limitations, an examination of the currents of popular culture sheds light on how Cuban women negotiated, contested, and continuously redefined gender norms.

International representations of the Modern Girl as a fashionable, socially-active resident of New York, Hollywood, London, and Paris resonated with middle-class Cuban women who hoped to emulate them. Varying in tone and intention, from allusions of frivolity and freedom to those of sexual promiscuity, the universal cultural understanding was that the Modern Girl, unlike her traditional counterpart, was socially liberated. By encompassing both foreign and national characteristics, representations of the Cuban Modern Girl produced multiple and conflicting messages on gender norms. The fluid and
complex notions of ideal Cuban womanhood in a post-colonial context became even more complicated when juxtaposed with the equally multifaceted representations of the international Modern Girl.

This dissertation argues that in the context of the political, social, and cultural ambiguity of 1920s Cuba, these foreign influences provided young women with a chance to question and redefine notions of Cuban womanhood. Within this cultural space, they employed the multiple representations of the Modern Girl to construct their own flexible definition of womanhood, one that conformed to both self-representations and societal norms. I argue that the majority of Cubans embraced the expression of female autonomy as a symbol congruent with a modern national identity. Critics did not reject modern womanhood per say. Rather, they condemned particular versions of the Modern Girl. In fact, their frequent use of mockery to chastise and belittle the Modern Girl lifestyle functioned as a means of voicing social fears, while dismissing women’s accomplishments and opportunities as trivial and inconsequential. The climate of the 1920s facilitated an opening for women, but this finite moment not only in historical terms but in the life of Cuban women offered many empty promises. With the commencement of marriage and motherhood, many women lost their recently-gained liberties.

The dissertation is divided into six chapters, with the following chapter, “The Glamorous Life of the Modern Girl,” juxtaposing the Cuban feminist movement with the rise of the Modern Girl. I compare representations of the two as a means of evaluating Cuban reactions to the incorporation of modern values within everyday understandings of gender relations and ideal womanhood. In particular, I am interested in the discrepancy
between the rhetoric of the feminist movement and the glamorized lifestyle of the Modern Girl. Chapter Three, “Fashion as Expression,” examines the role of modern fashion styles on Cuban women, including the impact of the bob haircut. I argue that increased emphasis on emergent trends played a dual role in society. On the one hand, it offered women a means to express their new-found identity and on the other, it made them the targets of derision. I look at the distinct differences of opinion between female and male writers. I contend that women’s comments, whether favorable or critical, illustrated that for them physical appearance was a relevant topic with serious consequences. In contrast, men often used overtly-sexualized language to discuss women, objectifying them and dismissing them as frivolous and insignificant members of society.

Chapter Four, “New Dating Practices and the Modern Girl,” looks at how mixed messages within popular culture influenced young women’s self-representations and interactions with the opposite sex. In particular, I examine the manner in which modern dating practices affected women’s gender roles within courtship and relationships. I argue that modern customs offered women new possibilities as well as challenges in that they had to maintain a careful balance between the different personas, making sure not to transgress notions of acceptable femininity. Chapter Five, “Behaving Badly,” explores the manner in which Cubans identified certain versions of the Modern Girl as outside the bounds of appropriate behavior. However, not all unacceptable archetypes became the object of disdain, rather some received support, emulation, and pity as well. The “Conclusion” examines how cultural changes and media portrayal of multiple options led to conflicting emotions for women, including a sense of empowerment and uncertainty
over their possible future roles as wives, mothers, career women, and old maids. It also considers the interplay between the prevalence of jealousy, adultery, and divorce within mainstream society and the discussion of shifting gender norms. Moreover, it addresses how representations of womanhood offered valuable insight into Cuban women’s construction of a modern identity.
Chapter Two: The Glamorous Life of the Modern Girl

Introduction

During the 1920s, parks, shopping districts, movie theaters, and country clubs teemed with activity as groups of young adults gathered with friends. It was within these social spaces that young women, often in short skirts and bob haircuts, openly socialized and flirted with their romantic interests. These public scenes differed greatly from those of a previous generation, when women and men interacted within the framework of strict courtship conventions that required that concerned adults be within close proximity. Parents confused by the rapid transformations in customs, as well as by the behavior and appearance of their daughters, perhaps found consolation in the fact that they were not alone. “There is a huge gap between the modern woman of today, ‘la flapper,’ and that of the previous generation,” writer Carlos Deambrosis Martins commented in 1925. “Mothers and daughters of today are separated by an abyss of incomprehension. In the context of this eccentric century it is easy to understand the speed at which the woman of today has separated herself from the woman of yesterday.”

Constant reminders everywhere forced many mothers to acknowledge that the lifestyle of their daughters varied significantly from that of their own decades earlier. The emergence of a new type of woman became apparent to Cubans as they walked

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1 The editorial was based on an upcoming book. I have not been able to verify whether this book was ever published. Carlos Deambrosis Martins, “Pinceladas” Bohemia 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 18.
down the streets, socialized in public spaces, and perused their favorite magazines.

Representations of the Modern Girl, to be sure, excluded a large portion of the population for she was depicted as white, young, attractive, unmarried, middle-class, and urban. However, women of all backgrounds identified with aspects of the iconic Modern Girl. Hoping to gain access to that world, they turned to popular magazines for tips on beauty, fashion, social deportment, and relationships.

Not all archetypes of the Modern Girl were the same. Certain themes, fashion styles, modes of behavior, and descriptive adjectives helped young women ascertain which version of the Modern Girl had been portrayed and whether or not she had been deemed acceptable. The variations of the Modern Girl depended in part on her clothing, pastimes, body language, assertiveness, and sexual behavior. Women learned from the multiple representations of modern womanhood that comportment varied depending on different occasions, purposes, and audiences. As a result, the degree to which one exhibited modern characteristics and the ability to maintain a balance between the different personae was a critical component of becoming a Modern Girl.

Cuban women acquired specific guidelines and lessons within the diverse, and often contradictory, messages and representations depicted within popular culture. More specifically, they discovered how to become a Modern Girl. Modes and models materialized in a variety of forms, helping readers visualize how the Modern Girl dressed, behaved, and socialized. Fashion sections illustrating the latest styles served to place women in modern outfits, while suggesting the appropriate attire for specific outings. This allowed for women to picture themselves in the country club, on the beach, or on the tennis courts wearing fashionable clothing, while participating in exciting
activities. Advice columns encouraged female readers to lead active, well-rounded lives that included exercise, a balanced diet, socializing, and reading. Women also found a clear depiction of the Modern Girl within novels and short stories. Particular adjectives, settings, and physical attributes indicated to them that the female character and plotline were modern. Editorials and satirical pieces also used specific themes such as fashion, the bob, or smoking to talk about the Modern Girl. All these sources together constructed an image of what the Modern Girl looked like and how she behaved.

Young women did not receive a consistent, static guideline on how to embody the Modern Girl. Rather, attitudes varied across the spectrum of public opinion. The wide-range of viewpoints often fell into two categories: those who considered the changes in cultural and gender norms a matter of importance with relevance to broader issues, and those who dismissed them as trivial and insignificant. Proponents and critics alike fell into these two categories, but the sex of the commentators often affected their reactions and strategies. Often times, women both in favor and against the Modern Girl understood the crucial affects the archetype had on an extensive number of gender issues, including those related to the Cuban feminist movement. In contrast, their male counterparts tended to devalue the impact of both feminism and the Modern Girl. They used mockery and a silencing of female gains as techniques to minimize challenges to the patriarchal society.

The feminist movement and the persona of the Modern Girl emerged during the same transformative years. Driven equally by notions of progress and modernity, they rarely intersected in terms of representations, objectives, and identities. This division and disparity between the two generations in many ways allowed for the dismissal of both by
the male-dominated media. The use of traditional discourse to obtain political and legal rights identified feminists as harmless, and in many respects facilitated their incorporation into the existing social order. In contrast, expressions of independence, in the form of a bob haircut, flirtatious smile, and revealing skirt, turned the Modern Girl into an object that was simultaneously exalted, trivialized, and scorned. Rather, than focusing attention on the changing realities of educated, working women in the public sphere, the mainstream media inundated Cubans with representations of the life of leisure of the Modern Girl.

The varied reactions of approval and criticism from peers, family members, and communities contributed to the need for young women to create their own versions of the Modern Girl. Regardless of the degree to which they assumed the identity of the Modern Girl, emergent cultural practices provided them with a means to express themselves as modern women within Cuba. Attempts to dismiss the Modern Girl as frivolous and irrelevant did little to disguise the significance of countless young women adopting the traits of the archetype. The prevailing conduct, appearance, and outlook of young women personified in the Modern Girl directly related to broader changes in society. However, links between the goals of the feminist movement and the way of life of the Modern Girl often times were overlooked, minimized, and ignored, positioning the two versions of modern womanhood against one another.

**Discourse on Cuban Womanhood**

A lack of consensus within Cuban society did not imply that the country was polarized with proponents of traditional values on one side and advocates of modern ones
on the other. Rather, the emphasis on modernity by Havana’s intellectual leaders prevailed, with traditional representations and rhetoric rarely appearing in the mainstream media. Cultural production emanating from the capital dictated much of the construction of a post-colonial national identity, including notions related to Cuban womanhood. This is not to say that there were no proponents of conservative values. Differences among members of urban and rural communities, as well as of those of varying classes, led to the adherence and acceptance of a vast array of gendered identities. These versions of ideal Cuban womanhood consisted almost exclusively of women as cosmopolitan, middle-class, and modern.

The situation in Cuba differed to that found elsewhere in Latin America where a more disparate division between traditional and modern values developed. In her book on comic books and the *chica moderna* in post-revolutionary Mexico, Anne Rubenstein describes how conservative and modern rhetoric developed alongside each other, rather than supplanting one another. This resulted in conservative discourse that referenced “family, the imagined past, and the pressing need for social stability” as a means of countering the modern discourse that conservative Mexicans found threatening.\(^2\) In *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, Jocelyn Olcott discusses the difficulties women faced in integrating modern and traditional notions of womanhood. She argues that “women simultaneously situated themselves as agents of progressive change and embodiments of cultural traditions.”\(^3\) Sueann Caulfield describes a similar situation in Brazil in her book on court cases dealing with “virginity, consensual unions, 


and crimes of passion.” She argues that Brazilian jurists went in “radical and conflicting directions” during the 1920s with some viewing the protection of women’s honor as no longer feasible, others celebrating the modernization of outdated norms, and still others insisting that “new threats to older moral values made the defense of women’s honor all the more urgent.”

There are a variety of reasons why, unlike other Latin American nations, Cuba did not conform clearly to the bounds of either traditional or modern paradigms. The desire within the intellectual community of Havana to appear modern to those within the island, as well as those outside of it, led them to move away from much of their colonial heritage. Consequently, there was within the mainstream media very little romanticizing of the traditional values associated with rural Cuba. Rarely was the representation of the innocent *campesina* juxtaposed with that of the urban Modern Girl. Instead, multiple versions of the archetypical Modern Girl emerged, with each of them assigned different degrees of acceptability and varying levels of credibility for representing ideal Cuban womanhood. This distinction between Cuba and other Latin American nations can be explained in part by a Cuban urge to disassociate itself from its much more recent colonial past. Moreover, the island’s bond with Spain had been replaced with a close relationship with the United States. Cubans rarely questioned the value and need of incorporating modern values. Rather, the debate centered on the acceptability of certain modern characteristics as well as on the interconnectedness of modernity and national identity.

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Intellectuals and journalists from Havana spent much of the 1920s defining the parameters of Cuban identity. These influential Cubans agreed that it included the central component of modernity, but debated how it affected notions of *Cubanidad*. Strong ties to the United States beginning in the early nineteenth century had long complicated their understanding of nationhood. By the 1920s, this had led to a definition of national identity that not only combined the values and cultural practices acquired under Spanish colonialism and U.S. imperialism, but found ways to make them uniquely Cuban. Louis A. Pérez, Jr. describes this process in *On Becoming Cuban*, arguing that “North American influence became a factor in Cuban identity at the time of national formation.” As a result, “U.S. forms penetrated so deeply through habitual usage and became so much a part of everyday life as to be indistinguishable from what passed as commonplace, but most of all for what passed as Cuban.”⁵ This constant struggle to define the nation as modern and Cuban led to a process of selectively incorporating foreign cultural values, while being careful to not jeopardize *Cubanidad*. The integration of U.S. practices and principles resulted in either subtle resistance or the conception of them as modern and universal imports. In his study of U.S. company towns, Joshua Nadel looks at how Cubans negotiated national identity. “Cubans in the east of the country prided themselves on their lifestyle, which they perceived as modern and equivalent of that in developed countries. At the same time, since modernity came in large part from contact with the United States, they struggled to define what was Cuban and what was foreign.”⁶

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The international emphasis on modernity during this time period of technological advances directly impacted Cuba. The economic and political involvement of the United States in Cuba had transformed the island’s infrastructure, economy, and education system. This had resulted in increased opportunities for numerous Cubans aspiring to a higher standard of living, including a large number of women who had entered the wage-labor force. Yet, for the most part, representations of working women were not found in popular magazines. The reality of women in middle-class professions or working-class occupations did not fit with Cuba’s idealization of the Modern Girl as a woman of leisure. This greatly contrasted with glamorized U.S. representations of young American women working in offices and department stores. This seemed to be a case in which Cubans interpreted modernity on their own terms. Working women were rarely depicted, and when they were, it was within certain glamorized professions. Actresses, musicians, and writers were celebrated for their talent, but their ability or need to make a living was not mentioned.

The absence of working women within the popular media departed from representations of ideal womanhood found elsewhere in Latin America. Rubenstein describes how two discourses played out in post-revolutionary Mexico with journalists debating whether “the ideal mexicana” was the “good citizen and good worker” or the “good mother and self-sacrificing wife.” Neither of these archetypes dominated public discussions in 1920s Cuba. The absence of both the male and female “good worker” in Cuban popular culture can be attributed in part to the glorification of modernity by

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7 Rubenstein, Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation, 85.
Havana’s intellectual elite, as well as to their exclusion of the rural and/or black population from notions of ideal Cuban citizens.

The trope of the “good mother” was integral to Cuban national identity, much in the same way it was throughout Latin America. The archetype of the self-sacrificing mother offering her male children as soldiers to the patria during the wars of Cuban independence remained a vivid memory. But once again, a disjuncture occurred between traditional understandings of womanhood and emergent representations of the Modern Girl. An absence of illustrations and rhetoric on motherhood within popular culture reflected the changing times. Mainstream media in particular challenged longstanding notions of femininity with an emphasis on the lifestyle of young, affluent, cosmopolitan women. Sexualized images of flirtatious women in revealing clothes assumed prominence in the Cuban imagination, often supplanting those of the “good mother.” Most portrayals within popular culture were of single women looking for love, while those pertaining to married women often revolved around marital disillusionment and adultery. And while women were still expected to become mothers after marriage, it was a topic of little interest to journalists, and presumably, readers. It did not fit with the magazines’ glamorized portrait of a modern and urban Cuba.

In contrast, the idealization of motherhood was common practice within the Latin American and Cuban feminist movements. Activists promoted motherhood as a means of educating working class women to become scientific mothers knowledgeable in nutrition and hygiene as well as for the purpose of carving out a space for middle class women in the so-called motherly professions of teaching, nursing, and social work. The trope of motherhood also became a means for feminists to call for increased access to
power under the guise of a traditional role. In her book on Latin American feminist movements, Asunción Lavrin describes how feminists in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, who “had been raised in cultures with a long tradition of reverence for motherhood,” set out to modernize their position “to suit a new political scenario without changing some aspects of its traditional core.”

In *From the House to the Streets*, Lynn K. Stoner suggests that “nearly all Cuban feminists insisted upon a reverence for motherhood and a desire to complement men’s lives.”

A desire to shed their colonial identity and enter the world of modern nations greatly influenced Cubans’ embrace of the Modern Girl. This led to a dismissal of traditional archetypes of womanhood, but not to a consensus on modern womanhood. The need for the mainstream media to embrace modern trends, while maintaining the patriarchal order led to the creation of different versions of the Modern Girl. Rather than stressing female achievements as the move from a life limited to the traditional roles of mother and wife to that of increased opportunities in the classroom and workplace, the mainstream media correlated autonomy and modernity with the leisurely lifestyle of the Modern Girl. In part, this silencing of the realities of women contributed to the disjuncture between the feminist movement and the Modern Girl.

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The Feminist and the Modern Girl

The prominent vision of Cuba as a modern and cosmopolitan nation resulted in an embrace of both the feminist movement and the Modern Girl, at least on the surface. A desire to appear progressive shaped the discussion, but it did not displace the equally prevalent notion of maintaining the status quo in respects to heterosexual relations and gender norms. The need to both accept and control the emergence of modern cultural trends led to the diverse, contradictory, and often subtle reactions of Cubans. Proponents and critics of modern womanhood were not easily distinguishable from one another. Feminists fighting for women’s rights often used traditional rhetoric that was disconnected from the lifestyle and behavior of the Modern Girl. Similarly, representations within popular magazines seemed incongruent with the legal, educational, economic, and political gains obtained in part by the feminist movement. The mainstream media often employed mockery and silencing to minimize the significance of shifting norms. Satire belittled women, while a lack of exposure in the press redirected attention away from female accomplishments and opportunities in higher education and the wage-labor force.

Many Cuban feminists stressed the value of motherhood and morality at the National Women’s Congresses in 1923 and 1925 in speeches on a range of topics, including suffrage, labor conditions, the prison system, education, and prostitution. The use of rhetoric on motherhood and morality was an integral part of feminists’ belief system as well as an astute maneuver to gain greater access to positions of power. By

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10 Speeches from the First National Women’s Congress, Stoner Collection, Reel 2, Document 40, April 1923; Speeches from the Second National Women’s Congress, Stoner Collection, Reel 3, Document 43, April 1925.
calling upon women’s traditional roles, feminists justified demands for increased female participation in politics, education, and the professions. Moreover, they did so while appearing non-threatening to the patriarchal order. Feminists expanded their traditional responsibilities as mothers and moral leaders within the home to the social sphere by arguing that “society is a large family.”11 Their utilization of the concept of morality was very similar to that of motherhood, but it played into an even larger national discussion on moral regeneration within politics.

In an effort to link national debates on corruption in government to women’s roles within the public sphere, feminists co-opted male intellectuals’ call for moral regeneration, arguing that innate feminine qualities made them morally superior, and hence better suited for the position. Moreover, feminists argued that men were ill-equipped for the task, since they were the ones responsible for the development of a corrupt and morally bankrupt system. Congress president Pilar Morlón de Menéndez urged women to be “virtuous in order to moralize; moralize the streets, the home, moralize the school, the store, public administration, the administration of our National Life.” She connected morality to access to power by arguing that women should partake in every aspect of national life.12 In her discussion of a need for “national regeneration,” feminist Edelmira González y Martínez argued that the movement held the answer to many societal problems. She believed that, “Feminism can be an important factor in

11 Blanca Dopico, “¿Reforma de la enseñanza femenina: responde el sistema de educación del país a las exigencias y tendencias de la vida moderna?,” Stoner Collection, Second Congress, Reel 3, Document 43, April 1925.

supporting the patriotic mission, since we do not lack the determination nor the intellectuality needed to take an active part in the future of national life.”\textsuperscript{13}

The issue of education was among the most prominent topics at the conferences. Feminists employed it as a means of addressing a number of demands including, increased female participation in public affairs, education reform for women of all social backgrounds, and greater supervisory roles for women within the teaching profession. Feminists argued that it was necessary for young women to receive comprehensive education in order to become leading members of society. They linked the reform of female education to women’s participation in the public life of politics and the workplace. Consequently, the reform of female education became central to women’s attainment of further rights, including suffrage. In a speech on education reform, María Luya de Domenech demanded that “the child of today, the woman of tomorrow, receive the adequate instructions, influences, and preparation to successfully be involved in private life, public life, social life, and political life.”\textsuperscript{14} Other speeches connected the issue of female education to Cuba’s stance as a modern nation, reminding legislators that “the strength of a country is tied to the education of its women.”\textsuperscript{15} Feminists went beyond lofty sentiments about their role in society, addressing the practical education

\textsuperscript{13} Edelmira González y Martínez, “El feminismo en Cuba,” Stoner Collection, Second Congress, Reel 3, Document 43, April 1925.

\textsuperscript{14} María Luya de Domenech, “Reforma de la enseñanza femenina,” Stoner Collection, First Congress, Reel 2, Document 40, April 1923.

\textsuperscript{15} W. Thompson, “La necesidad de instruir a la mujer para el cumplimiento de sus deberes naturales, fisiológicos, morales, y sociales” Stoner Collection, Second Congress, Reel 3, Document 43, April 1925.
needs and demands of women of all social classes.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, women within the profession took advantage of their numerical supremacy and demanded leadership positions as school board members, school inspectors, and school administrators.

The feminist movement conveyed a progressive message when it called for legislative rights and increased participation in public life, yet for the most part it challenged the status quo from within rather than attempting to dismantle the patriarchal order.\textsuperscript{17} Access to the male world of politics had been obtained in part because feminists had been careful to present themselves in a manner that did not make them appear threatening. Emphasizing their roles as mothers and moral leaders allowed women to gain access to positions of power, but it resulted in an expansion of the female sphere of the home to that of a female sphere in society. Their approach led to successful reforms and opportunities for women, but it continued to define and limit women in respects to their so-called innate feminine characteristics.

Despite the prevalence of traditional rhetoric, not all feminists believed in maintaining the patriarchal order. Among the different perspectives was that of whether or not women’s new role in society should challenge notions of ideal femininity. Most argued in favor of combining traditional feminine traits with modern demands, while a few more liberal-minded feminists viewed femininity as detrimental to women’s advancement. Among those feminists who believed in maintaining a balance between

\textsuperscript{16} Among the specific education reforms were the need for an increase in primary schools and teachers, the creation of vocational, commerce, normal, and night schools, and the incorporation of home economics, morality, civic duty, and physical education in school curriculums.

\textsuperscript{17} With multiple causes and goals, the feminist movement suffered from internal conflict and disagreement over which issues were relevant to their movement and the means that should be used to obtain their objectives. Feminists held beliefs that ranged the full spectrum of the political and social sphere, with some expressing traditional views and others voicing radical opinions. For a detailed account of the feminist movement, see: K. Lynn Stoner, \textit{From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Woman’s Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
traditional and modern expectations, Piedad Maza y Santos denounced the idea that the woman of the future would be void of feminine charms, “appearing everyday more like men,” or that she would “revert to the past losing voluntarily all the gains achieved through cruel and difficult struggles.” She argued that neither extreme was necessary, but that rather women could find a way “to harmonize both ideals, being at the same time old-fashioned and modern, uniting in perfect synthesis, the familiar virtues with political and social activity.” Maza y Santos believed this included the duties of mother, wife, professional, and politically-informed citizen. Poet Dulce María Borrero de Luján rejected feminine values as harmful to the women’s movement. She believed that, “As long as we keep believing that being generous, pure, selfless, [and] sweet is enough…and that having our own opinion is poor preparation for marriage, we shall have the ‘eternal feminine’ on the one hand and bellicose feminism on the other.”

The male-elite world of politicians, intellectuals, journalists, and professionals embraced the feminist movement, but it relegated it to a marginal role in the popular imagination. It did so by promoting a female sphere based on traditional roles, creating a satirical feminist archetype, and erasing connections between changes in cultural practices and the movement. By legitimizing the feminist movement, male elites were able to endorse the notion that Cuba was a modern nation, while maintaining control of challenges to established gender norms. Reaction to the feminist movement was overall positive with articles on the feminist movement, well-known feminists, and the National

18 Piedad Maza y Santos, “Hacia el verdadero femenismo” La Mujer Moderna 2:13 (November 1926), 17-18.

19 This editorial consisted, in part, of a reprint of an article by Jorge Mañach on feminism published in the Cuban newspaper, El País. The article included an interview between Mañach and Dulce (presumably well-known feminist Dulce María Borrero de Luján). Hortensia Lamar, “Copiamos de ‘El País’” La Mujer Moderna 1:7 (May 1926), 41.
Women’s Congresses in 1923 and 1925 appearing countless times in *Diario de la Marina, La Lucha, Social,* and *Bohemia* to name a few mainstream media outlets. *Revista Bimestre Cubana* praised the 1923 congress for “symbolizing the accession of a new and vigorous element into the public life of the nation.” It welcomed women’s new responsibilities, adding that “the Cuban woman can do a lot, since all moral strengths are needed.”

Essayist and literary critic Jorge Mañach also encouraged women to restrict their influence on society to that of a female sphere. Commenting on the publication of new feminist magazine, Mañach asserted that “in every page it is revealed that the female editors have at last a clear comprehension of the situation of women in Cuba,” which is “eliminating the ridiculous antagonisms and rude remarks in men’s barricade, by intensifying the characteristic energies of women and applying them within the traditional sector.”

The feminist movement embraced traditional rhetoric in part as a means of gaining respect and credibility within society, but public skepticism, angst, and uncertainty over challenges to the patriarchal order emerged nevertheless. Critique rarely surfaced in the form of overt opposition to the movement, rather marginalization and mockery became the primary tools of anxious Cubans. The mainstream media published articles on and by feminists, but exposure was mostly limited to certain events and moments, rather than the creation of a space for feminists to participate in the on-going and frequent conversation on women in the public realm. Moreover, popular publications

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20 More than half of this issue of *Revista Bimestre Cubana* was dedicated to issues related to the feminist movement. It included essays by feminists Dulce María Borrero de Luján, Hortensia Lamar, and Pilar Morlón de Menéndez. Juan del Morro, “Las aspiraciónes de la mujer cubana” *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 2:18 (March-April 1923), 100.

expressed societal reluctance to support the recent transformations in women’s lives by ceremoniously highlighting certain feminists and events, but by and large ignoring the increased presence of ordinary women in the workplace and educational institutions. The most strident attacks of feminism took place on the pages of satirical publications. Mañach warned feminists of the use of mockery as a means to discredit the movement, advising them on how to combat this detrimental technique. “As long as feminism is not a concern of all women, from the most independent to the most domestic, men will continue to look at it as the politics of marimachos, and will combat it with the worse weapon of all, mockery.”

Mockery of feminism within satirical publications served to maintain the allusion of support by mainstream Cubans, while vocalizing societal fears and minimizing the significance of changing gender norms. Satire proved useful as a means of exposing, probing, and debating controversial issues, without appearing alarmist and retrograde. This was especially the case when comical pieces combined belittling remarks with progressive commentaries on women in modern society. Serials such as La Política Cómica and Muecas catered to a middle-class male audience eager to ridicule and deride political, social, and cultural aspects of Cuban life.

22 Ibid., 41.

23 For example, see illustration from La Política Cómica depicted above: “El feminismo en Cuba” La Política Cómica 15:766 (August 22, 1920), 8.
The caricatures of the enlightened woman and powerless man resonated with a public confronting uncertain times. A fictional scenario in *La Política Cómica* depicted a wife warning her husband that “a strike” on housework and conjugal relations would be in effect until her stipulations were met. These included a new home, a housekeeper, shared responsibility of parenting, and the freedom to “go to the street and attend to her whims.” The husband had no choice but to concede since he could not withstand the conditions of the strike. The editorial concluded with a warning to male readers. “Prepare yourselves men, because modern ideas are taking hold, and there is a saying that says: ‘What women want, the devil concedes.’ *Arriba las faldas!*”\(^\text{24}\) The exaggerated demands and reactions of the wife and husband turned both of them into objects of ridicule. But, the cautionary words at the end served to simultaneously inform men that they should embrace the inevitable emergence of modern trends and belittle female tactics as manipulative and petty. Similarly, *Muecas*’ attempt at dismissing social changes as inconsequential and acceptable served to underplay societal concerns, while mocking women’s gains and abilities. Its editorial on women gaining the right to vote in Cuba described how handsome candidates would achieve certain success, since women were “inherently sentimental, impressionable, and in favor of esthetics.”\(^\text{25}\) Another *Muecas* piece on the rumored integration of women into the police force belittled women’s ability to perform the task, but added that male criminals would revel in the “pleasure of being disarmed by *una polizonte,*” allowing her “to disarm them without

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{25}\) “Si las mujeres votasen” *Muecas* 1:64 (December 4, 1921), 9.
protesting.”26 And lastly, a *Muecas* article on female manipulation compared the hunger strikes of “las sufragistas” to those of wives attempting to obtain their way.27

The mainstream media also employed mockery as a means to discuss the impact of the Modern Girl. Satirical publications geared towards a male audience were not alone in their belittling depictions of the archetype. In fact, in contrast to the comical pieces on feminism and women’s rights which appeared almost exclusively in satirical serials, belittling representations of the Modern Girl were rampant in popular media outlets. However, this was mainly the case in the editorials and illustrations of male journalists. The topics of fashion and courtship provided the male-dominated media with a means of discussing the broader issue of shifting gender norms. Seemingly trivial commentaries on hair length, flirting, and marital discord addressed social concerns, while also devaluing the impact of the transformation of women in society. Thus, the reaction of both supporters and opponents of modern trends as personified in the characteristics of the Modern Girl depended in great part on the sex of the commentator.

Male supporters and opponents tended to express both approval and critique through mockery. Men who combined praise with satire parodied the Modern Girl by depicting her as a frivolous, sexual object. By doing so, male proponents positioned themselves in a manner that allowed them to appear modern and supportive, despite their flippant commentaries. Nevertheless, by disparaging the Modern Girl, they directed attention away from female gains in the public realm and unstable heterosexual power dynamics. Male critics also deemed the Modern Girl inconsequential and non-

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26 “Policía femenina” *Muecas* 1:54 (October 2, 1921), 18.

27 “Recursos femeniles” *Muecas* 1:64 (December 4, 1921), 5.
threatening, focusing rather on their view of her as unappealing and masculine. Thus, celebrations and denunciations on the behalf of male commentators equally diminished the importance of emergent cultural practices, while exposing social anxiety. Women in support of the Modern Girl recognized the connections between discussions on emergent fashion trends, dating practices, and sexuality and those on women’s increased opportunities and accomplishments. They saw how changes in behavior, physical looks, and attitudes directly and positively correlated with the increased presence of women in the workplace, classroom, and social sphere. Women critical of the Modern Girl, namely feminists, believed that the frivolous and superficial trappings of modernity undermined the seriousness of the women’s movement. Moreover, they argued that the outlandish conduct and appearance of the Modern Girl provided men with an opportunity to belittle and dismiss women.

Both the icons of the feminist and the Modern Girl served as potent symbols of modern womanhood however, the societal image and understanding of the two varied significantly. The feminist struggle for access to legal rights and positions of power greatly impacted Cuban politics and women’s place within it. Feminist issues received attention and support leading to civil and legal triumphs, including the attainment of female suffrage in 1934. Their goals and actions directly related to the emergence of modern trends as characterized by the lifestyle of the Modern Girl. However, feminists’ emphasis on traditional values automatically distinguished them from the Modern Girl. While feminists made certain to appear non-threatening by presenting their progressive goals as natural to their traditional responsibilities, the Modern Girl distanced herself from the past through her outlook, behavior, and appearance. Feminists rejected the
Modern Girl for fear that the seemingly superficial persona would undermine their accomplishments. The work of female writers reveals how despite feminists’ concerns, most women were able to look past the trivial aspects of the Modern Girl, using her lifestyle and appearance as a means of discussing changing gendered practices.

The differing approaches and objectives of the feminist movement and the Modern Girl can be explained in various ways. Age was one factor. Generational difference was framed in terms of lifestyle choices with middle-aged feminist using their education and professional experience to enter the public sphere and younger women taking advantage of changing cultural norms to emulate Hollywood stars and enjoy a life of leisure outside the home. Class was another factor. The feminist movement included a large number of women of the upper classes, many of whom used their fathers and husbands’ connections to achieve political and legal influence. In contrast, the younger generation became representative of the upwardly mobile middle class who in an effort to increase their status acquired the latest modern technology, adopted imported fashion trends, and attended glamorous events. This is not to say that the two worlds did not intersect. As members of the social elite, most feminists also spent much of their time concerned with fashion styles, physical appearance, and socializing. Moreover, many of those leading the lifestyle of the Modern Girl expressed their desire for more equality between the sexes, whether it be with their family members, romantic partners, or male peers.

The male-dominated media embraced both the feminist and the Modern Girl as products of modern womanhood. Their treatment of the two differed considerably, but the use of mockery and silencing remained the main tools of critique. The feminist
movement, its accomplishments, and its impact on everyday women received marginal attention, especially when compared to that given to the Modern Girl. Narratives, images, and commentaries on the exploits of the Modern Girl proliferated within a popular culture obsessed with her clothing, habits, glamorous outings, and sexuality. As a consequence, representations of the Modern Girl clashed with the reality of middle-class women in higher education and the professional world. Regardless of attempts by the mainstream media to devalue and minimize the impact of cultural transformations on Cuban women, it was evident that the drastic changes in conduct and appearance of a vast number of women affected understandings of gender norms.

The international impact of the Modern Girl was difficult to ignore, even if some Cubans had been inclined to do so. The incorporation of the persona of Modern Girl into everyday life affected mainstream Cubans in ways that the feminist movement was unable to do so. The presence of women with short skirts and bobbed hair in neighborhood streets as well as on the pages of magazines served as a daily reminder that something significant was taking place. However, sudden changes in cultural practices had created a new social space with ambivalent notions of appropriate gendered behavior. This was especially challenging for women since they had to follow a code of conduct that was appealing and acceptable to their peers as well as parents. Young women unsure of how to behave carefully maneuvered themselves within this elusive world. As a result, taking on the identity of the Modern Girl became a means for women to simultaneously conform to the changing times, express themselves, and defy convention.
Living a Glamorous Life

A divide existed not only between the icons of the feminist and the Modern Girl, but also between the image of the glamorous Modern Girl and the reality of middle-class working women. The gap between representation and reality existed in part, because of societal unease and uncertainty towards the increase of middle-class women in the workplace. Representations of the Modern Girl as frivolous, superficial, materialistic, and sexually-liberated captured the popular imagination. Because it was easier to dismiss, this modern version of Cuban womanhood seemed less threatening in many respects to that of professional women within the public realm. Through the archetype of the Modern Girl the mainstream media ridiculed changes in behavior and appearance, all the while ignoring the presence of women in occupations previously designated for men. Nevertheless, changes were taking place in the public sphere. Women throughout the island incorporated aspects of a modern identity though their daily activities, attitude, style, and occupation.

The absence in the popular media of representations of working women contrasted with the rapid increase in the number of female professionals. Women in the late-nineteenth century had been predominately employed in a variety of unskilled labor.28 By the first half of the 1920s, the educational and occupational boom had begun to affect middle-class women. The number of white women in the wage-labor force nearly doubled between 1907 and 1919.29 This included a doubling of white women in

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28 Women worked in a variety of unskilled trades, including: 63 percent in domestic services, 16 percent in manufacturing, 10 percent in agriculture, 2.4 percent in professions, and 1 percent in trade and transportation. Of the total, nearly 75 percent of working women were of color. United States War Department, Informe sobre el censo de Cuba (Washington: Oficina del censo de los Estados Unidos, 1900), 485-86.
professional occupations, trade, transportation, and manufacturing.\textsuperscript{30} In 1919, twenty-five percent of professionals were women. The ranks of female professionals included 45 actresses, 200 pharmacists, 727 nurses, 740 employees of banks and offices, 901 clerks and copyists, 1,274 government employees, and 5,122 teachers.\textsuperscript{31} More than ever before, marriage for middle-class women did not dictate that they leave the workplace. In 1919, thirty percent of professional women continued to work after marriage.\textsuperscript{32} Some chose to continue their vocation for their own self-fulfillment, but for others it had been a result of their desire to maintain middle-class status and participate in the consumer culture. The presence of women within professional fields had an impressive impact on Cuban society. However, popular culture rarely reflected this reality.

Most often portrayals of working women placed them within the artistic realm as writers, poets, actresses, and musicians. Numerous editorials and interviews centered on women who had published books, performed abroad, and starred in films. The mainstream media presented these occupations as exciting, sought-after, and most often than not, socially acceptable. The same occurred abroad, where the fascination with the world of entertainment turned artists and performers into celebrities. Within the United States, everyday-women working in offices and department stores also became

\textsuperscript{29} The number of white working women jumped from 19,833 to 33,571. Cuba, \textit{Censo de la república de Cuba bajo la administración provisional de los Estados Unidos 1907} (Washington: Oficina del censo de los Estados Unidos, 1908), 513; Cuba, \textit{Censo de la república de Cuba: año de 1919} (Havana: Maza, Arroyo, y Caso, 1920), 628.

\textsuperscript{30} Between 1907 and 1919, the number of women in professional occupations increased from 3,280 to 6,404, in trade and transportation from 1,324 to 2,371, and in manufacturing from 5,938 to 10,580. Ibid., 513-515; Ibid., 628-30.

\textsuperscript{31} The number of professional women included 1,329 women of color. Cuba, \textit{Censo de la república de Cuba: año de 1919} (Havana: Maza, Arroyo, y Caso, 1920), 628-30.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 719.
glamorous individuals to be envied and desired. The same cannot be said of Cuba. In contrast to the United States, wage labor did not usually appear in the pages of Cuban magazines as the newly-coveted pastime of the upwardly-mobile middle class. Office clerks and teachers made up a large percentage of professional women, but their presence was largely ignored within the media. In the series “Por la escuela,” a case in which professional women received substantial exposure, the conversation revolved around pedagogy, not the lifestyle of teachers.

Within the mainstream media, the majority of male and female writers avoided discussing the reality of working women. However, the issue arose at times, especially within feminist publications. Female writers did not glamorize the workplace, but they did not ignore the issue all together. Rather, they focused on the various social problems associated with women entering the wage-labor force. Their varied reactions shed light on the challenges women encountered during this transitional time in which neither the home nor the workplace solely satisfied the needs of women. Against the notion of married women in the wage-labor force, La Dama Duende identified four main reasons why women should not return to work after marriage: unfair competition with single women in need of an income, the impossible task of the double duty, the desire of a majority of husbands to be the breadwinner, and the necessity to look rested and beautiful for one’s husband. She recognized that women accustomed to working would miss their earnings and become “bored,” but she believed that performing both tasks well would

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34 *Bohemia* published this series from December 1924 to at least July 1925. Dr. Gabriel García Galán, “Por la escuela” *Bohemia* (December 1924- July 1925).
prove impossible, and “in choosing between them, the home is the most important one.” Making sacrifices was necessary to keep the attention and affection of one’s husband, La Dama Duende insisted. “Prepare to retain it, señorita Modernas, by all means necessary, at the cost of all sacrifices.”35 Her comments reflected the difficulties women faced as they confronted the task of meeting multiple responsibilities. They also reveal a tendency to place priority in the duties of the home to the detriment of economic and professional desires.

Other female writers viewed it possible, and even necessary, to integrate the demands of the home with the ambitions and needs of working women. La Mujer Moderna voiced concerns regarding the obstacles for working women, but it supported the role of women outside the home. It categorized women as those who did not work, those who worked too much, and those that worked moderately. The first was viewed as “a parasite,” and the third as “a product of the new society.”36 Not all women could afford to stay at home. Moreover, not all women had the same occupational opportunities. Afro-Cuban writer Catalina Pozo y Gato addressed the difficulties educated black women faced when attempting to find suitable positions. Rather than competing for jobs with white women with equal or lesser qualifications, they found themselves forced to work alongside uneducated black women as domestic servants. “Neither in stores nor in offices, Cuban or foreign,” Pozo y Gato affirmed “do they offer employment to our educated young women, openly mocking the law, if it exists.”37

35 La Dama Duende, “Las esposas que trabajan” Almanaque Social 2:12 (April 1930), 82.
36 “Tipos de mujeres” La Mujer Moderna 1:5 (April 1926), 3.
37 Catalina Pozo y Gato, “Con su permiso, amigo” La Mujer 2:24 (November 15, 1930), 4, 20.
Instead of featuring representations of working women, mainstream publications espoused the life of leisure as the ideal for middle-and-upper-class women. Unlike their American counterparts, Cubans of a certain means were not expected to occupy most of their time with housework and childcare. As mentioned in the previous section, traditional roles cast them as wives, mothers, and the moral compass of the family, but these labels did not dictate their everyday activities. In many cases, domestic servants and nannies provided women of the upper classes with the opportunity to dedicate themselves to other activities. Consequently, members of the rapidly-expanding middle class found in popular magazines and etiquette manuals a means of acquiring the skills to pursue a leisurely lifestyle. Editorials and advice columns included suggestions on fashion, health, and beauty regimens, more so than on cleaning techniques, cooking, and childrearing. Etiquette manuals were especially useful for they carefully outlined proper conduct and attire for a variety of social practices, occasions, and events. The daily activities of women consisted of studying the arts, exercising at the country club, shopping for the latest fashions, and making house calls to visit social acquaintances. Viewed as an important tool, even education functioned in the minds of many as a means of attracting men with intriguing conversation, rather than as an opportunity to attain a skill and pursue a profession.

New technology in the form of transportation systems, telecommunications, and electric power helped to incite the belief that Cuba had joined the ranks of modern nations. The desire to become a member of a modern society affected Cubans throughout the island. Access to better education and employment facilitated the desire and ability of Cubans to transcend class boundaries. Moreover, the modern trappings of
the outside world provided further stimulus to move away from the colonial past. Provincial towns looked towards urban centers, with Havana serving as its principal connection to the international community. The impact of modern technology brought Cubans closer to one another and to those abroad through access to published materials, the cinema, the radio, and tourism. For some Cubans, encounters with foreigners visiting the island became commonplace as did traveling to the United States and Europe. The extended stays abroad of members of the upper classes for schooling and business facilitated a cultural exchange as did the increase of foreign residents, especially Americans, on the island. Traveling musicians, dancers, and theatre groups from Latin America, Europe, and the United States brought their artistic influence to Cuba, while Cuban performers took their talents abroad as well. New forms of entertainment also served as a mode of importing foreign culture. Most significantly, Hollywood captured the imagination of Cubans across the island.38

Theaters featuring U.S. films emerged with rapid speed all across the island. Overnight, Hollywood movies and stars became an everyday subject for Cubans enthralled with the big screen. Hollywood became a frequent theme within popular magazines with editorials, columns, interviews, and even entire publications dedicated exclusively to the movie industry. Magazines paid attention to particular films, as well as to the glamorous lifestyle of famous actresses and actors. They featured the fashion styles and beauty techniques of movie stars, offering detailed narrative and illustrations. Moreover, Cubans closely monitored the latest gossip from California, especially news of marriages and divorces. Not surprisingly, Hollywood starlets served as a model on

38 For more information on the cultural exchange between Cuba and the United States, see: Louis A. Pérez, Jr., On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
becoming a Modern Girl. Writer Carlos Deambrosis Martins recognized the part
Hollywood had played in keeping women up-to-date in terms of modern social
conventions and behavior. He claimed that movies were “among the determining factors
in the evolution of the modern woman,” becoming for them “a school on beauty, flirting,
customs, love” and “the art of the vamps.” Hollywood movies had taught them “to
become women to the fullest extent, allowing them to discover themselves as well as all
the diverse manners of being feminine.” Moreover, Deambrosis asserted that “nothing is
conceived, if it has not previously been contemplated from the uncomfortable position of
the movie theater seat.”  

The personas of different actresses
attracted young women looking to fashion
themselves after the archetypical characters
found on screen. The innocent, good-natured
girl characterized by Mary Pickford and
Lillian Gish were often juxtaposed with the
vamps made famous by Theda Bara, Nita
Naldi, and Pola Negri. Deambrosis
described the impact of these actresses on
young Cuban women who “copy the poses of
Nita Naldi and Mary Pickford in front of a
mirror.”  

39 Carlos Deambrosis Martins, “Pinceladas” Bohemia 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 18.

The virgin/vamp characters were contrasted within films as well as on the
pages of magazines. In a 1920 issue of Carteles, Violet Heming and Bebe Daniels the
stars of “Everywoman” appeared side-by-side with captions that corresponded with their respective personas. Heming, pictured holding flowers with a sweet-look on her face, possessed “an angelic and original smile,” while Daniels in a provocative stance and outfit was capable of “driving her many admirers crazy” with “her enigmatic stare.”

Female writers both chastised and encouraged emulation of Hollywood stars. Young women thus received contradictory messages, with North American movies and Cuban popular culture offering a broad range of lessons and advice. Etiquette book author La Doctora Fanny warned women against assertive and overly-sexual body language, behavior that “may be very chic, but it is improper” and moreover, “girls who value themselves should not imitate movie heroines.” Modern technology created increased confusion for young women uncertain of adopting the modern practices depicted on the movie screen. In her reprimand of a young woman who had considered calling a love interest on the telephone, advice columnist Madame La Fleur declared that “those actions may be acceptable in the movies,” but not in actual life. Not all female writers viewed Hollywood as detrimental to the youth of Cuba. Advice columnist and actress Estela Arza believed the cinema could have a positive influence on young women. She recognized it as a tool for providing a “moral lesson,” which was why she recommended the film “Las semi-virgenes” to her young female readers.

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40 Ibid., 18.
41 For example, see photograph depicted above: “Everywoman” Carteles 2:1 (January 1920), 61.
42 La Doctora Fanny, Como debo comportarme en sociedad: Manual de prácticas sociales, 2d ed., (Barcelona: Sociedad General de Publicaciones, 1930).
43 Madame La Fleur, “Consultorio social” Almanaque Social 2:19 (November 1930), 64.
44 Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:40 (October 2, 1921), 25.
appearance, actions, and lifestyle of actresses on and off screen provided an inspiration to Cuban women hoping to imitate their idols. At times, they copied their favorite stars’ hairdos and dress styles, and at others they adopted their behavior.

Hollywood symbolized both the idealization of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and glamour and the fear of corruptive forces. The idealization and fear of Hollywood was best expressed in the guidance offered to young women eager to move to the United States to pursue their ambitions of becoming Hollywood starlets. Advice columnist and actress Arza recognized the difficulties of attaining success abroad, but she did not completely discourage aspiring actresses. “You must be artistic, youthful, sociable, tolerant, knowledgeable of sports, fluent in English, and of a certain type,” she informed a young woman from Camagüey. “At first you will suffer a great deal,” Arza acknowledged “but if you possess talent then it will be possible to succeed.”45 Not everyone was as optimistic that young women from Cuba could attain success and fulfillment in movies. Writer Guillermo Jiménez described the common, but dangerous allure of Hollywood. “Nowadays every pretty woman searches for the screen as if it were paradise,” but instead he asserted, suffering and disillusionment await them. Jiménez cited Gloria Swanson’s claim that she was leaving Hollywood because it was a “horrible hell where one lived torturing one another,” as a means of further deterring Cuban women hoping to become stars.46

Varied accounts of Hollywood revealed the dual reaction of adoration and aversion of Cubans to U.S. movies. The most discouraging portrayals depicted Hollywood as an immoral force luring young adults into a disheartening world. In

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particular, they focused on the deceptive characteristics of Hollywood. Writer B. Canal referred to Hollywood as “a modern-day Babylon,” because of its ability to seem from afar like “a city of dreams and illusions for the modern youth” and from up close “a false gleam of light that leads to disenchantment.”

Writer Carlos Deambrosis Martins captured the conflicted sentiment of Cubans, describing the U.S. film industry as the “synthesis of frivolity” and “a great modern tyranny” for its potential to turn its audiences into “slaves.”

These commentaries uncovered more than the contradictory reactions of Cubans. They alluded to a connection between the ambivalent relationship to Hollywood and the uncertainty towards modern trends and shifting gender norms.

An emphasis within popular culture on the life of leisure of the Modern Girl and the glamorous persona of the Hollywood starlet contrasted greatly with the absence of working women. Shifting attention away from recently-acquired female opportunities in politics, education, and the professions to that of female appearance and behavior made the former appear like undesirable goals. Representations of the Modern Girl as a carefree and frivolous individual sought to make the rights achieved by women appear less important and intimidating. Cultural changes expressed through assertive conduct, modern fashion styles, less-inhibited social interactions, and increased lifestyle options often resulted in their dismissal as endearing, harmless, and attractive. It was only when these new cultural practices crossed the line of acceptability that they posed a threat to societal norms. Most women found innumerable ways to live up to the lifestyle without drastically transgressing the ever-moving boundaries of decorum. Through popular magazines and Hollywood movies, women encountered a safe venue that allowed them

48 Carlos Deambrosis Martins, “Pinceladas” Bohemia 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 18.
to reenact aspects of a glamorous world, imagining themselves as the object of female admiration and male adoration.

**Defining the Cuban Modern Girl**

The diverse and conflicted views of Cubans led to multiple understandings of the Modern Girl. Hollywood served as one of the sources available to young women looking for inspiration and guidance on how to become a Modern Girl. Popular magazines offered another. Advice columns, editorials, fashion sections, illustrations, and advertisements assisted women in constructing their own versions of the Modern Girl. Various Modern Girl archetypes emerged resulting in a lack of consensus regarding the positive and negative effects of modern trends. Representations emphasized specific aspects of her behavior and appearance creating a number of archetypes that readers could identify and relate to. Similar to the virgin/vamp categorizations found on movie screens, iconic characters surfaced from the pages of popular magazines. Particular descriptors, themes, and settings became central to identifying the various archetypical versions of the Modern Girl. Certain conduct, hair length, fashion styles, and social outings thus corresponded with particular types. Portrayals of the Modern Girl included moral judgments on the part of readers and writers, since archetypical behavior, appearances, and lifestyles became the target of praise, ridicule, and condemnation.

Cubans adopted foreign icons of modern womanhood into their own notions of femininity. Hollywood became just one of the many ways in which the international phenomenon of the Modern Girl entered mainstream society. The inclusion within the everyday vernacular of foreign words that alluded to modern womanhood was among the
others. Promoted by Hollywood and popular magazines, terms associated with a

cosmopolitan lifestyle included the English words “flapper,” “girl,” “smart-set,” and
“flirt” and the French words “la garconne,” “chic,” and “soiree.” They connoted to
readers that Cuban women were just as modern, trendy, and glamorous as women abroad.
Moreover, the use of foreign vocabulary within popular culture became a means of
creating multiple constructions of modern womanhood, while also allowing readers to
visualize the persona of the Modern Girl. Those looking at the publication Chic came
across the new vocabulary in the editorial “El eterno flirt,” and the illustrations “Las
flappers” and “Jazz flirt.” A photograph in Carteles referred to Hollywood actresses
posing on a beach as “girls,” while the editorial “La falda larga y la flapper” commented
on modern fashion trends. In Social, a magazine that referred to itself as the
publication of the “smart-set,” Mademoiselle D’Arles offered advice on which “chic”
outfits to wear to evening “dancings” and “soirees,” while a Bohemia editorial
commented on the art of flirting in an editorial titled “Flirt.”

49 “El eterno flirt” Chic 12:100 (December 1923), 42; “Las flappers” Chic 12:91 (March 1923), 32; “Jazz
flirt” Chic 12:89 (January 1923), 30.

50 Carteles 2:2 & 3 (February/March 1920), 60; María Monvel, “La flapper y la garconne” Social 11:11
(November 1926), 39, 74-75, 92.

51 Conrado Massageur initiated the magazine Social, which carried the label “The magazine of the ‘Smart
Set,’” with the intention that it serve as “an album” recording “all the grand parties of the ‘smart-set.’”
Benitez, “La revista del ‘smart set’ en ‘La Lucha’” Social 1:6 (June 1916), 35; Mademoiselle D’Arles,
“Crónica de París” Social 8:1 (January 1923), 55-56; Real de Buenrevés, “Flirt” Bohemia 18:10 (March 6,
1927), 9, 52.
Illustrations and photographs of middle-class Cuban women brought the Modern Girl to life in a variety of poses, outfits, and settings. There was no way of escaping the icon of the Modern Girl, since within most magazines she appeared in front pieces, advertisements, illustrations, cartoons, and photographs. Moreover, these images had practically supplanted all of those portraying traditional womanhood. Visual imagery offered a daily reminder that the look and behavior of women had drastically changed within a short time span. Modern and revealing fashion trends became the focal point of illustrations and photographs of Hollywood stars as well as of Cuban women. Advertisements for an array of items used sexuality to sell their products, including those that had little to do with physical appearance such as household, hygienic, and digestive solutions. Advice and fashion columns also included provocative illustrations of the Modern Girl in stylish outfits and poses. Fashion trends came to life in photographs of middle-class women from throughout the island wearing stylish clothes and bobs.\textsuperscript{52} Furthermore, they revealed that the customs of the Modern Girl had reached provincial towns as well as urban centers. Most magazines had long-been featuring portraits and wedding pictures of society women, but by mid-decade the photographs of Cuban women had become indistinguishable from those of Hollywood stars. Young women with short bobs, make-up, and the latest fashions, posed

\textsuperscript{52} For example, see photographs of Cuban women depicted above: \textit{Social} 12:5 (May 1927), 50.
for professional photographers whose advertisements for their photography studios could be found on the following pages.53

Advertisements promoting national and foreign products depicted the Modern Girl through visual as well as textual sources. Marketing firms employed a variety of techniques to endorse the notion that women lived in a modern era. Illustrations of women in fashionable clothing, bob haircuts, and assertive poses promoted the merchandise as those for modern women. Other methods included the utilization of the term “modern” and the portrayal of Hollywood stars as fellow consumers. In a Palmolive soap advertisement, a product that claimed to refresh, vitalize, and whiten skin, Cleopatra was shown sharing her beauty secrets with “the Modern Woman.”54 An advertisement for “Freezone,” medication for the removal of foot calluses, juxtaposed home remedies of the past with modern technology. Its advertisement, which featured women in high heels and stylish outfits, claimed that with their product “taking a stroll, dancing, and all other past times will be much more enjoyable.” It deemed its “scientific and modern” ointment fitting for the modern household where there is no room for “antiquated and barbarous methods.”55 Pictures and quotes from Hollywood actresses were also employed as a means of selling products. An advertisement for “La Crema Milkweed” body lotion featured Hollywood actress Louise Lovely,56 while one for “Cutex” referred to Colleen Moore.57 The nutritional tonic “Vino Tónico de Stearns” did not use a particular actress

54 “Palmolive” Bohemia 13:37 (September 10, 1922), 28.
56 “La crema milkweed” Bohemia 12:26 (June 26, 1921) 22.
in its advertisement, but rather it claimed that “the most famous movie stars” know that “to cultivate their beauty” they need to be in perfect health.58

In an effort to appeal to the “modern” consumer, advertisers connected the concept of modernity to women having achieved social independence. The emphasis on autonomy was most evident in advertisements that featured women working, playing sports, and driving a car. Among those depicting the Modern Girl leading an active and self-reliant lifestyle were illustrations of secretaries, nurses, tennis players, swimmers, and female drivers.59 Those of women in the office and behind the wheel presented the most disjuncture with the majority of the Modern Girl representations. Working women rarely appeared in other narratives and imagery, and despite Cubans’ tendency to connect their fascination with automobiles to representations of female drivers, no evidence emerged of women actually driving.60 In contrast, multiple references within advice columns, features, and photographs attested to the presence of women in sports.

Advertisements also called upon the notion of modernity through imagery and narrative of sexually-liberated women. Proponents and critics alike viewed uninhibited sexuality as the most extreme of the Modern Girl characteristics. Consequently, sexual references and images appealed to Cubans drawn to the symbolism of modern

57 “Cutex” Social 10:12 (December 1925), 77.


womanhood, while also reminding the public of the dire consequences of altering gendered expectations. In one advertisement for “Vivaudau” beauty products, a drawing of a naked woman accompanied a message about how applying its body lotions made women more “beautiful and able seducers,” assisting in “conserving the illusions of husbands or love interests.”61 In a similar manner, an advertisement for Palmolive soap depicted a bobbed woman with an overly-sexualized facial expression and the tagline, “the complexion that seduces men and causes envy in women.”62

The multiple identities of the Modern Girl were personified in the exaggerated and vivid illustrations of some of Cuba’s most well-known caricaturists. Bohemia captured the diverse portrayals of the archetype on a number of its covers with the works of H. Portell Vilá and E. Navarro. Among them, “La viciosa,” an exaggeratedly-dressed woman in high heels and a bob with a cigarette in her mouth, and “Garzona,” a woman with manly clothing, an extremely short haircut, and heavy makeup.63 These illustrations addressed the fascination of the Cubans with the persona of the Modern Girl, while also alluding to the mixed reactions of a public confused and concerned over the introduction of modern trends. With these visual depictions, the mainstream media called attention to their embrace of the emergent version of modern womanhood. However, they simultaneously typecast her behavior as excessive, outrageous, and comical.

62 “Palmolive” Carteles 4:10 (October 1922), 23.
One of the most prominent caricaturists of the decade was Conrado Massageur, whose artwork appeared various times within most *Social* issues. Similar to other caricaturists, his illustrations served as a commentary on the ambivalent response of Cuban society. He epitomized the icon of the Modern Girl with his “Massa-girls” illustrations. These included “La flapper,” a heavily made-up woman with a bob and a cigarette in her mouth, and “La peligrosa,” a bobbed redhead seductively staring at readers.64 The term applied to actual Cubans as well, as attested to by the photograph of the “Massa-girl” from Sancti Spíritus.65 In an effort to nationalize the archetype of the Modern Girl, Massageur combined the foreign, with English-language words such as “girls,” “flapper,” and “miss,” with the national symbols of the Cuban flag and the

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64 The title “Massa-girls” played on the name of the caricaturist, Conrado Massageur, and the common U.S. term, Modern Girl. See above illustration of the flapper: Conrado Massageur, “La flapper” *Social* 8:2 (February 1923), 12; Conrado Massageur, “La peligrosa” *Social* 10:10 (October 1925), 11.

65 *Social* 8:9 (September 1923), 30.
Vedado Tennis Club emblem. With his narrative and imagery, Massageur also commented on societal perceptions of modern trends as immoral. In one cover, a young woman gets her hair bobbed by the devil and in another she is dancing with the devil. Moreover, he conveyed the idea that the magazine had a corrupting influence on women. This was the case in an illustration of a married woman walking on the beach with her lover in one hand and an issue of Social in the other. On the table of contents page, an allusion to Adam and Eve took shape in the form of an illustrated snake offering Eve an issue of Social, rather than the customary apple.

The emergence of the Modern Girl led to the sexualizing of women within the public sphere. Magazines employed a variety of visual tools in their embrace of the new trend, including nudity within illustrations and photography. Drawings within advertisements of women fully exposing their breasts were widespread, even when they were an unnecessary aspect of using the product. More dramatically, nude photographs appeared as an art form in a number of magazines, including Carteles, Bohemia, and Social. They comprised of photographs of models and actresses in a variety of poses including those in which they exposed most of their body, appeared topless, and partially

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66 See above cover of a Cuban woman holding the flag, wearing traditional male campesino clothing as well as high heels, make-up, and a bob: Conrado Massageur, Social 9:5 (May 1924), 1; Conrado Massageur, “La del V.T.C.” Social 8:4 (April 1923), 12.

67 Conrado Massageur, Social 9:7 (July 1924), 1; Conrado Massageur, Social 10:7 (July 1925), 1.


69 Conrado Massageur, “En este número” Social 11:1 (January 1926), 5.

70 For example, see: “Hiel de vaca” Carteles 2:2 & 3 (February/March 1920), 52; “Odol” Carteles 2:9 (September 1920), 10; “Te Japones” Bohemia 11:4 (January 25, 1920), 20; “Lavol” Bohemia 12:18 (May 1, 1921), 22.

71 For example, see: “Los nacionales Larrañaga” Carteles 2:4(April 1920), 2; “Un bello desnudo de Monroy” Social 13:5 (May 1928), 41; “La fuente de la juventud” Social 13:10 (October 1928), 16; Lawrence H. Smith, “Academia” Social 10:6 (June 1925), 35.
hid behind sheer material. Journalists commented on the sudden presence of nudity within magazines, movies, and theater performances. In *Chic*, author Lina Valmont questioned the morality of nudity in the theatre, while the photograph spread “El Desnudo en el Cine” simply acknowledged that “nudity is in style nowadays.” Featuring five nude actresses from Asia, Europe, and Latin America, the text commented on how nudity took place on the French beaches of Deauville and Lido as well as within the promotional campaigns of upcoming films. Hollywood stars also posed in the nude to publicize their movies, with both Louise Brooks and Josephine Baker appearing in partially nude photographs in *Social*.

The popular media did more than just simply present Cubans with visual representations of the Modern Girl. They also commented on her existence within a variety of articles, short stories, and editorials. These publications revealed a great deal about how Cubans reacted and adjusted to the transformations in gender norms. On the surface, the introduction of the Modern Girl received overwhelming societal approval, but critique in the form of overly-dramatic tragedies and exaggerated satirical portrayals exposed fears and uncertainty. Some writers voiced their full support or rejection the Modern Girl, while others expressed their ambivalence through dramatic accounts of a tragic figure and the use of mockery. Often the reaction of writers depended on their sex, with female writers approaching it as a serious issue and male writers feigning indifference.

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72 Lina Valmont, “El desnudo en el teatro” *Chic* 12:94 (June 1923), 12.

73 “El desnudo en el cine” *Social* 13:10 (October 1928), 70.

74 For example, see: “Louise Brooks” *Social* 10:10 (October 1925), 23; “Una ‘sirena’ peligrosa” *Social* 13:11 (November 1928), 62.
In “Eva moderna,” a lighthearted and upbeat portrayal of the Modern Girl, writer Isabel de Palencia embraced the emergence of modern trends as important and beneficial to women’s lives.75 “A formidable change in women has occurred,” de Palencia asserted, “not only in her social and economic position, but also in respects to her viewpoint and attitude.” According to de Palencia, these achievements had been attained without the criticism that had been expected because “men have become paralyzed in surprise.” Among the most prominent and most quickly accepted of all the emergent transformations was women’s physical appearance. Her connection of the new attitude and fashion style of women to a broad-range of opportunities demonstrates how for many female writers the introduction of modern trends had a significant and positive impact on women. For de Palencia fashion was pivotal to women’s recently-obtained identity. Not only were they able to do away with all the limitations on appearance imposed by “morality and customs,” but “the independence that women enjoy” had allowed them to develop a viewpoint which they communicated through fashion.76 Thus, the latest look embodied in the characteristics of the Modern Girl became a means for young women to express their sense of autonomy.

Other accounts of the Modern Girl uncovered the ambivalence of the Cuban public, in that the authors included positive remarks in their exaggerated and unflattering portrayal. Those of female writers tended to recognize the importance of the issue of emergent modern trends. However, their ambiguous position reflected the tensions

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75 In a reference to the biblical Eve, the term “Eva moderna” appeared in Carteles as well. A photograph of a Hollywood actress in workman’s clothes biting into an apple carried the byline: “A fearsome Eva, since she has eaten Adam’s apple and taken his overalls too. This ‘Eva moderna’ is known as Shirley Mason on the screen.” “Sumario” Carteles 2:11 (November 1920), 13.

76 Isabel de Palencia, “Eva moderna” Social 12:1 (January 1927), 53, 68.
evident in Cuban society. Although not a critique, the overall tone and characterization of the two archetypes in journalist María Monvel’s “La flapper y la garconne” impressed on Cubans a disheartening picture. Monvel believed the impact of modernity had been so significant, as to require an analysis of the figure “who by abandoning her traditional modesty has occupied a place in society, in new attitudes, and even in politics.” In her detailed, yet superficial, sketch Monvel introduced the two variations of the “niña moderna” available to Latin American women. “The daughters of our century and our civilization” shared many characteristics, but the flapper encompassed more “audacious and innocent” traits, while the garconne seemed “less charming and more determined.” According to Monvel, the flapper held on to her childhood, leading her “to not want anything serious and to not want to be taken seriously,” while the tragic figure of the garconne “laughs, plays, and is childlike, but her childishness is more for the sake of appearances.” This portrayal recognized the prevalence and importance of the Modern Girl on society, but it typecast her as a naïve, frivolous, and tragic individual.

Depictions of the Modern Girl lifestyle as trivial and inconsequential often employed mockery as a tool of subtle critique. By simultaneously incorporating praise and ridicule in their representations of the Modern Girl, the male-dominated mainstream media appeared to be in support of modern trends, while also reflecting societal angst and disapproval. Writer Carlos Deambrosis Martins epitomized the manner in which mockery turned the Modern Girl into both an object of desire and derision. Through both admiration and dismissal of the archetype, he converted her into a less threatening and real individual. In one anecdote, Deambrosis asked “what better aim can women aspire to than to be dolls without souls, and close their eyes saying: ‘I love you,’ ‘Kiss me,’ etc.,

77 María Monvel, “La flapper y la garconne” Social 11:11 (November 1926), 39, 74-75, 92.
etc.? This simplified caricature glamorized women through the use of English words to allude to U.S. notions of sexuality, but it also objectified, belittled, and demeaned them. In another anecdote, Deambrosis linked the act of smoking to the “frivolous” nature of the Modern Girl. “If smoking is so frivolous, then it is incomprehensible that it not be THEM the ones that smoke,” he asserted. “The cigarette was invented to fill with smoke all the holes there are in life. And in the life of women there are so many holes! They are so lazy, such daydreamers! They have their head so filled with smoke!”

It was the fictional literature of the time, especially the novel and the short story, which best captured the impact of the Modern Girl on Cuban society. The archetype worked in much the same way as the Hollywood virgin/vamp, with an assortment of traits simultaneously attracting and repelling those around them to particular versions of the Modern Girl icon. Even though, the virgin/vamp classifications allowed readers to detect more easily which type of Modern Girl emerged on the movie screen and magazine pages, it was not always clear whether the audience was supposed to admire or criticize their behavior. At times, positive representations of the Modern Girl included the description of them as frivolous, flirty, carefree, and fashionable. But these same characteristics were also belittled and chastised, even within seemingly flattering portrayals. Negative depictions often presented them as manipulative, ruthless, materialistic, and sexual. Nevertheless, some writers viewed these traits as admirable and desirable. The integration of both positive and negative remarks, often within the same narrative, functioned as a means for fictional writers to reflect Cubans simultaneous embrace and rejection of the Modern Girl.

78 “I love you, Kiss me” appeared in English. Carlos Deambrosis Martins, “Pinceladas” Bohemia 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 10, 18, 20.
The most common method of both accepting and dismissing the Modern Girl materialized in short stories in which writers portrayed fictional characters as inanimate objects of desire with superficial concerns and objectives. At times, idealized versions of a life of leisure depicted female characters void of emotion and complexity. In “Oh las ingenuas,” a lighthearted and seemingly positive representation of modern womanhood, the female protagonist receives praise from her husband, a man who enjoys seeing her in revealing outfits. The author depicts the fashionable “doll” spending her days laughing, gossiping, and watching the baby play with the nanny. In “La dama de los zapatos rojos,” the male protagonist has grown frustrated after the woman he had met via the telephone fails to arrive at their first encounter. He angrily declares that “all women are flirtatious, frivolous, [and] curious.” Other stories turned the Modern Girl into an object of pleasure that had transgressed the bounds of acceptable behavior. Having become a liability to men, the women needed to be ignored and rejected. In “Donde se encuentra el amor?” the author claims that those who look for “mujercitas frívolas,” within automobiles, cabarets, and brothels, are looking for love in the wrong places. In “La otra,” a story about a man who contemplates murdering his wife for going out at all hours and committing adultery, the female character personifies “bad instincts, perversity, [and] vice.”

79 Consuelo Morillo de Govantes, “¡Oh las ingenuas!” Bohemia 15:15 (April 13, 1924), 11.
80 Rosario Sansores y Pren, “La dama de los zapatos rojos” Bohemia 15:10 (March 9, 1924), 5, 25.
81 Pedro Antonio González Llorente, “¿Donde se encuentra el amor?” Flirt 1:1 (March 1922), 20.
82 M. Pot-Rodo, “La otra” Bohemia 14:26 (July 1, 1923), 10-11, 18.
Criticism of the Modern Girl also came in the form of direct attacks. Columnist Roger de Lauria accused one female reader of being frivolous and “like most all other women of the time” a flirt who “enjoys playing with men’s hearts.” According to de Lauria, “flirting is like a mask that hides from the world the most beautiful thing women possess: emotion.” Others agreed that frivolous and flirtatious behavior, traits associated with the Modern Girl, hampered the image of women in the eyes of men. They blamed women for employing these modern characteristics, methods that they believed led to manipulation and deceit. They also connected female conduct to the lack of legal rights for women. Essayist and literary critic Jorge Mañach argued that denying women the right to “live naturally” had made them frivolous and that conceding them their natural rights would make them “free, spontaneous, direct: a person apt to look at men in the face, without the guises of flirting….” Finding themselves limited to the opportunities that men conceded them, women directed all their efforts to “praising or tricking men…into submission or falseness.” Mañach blamed “the stubbornness of the gallant man and the frivolous woman” for this impediment to women’s natural development.

Many feminists had incorporated the traditional rhetoric of morality to achieve political and legal rights, especially during the congresses. As a result, a contradiction existed between the life of leisure that characterized the Modern Girl and the notion that women represented the moral compass of the home and nation. Most female activists spoke in general terms about women’s moral obligations, however a few focused on the temptations of immoral activities for modern women. Just prior to the first congress,

83 Roger de Lauria, “Ellas y yo: epistolario romántico” Bohemia 12:39 (September 25, 1921), 12, 23.
84 Jorge Mañach, “Una posición feminista” Más Allá 3:5 (March 1, 1930), 13.
feminist Dulce María Borrero de Luján wrote about the correlation between corruption in government and the lack of morality in childrearing. She blamed the problem on “the spiritual and mental weakness” of women attracted to “the love of luxury,” and to a “more comfortable” and “more chic” lifestyle.\(^{85}\) Thus, the way of life of the Modern Girl became linked to the social concern over immorality.

Feminists not only attacked the life of leisure and luxury associated with the Modern Girl. They also connected the issue of sexual promiscuity to the emergence of modern trends. In their congress speeches, feminists María Cabrera de Fernández and Hortensia Lamar alluded to cultural changes as possible deterrence to the well-being of women. They argued for increasing women’s rights and opportunities as a means of better preparing them politically, socially, and economically. “Immorality invades and destroys everything,” asserted de Fernández. Moreover, women often “fall” because “they are unprepared to defend themselves against the temptations that surround them.”\(^{86}\) Lamar reasoned that to remain the center of the home, women needed “to obtain all the civil and political rights that men enjoy.” She believed it imperative that women obtain instruction “about the outside dangers” that influence and debilitate the home. Furthermore, Lamar asked for “mothers to be vigilant of the new generation” in order to assist them during “the crisis of dangerous change.”\(^{87}\) Addressing the topic once again in 1927, Lamar criticized frivolous women, asserting that “cultured, brave, hard-working

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\(^{86}\) María Cabrera de Fernández, “Actuación de la mujer en sociedad,” Stoner Collection, First Congress, Reel 2, Document 40, April 1923.

\(^{87}\) Hortensia Lamar, “Protección y defensa del hogar cubano,” Stoner Collection, First Congress, Reel 2, Document 40, April 1923.
women...are more women, more feminine than the timid, empty, ignorant, sweet, 
muñeca de placer.”

Women thus received mixed messages. Representations that celebrated the Modern Girl labeled frivolous and flirty conduct glamorous and desirable, satirical parodies praised and belittled these traits, and negative portrayals viewed them as detrimental to societal perceptions of women. Looking back at her adolescence, poet and prose writer Graziella Garbalosa commented on the emergence of the Modern Girl during her adolescent years. Garbalosa remembered “la garconne,” a new type of “hybrid woman,” as the introduction of a symbolic feminine figure for “an age of transcendental transition.” However, rather than recalling her youth positively as a time in which women obtained increased rights, Garbalosa remarked on how the “dazzling and painful” period, in which women “broke their patriarchal chains,” had led to their losing “the prerogatives that men had conceded to the delicate sex.” Lost privileges ranged from those of trivial courtesies, such as men offering their seat on the train, to the role women played in maintaining the morality of future generations. The complex and contradictory understanding of women’s rights in relationship to modern trends was exemplified in Garbalosa’s comments. Even after twenty years, Garbalosa associated the period with a loss of traditional gender roles, rather than with the opportunity to work as a successful author within a male-dominated profession.

It would have been impossible for a single definition of Cuban womanhood to have been established during the rapid modernization of the 1920s. The ideals of the

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89 Graziella Garbalosa, Tres Cuentos de la abuela a la nieta (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la nación, 1944), 14-15.
feminist movement clashed with the representation of the Modern Girl as a woman of leisure. Moreover, neither the feminist position of obtaining ground-breaking rights for women through traditional discourse nor the varied portrayals of the Modern Girl resulted in a one-dimensional characterization of Cuban women. Attempts at defining and classifying modern womanhood led to an array of views that could be interpreted in numerous ways. For the most part, the archetype of the Modern Girl was embraced by mainstream society. But more often than not, Cubans mocked and belittled the acceptable version of the Modern Girl, while vilifying the more sexualized and contentious archetype. The reality of the Modern Girl was much more complex than any one characterization of the archetype. Aware of the difficulties in adopting the persona of the Modern Girl, women chose the traits and conduct that best suited their realities at any given moment.

Conclusion

The feminist movement incorporated the traditional rhetoric of the social reform movement that had taken hold of Cuban politics during the 1920s. Placing themselves in the familiar roles of national mothers and moralizers made it easier for feminists to fight within the male realm of politics, obtain their progressive goals, and be perceived as a non-threat to the male hierarchy. However, feminists did not become a part of mainstream society in the same way as the persona of the Modern Girl. Embracing the archetypical figure facilitated Cubans recognition of the inevitable cultural changes taking place, while also dismissing them as insignificant. The question was not whether modern values would be accepted, but rather how to incorporate them into established
notions of Cuban womanhood. As a result, most discussions of the Modern Girl appeared to be from proponents who welcomed the modern trends affecting gender norms, while overt critiques focused on the consequences of incorporating too many of the Modern Girl traits. Yet, most commentary remained dismissive and belittling. Used as a technique to warn women to not take themselves too seriously and appease those uneasy about the emergent trends, representations of the Modern Girl became a familiar aspect of Cuban society.

The icon of the Modern Girl reflected actual changes in cultural practices. Young women throughout the island participated in the transformative act of dressing and behaving differently than their mothers. Within a generation, the young woman who peeked out the window at her love interest had become the fashionable and assertive Modern Girl who strolled down the streets. However, young women faced the challenge of encompassing contradictory characteristics for the purpose of appealing to a wide group of people. It was not as simple as deciding between the juxtaposed figures of the traditional and modern woman. Even those who looked for guidance within the numerous and exceedingly popular representations of the Modern Girl confronted diverse portrayals. The abundance of multiple understandings of what it meant to be a Modern Girl made it increasingly difficult for young women to decipher which modern feminine traits Cubans considered desirable and acceptable, and which they deemed inappropriate. As made evident in the following chapter, the appearance of this modern figure became a matter of national debate.
Chapter Three: Fashion as Expression

Introduction

Columnist Ana María Borrero connected fashion to Cuban culture and nationalism when she described how at the Conferencia Internacional Americana “the elegance of our women, in this case, is not simply an issue of clothing, but rather ample proof of civilization and culture.” Advice columnists Estela Arza and Enriqueta Planas de Modeda made a different sort of correlation between fashion and modernity on the one hand, and Cuban identity on the other. They attributed the adoption of the bob haircut and short skirts not to international fads, but to hygiene and comfort, essential components for women leading active lives in Cuba’s tropical climate. In contrast, male writers often employed satire to minimize the connection between women following the latest trends and experiencing greater cultural freedoms. This method also served to touch upon larger social concerns and fears. In one humorous editorial on women’s relationship to fashion, writer Roberto de Arbin portrayed women as victimized mannequins who had lost their personality and simply become objects attired in the latest styles. He jokingly wondered whether these “slaves to fashion” had a soul. An editorial

1 Ana María Borrero, “La elegancia en broma y en serio” Social 13:2 (February 1928), 64.

2 Bohemia published “Sugestiones” from September 1924 until at least November 1926. Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia (January 1922-February 1924); Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” Bohemia (September 1924-November 1926).

3 Roberto de Arbin, “El alma del maniquí” Bohemia 15:36 (September 7, 1924), 9.
in *La Política Cómica* mocked women for following ridiculous trends, including that of masculine outfits. To make the point that “women go crazy over wearing men’s clothing,” the illustrator drew a farcical depiction of a group of women posing triumphantly in over-sized hats and striped suits.⁴

Varying in tone and intention, these commentaries became a part of the larger dispute over the definition of acceptable parameters for modern Cuban women. At times, these discussions on changing styles and their influence on gender norms seemed overt, as in the case of “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas,” a series of opinion pieces published on the bob haircut. In the span of a few weeks, approximately thirty male and female writers shared their contradictory views on the popular and ubiquitous bob haircut.⁵ This format provided a space for influential Cubans to discuss their varied perspectives not only on the overnight phenomenon of the bob, but on the social impact of modern trends. Their opinions offered the public a reflection of their own embrace, ambiguity, and rejection of emergent cultural practices. Thus, within this tangible framework, the significance of modern trends on understandings of ideal Cuban womanhood became unquestionable.

However, most of the debate took place in the numerous editorials, columns, illustrations, photographs, and short stories, as commentators participated in an indirect dialogue with each other and readers. Notions of modernity, agency, sexuality, and frivolity intersected in the varied representations of the fashion-conscious, cosmopolitan Modern Girl. This resulted simultaneously in the dismissal of fashion and beauty as

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⁴ “Los caprichos de la moda: El bombín de doña Goya” *La Política Cómica* 19:984 (October 26, 1924), 8.

⁵ “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” *Bohemia* (February 17, 1924- March 30, 1924).
inconsequential and harmless, and an awareness of the centrality of the issues in respects to shifting gender norms. The desire to join the world of modernity affected the treatment and perception of women. At stake was whether the adoption of customs associated with modernity would empower women, allowing them to gain recognition as more than wives, mothers, and objects of desire, or would the behavior be mocked, belittled, and dismissed as the actions of frivolous women. The expression of modernity through physical appearance often led to the reinforcement that the value of women laid in their beauty and sexual appeal, rather than in their personality traits and life experiences. Nevertheless, modern fashion trends served as an important means of articulating a new-found sense of independence.

Conversations about fashion provided a space for Cubans to take a stand in support of or in opposition to the emergent opportunities, freedoms, and roles for women. However, this debate made for unlikely alliances. On one side, feminists bemoaned the correlation between physical appearance and the assertion of women’s rights. They believed that the expression of female liberties through the superficial markers of fashion minimized the seriousness of feminists’ objectives. Male critics of the new fashions, along with a few women defending traditional views, also focused on the frivolity of fashion, casting women as slaves and victims of international whims. Moreover, they scoffed at the masculine attire and haircuts that conflicted with notions of traditional femininity. On the opposing side, women throughout Cuba eagerly adopted the trends and hairstyles they associated with the international Modern Girl. Magazines dedicated extensive coverage to fashion, with columnists stressing the importance and seriousness of following the latest styles. Female journalists further connected emergent trends to
keeping up with the demands of modern life. Male proponents of the Modern Girl celebrated the sex appeal and attractiveness of exposed legs, shoulders, and necks. But their embrace of the new styles often carried a voyeuristic, sexual, and belittling tone. The act of mocking women’s so-called obsession with fashion served as a diversionary tactic. It provided an outlet to express anxieties about changing gender roles, loss of male control, and women’s expression of sexuality, while allowing men to appear unconcerned about impending threats to their masculinity. It also served to diminish the importance of women’s political, legal, and cultural gains.

Articles and columns on fashion and beauty did more than serve as a platform for discussing the Modern Girl. They added to the descriptors, adjectives, and traits that defined the Modern Girl, making her come to life in the vivid narratives and illustrations. Furthermore, the diverse depictions of fashion styles offered women a variety of archetypical representations of the Modern Girl. Distinctive characteristics became the focal point of the archetypes, including sexuality, materialism, masculinity, frivolity, and passivity. Slightly different descriptions corresponded with the authors’ message, as demonstrated in the different settings, personalities, morals, and appearances of their characteristic Modern Girl. These humorous, dramatic, and exaggerated portrayals presented an extreme example to Cuban women, allowing them to find a mid-way point to emulate. As a result, popular magazines provided middle class and upwardly mobile women with a tangible means of becoming a Modern Girl. They offered them assistance in their never-ending attempts to keep up with the latest styles, while also assessing whether they conformed to social standards. As they looked through the pages of magazines, young women obtained advice on how short to wear their skirts, which
accessories to use, and whether or not they should wear stockings. And even as they embraced certain trends, they continued to gauge their popularity and acceptability. Moreover, they received guidance on the suitability of certain styles for specific outings, age groups, and marital status.

The process of questioning, emulating, deciphering, and selecting trends directly related to the overall cultural changes transforming the daily life of women. This form of expression facilitated various developments, including their claims of independence, assertions about a modern identity, and connection to the international Modern Girl. The outer appearance of women hinted at the cultural freedoms that they experienced in everyday life. Taking on partial aspects of the dress and look of the Modern Girl eased women into their recently-discovered modern identity, while allowing them to experiment with different variations of the archetype. Bobbing their hair, wearing sleeveless dresses, and showing their legs served as a rite of passage and a means of adopting a modern persona. Furthermore, dressing up as the archetypical Modern Girl fit with the fantasy depicted on the movie screen and magazines pages. Following modern trends also tied women to their counterparts abroad. Associating themselves with the international Modern Girl became a means to separate themselves further from their mothers and draw themselves closer to the glamorous lifestyle of the Modern Girl.

The world of fashion and beauty thus allowed women to express their new-found freedoms, develop their own modern identity, and live up to an international fantasy. In the process they were trivialized and belittled, especially by male authors, as empty-headed, frivolous dolls. Such was the case when writer Carlos Deambrosis Martins
referred to thin women as the “woman-doll, woman-toy of men.” Emphasis on the body through increased attention to fashion and beauty served to reinforce stereotypes of women as decorative objects. However, it also offered women a sense of control over their bodies and a space in which to express their liberation from social confinement.

Following the latest styles became an indicator of membership in an international lifestyle that was cosmopolitan, elegant, and modern. Yet, trendy clothes, accessories, and hairstyles were not markers designated exclusively for the upper-class living in Havana. Connoting a certain level of prominence and opportunity for leisure outside the home, modern clothing became a status symbol coveted by those within the middle class. *La Política Cómica* mocked this correlation between fashion and a desire for upwardly mobile status in a fictional dispute between an unemployed husband and his wife. The woman, asserting that simple clothing is only suited for working-class women and that even during times of economic hardship she will remain in “the latest fashions,” is countered with “you should be a better wife and wake up to the realities of life.” She ignores his pleas, and moreover avoids being associated with her poorly-dressed husband while in public.

Women across Cuba who kept up with most, or even some, of the trends emanating from popular magazines linked themselves with the elite of the capital, while also referencing their position within the growing middle class. As a result, women taking on any part of the persona of the Modern Girl indirectly fostered their own, as well as their families’, class status. Wearing expensive and stylish clothing became a middle-

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6 Carlos Deambrosis Martins, “Pinceladas” *Bohemia* 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 18.

class aspiration, similar to that of owning household appliances and automobiles.

Popular magazines reinforced this connection between fashion and class by making references to the international fashion scene. Describing the latest styles coming out of New York, London, and Paris, they guided readers on how to shop while in Europe as well as dress appropriately for “parties” and “soirees.” It did not matter that this advice did not apply to the majority of Cuban women who would never travel abroad or attend high-society balls. It served as an ideal, a fantasy, a means of making their reality a little more glamorous, cosmopolitan, and modern. And moreover, it separated them from the lower classes in their community and connected them to the middle and upper classes in urban centers.

**Slaves to Fashion**

Certain trends became an expression of women’s recently-attained freedoms. Revealing clothes and sporty attire directly related to the new customs and roles of women in the social sphere. As a result, the ambiguous reactions of Cubans to shifting gender norms resulted in mixed messages on emergent styles. Becoming another arena in which to debate the position of women, the popular media expressed varying views on the topic. Presented as both a mundane issue of little significance and a space in which to discuss changing gender norms, journalists generated significant conversation on fashion trends, specifically those related to skirt length and dress design. Female writers tended to categorize the fashion world as the terrain of elegant, active, and practical members of modern society, while their male counterparts often labeled women as victims of the fashion industry, materialistic deviants, and sexualized objects. Viewed as a focal point
from which to express varied perspectives, the mainstream media consequently reflected and drove discussions over appropriate gendered behavior. Female readers participated as well, sending letters to columnists for affirmation or guidance on the different styles that consciously or not they recognized as part of their new modern identity.

Fashion served as an international language that linked women on the island to like-minded women overseas. The fashion scene of New York and Paris conjured up captivating images of elegance in the minds of Cubans. These two cities specifically held the most fascination for women seeking to emulate the *chic* foreigners. Writer Carlos Deambrosis Martins commented on the tendency of Cuban women to look abroad for guidance. “They are always *al último grito* of Paris and New York,” he asserted “since nowadays the greatest sin is to be out of style.”

Magazines assisted women in their quest to be up-to-date with numerous articles and columns on the latest trends from abroad. *Elegancias*, the only magazine in Cuba dedicated exclusively to fashion, included among its features “*La influencia de otras modas,*” “*Trajes de soiree,*” “*Los modelos de la quinta avenida,*” and “*Paris presenta modelos de un chic singular.*” Other popular magazines carried similar titles and moreover they adopted the practice of having columnists assume French pseudonyms, such as Henriette, Jacqueline, Mademoiselle D’Arles, and Madame La Fleur. For those who could afford to travel abroad, foreign fashions purchased in the United States and Europe became a marker of status.

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8 Carlos Deambrosis Martins, “Pinceladas” *Bohemia* 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 18.

9 These features appeared in several issues of *Elegancias* during 1921 and 1922.

10 These columns appeared in *Elegancias, Social, Almanaque Social.*
discussing summer styles, advice columnist Planas noted that many women had already bought their summer clothing on their trips to Europe the previous winter.\textsuperscript{11}

The representation of the Modern Girl connected women to one another. The May 1928 cover of \textit{Social} featured an illustration by caricaturist Conrado Massageur of a Modern Girl holding four figurines of international Modern Girls. The women, with different modern outfits and bobs, appeared to represent the Modern Girl in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and the United States.\textsuperscript{12} Women expressed their fascination with other cultures by sending in photographs of themselves dressed up in gypsy costumes,\textsuperscript{13} and the kimono appeared in fictional accounts as the apparel of independent and sexually-confident women.\textsuperscript{14} A group picture in \textit{Chic} depicted women at a festival donning outfits from the United States, China, Italy, and Brazil.\textsuperscript{15} By creating a fantasy through

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\textsuperscript{11} Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” \textit{Bohemia} 16:20 (May 17, 1925), 25. \\
\textsuperscript{12} See illustration depicted above: Conrado Massageur, \textit{Social} 13:11 (November 1928), 1. \\
\textsuperscript{13} Among the illustrations and photographs: This issue of “Sugestiones” featured a drawing of a woman in a “Traje de gitana.” Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” \textit{Bohemia} 16:7 (February 15, 1925), 25; \textit{Chic} featured a photograph of two women in a gypsy costume. \textit{Chic} 9:54 (February 1920), 20; \textit{Chic} featured a photograph of a woman in a gypsy costume. \textit{Chic} 11:86 (October 1922), 24; An illustration of a woman in a gypsy costume accompanied the short story “La gitana rubia.” María del Amparo Borras, “La gitana rubia” \textit{Bohemia} 16:5 (February 1, 1925), 10, 26. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Armando R. Maribona, “El preso” \textit{Bohemia} 12:42 (October 16, 1921), 5, 22; Gerardo del Valle Alvareda, “La interviu” \textit{Bohemia} 15:3(January 20, 1924), 5. \\
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Chic} featured a photograph of a group of Cubans at a festival. \textit{Chic} 11:87 (November 1922), 32. 
\end{flushleft}
costumes, women tied themselves to one another, but they also experimented with their own identity. Dressing up allowed women to convert themselves temporarily into a Modern Girl.

The preoccupation with fashion was so prevalent that it became the focus of various satirical pieces. Humorous portrayals of fashion-obsessed women spoke to the widespread attention new styles received within Cuba as well as to the fascination of women with their modern counterparts within the international community. In an effort to dramatize the relationship between young women and the fashion world, Muecas presented a fictional anecdote of a young woman becoming so shocked by a fashion magazine that she loses her mind, and subsequently goes into an asylum. The publication mockingly compared fashion to feminist rhetoric with a statement about how “without achieving a fashionable silhouette, it is impossible to regenerate the nation.”

Satirical publications also derided Cuban women’s emulation of foreign styles. La Política Cómica ridiculed women in outlandish French trends for not only donning strange hats, Chinese nightgowns lined with fur, and dresses with Egyptian designs on them, but for adopting styles that, according to the author, elegant women in France did not wear. A cartoon in Muecas also associated the latest summer and winter trends with more “exotic” apparel. The illustration depicted women in two outfits, one African-inspired and the other Eskimo-inspired. The portrayal of women as fashion-obsessed, absurd,

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18 “Humorismo extraña” Muecas 2:10 (March 5, 1922), 19.
and irrational demonstrated that to men fashion served as another means of belittling and
dismissing the actions of modern women.

Perhaps, the most outlandish modern fashion trend was that of masculine attire.
The popularity and acceptability of the style in Cuba is questionable. Without
photographs of Cuban women in masculine attire and fashion columnists assertion that
women had adopted the style, it is difficult to ascertain whether the look achieved
widespread popularity. However, references to the masculine look in mainstream
magazines indicate that Cubans embraced it as that belonging to a type of Modern Girl,
albeit for the most part a foreign one. The columns “Ellas y yo” and “Sugestiones”
included illustrations of Cuban women wearing a tie,\textsuperscript{19} while photographs of American
actresses in ties appeared in two separate issues of \textit{Bohemia}.\textsuperscript{20}

In contrast to the scant
representations in mainstream
magazines, the satirical publication
\textit{La Política Cómica} proclaimed the
masculine style as prominent among
Cuban women. It declared the “\textit{a lo
garsona}” look the most recent “rage
affecting the world.” Moreover, it
admired “the adorable bobs and
captivating \textit{garsona} outfits in which beautiful \textit{cubanitas} look so good.” However, not all

\textsuperscript{19} Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” \textit{Bohemia} 16:2 (January 11, 1925), 25; Roger de Lauria,
“Ellas y yo: epistolario romántico” \textit{Bohemia} 12:38 (September 18, 1921), 12.

\textsuperscript{20} “Actualidades” \textit{Bohemia} 16:34 (August 23, 1925), 14; \textit{Bohemia} 16:42 (October 18, 1925), 1.
masculine outfits received its approval with the bowler hat and walking stick labeled as “ridiculous exaggerations.” This was in part due to the fact that these items did not sexualize women in the same manner as exposed necks and legs and close-fitting clothing. The publication expressed its enthusiastic support of masculine attire through complimentary language as well as overtly-sexual references. It exclaimed that the striped suit, collared shirt, and tie looked wonderful on the “pretty and well-shaped” muchachita, especially when it was possible to glance at her legs in the short skirt.

La Política Cómica also assessed that the new masculine look enjoyed societal approval. It depicted young women in masculine clothing receiving praise from licentious bystanders as well as potential husbands and family members. According to the editorial, admirers turned into instant boyfriends, making parents embrace the new style for its ability “to solve the problem of [finding] boyfriends.” In comparing the new style to the woman’s previous bun and long skirt, a fictional boyfriend proclaims “You look like another woman. Before, you looked like a priest; but now that I observe in you things that I could not have suspected, I find you adorable. I knew your soul; but until now I did not know your body. Whenever you want lets go to the judge and get married.” Thus, men approved of the style as long as it accentuated female bodies and turned women into sexual objects. Satirical editorials participated in the social tendency

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21 The author asserted that “Maríblanca” (presumably feminist Maríblanca Sabas Aloma) was among those adopting the walking stick. “Los caprichos de la moda: El bombín de doña Goya” La Política Cómica 19:984 (October 26, 1924), 8.

22 See illustration depicted above: “La tiranía de la moda: Los vestidos de las ‘garsonas’” La Política Cómica 19:983 (October 19, 1924), 8.

23 Ibid., 8.
to sexualize the Modern Girl, but they also imparted support for modern behavior within the context of exaggerated and comical parodies.

Unlike masculine attire, the popularity of the short skirt was indisputable. Its widespread adoption comes through in visual representations as well as in the proliferation of commentary on the emergent fashion trend. Discussions on the impact of the short skirt on Cubans centered not just on the style as an international fashion statement connoting modernity and sexuality, but as a sensible fashion design suited specifically to the needs of Cuban women. The issue of skirt length became a principal concern of Cubans with illustrations and editorials on the topic. Columnist Sofía detailed for readers recent developments with eight drawings that traced the style of wearing skirts. The illustrations depicted the popularity of long skirts in 1916, followed by just below the knees in 1926, above the knees in 1928, and ankle length in 1929-30.²⁴

Attempting to explain the drastic modifications of skirt length, some female writers attributed the changes to profits, not changes in trends and notions of propriety. Sofía viewed the comeback of the long skirt in part as the desire of manufacturers to increase profits through the sale of larger quantities of cloth.²⁵ Nena and Juanita, the authors of “La falda larga y la flapper,” agreed with this explanation. They described how in 1919 the short skirt had gained popularity worldwide as a design that provided “comfort, aesthetics, and good health.” But in 1923, despite the belief that the long skirt had “disappeared once and for all,” manufacturers insisted on bringing back the style as a means of increasing revenue. Nena and Juanita explained how “the vast majority of

²⁴ Sofía, “Faldas largas” Más Allá 3:2 (January 15, 1930), 32.
²⁵ Ibid., 32.
millions of women in the Americas remain addicted to the short skirt.” They added that women that did not want to give up “their health, comfort, and youthfulness maintain their hair and skirt short.” Thus, despite the sentiment that the fashion world dictated styles in terms of profits, not female demands and needs, some women rejected these outside forces and claimed that they would follow styles that suited their practical needs.

An emphasis on the functional elements of the short skirt, including comfort and hygiene, demonstrated that for women the issue of fashion was important and directly related to their modern lifestyle. Some female writers even connected the practical use of the short skirt to the specific situation of Cuban women. Numerous columns by Estela Arza and Enriqueta Planas de Moneda attributed its success in Cuba to the demands of everyday life. In 1922, Arza asserted that despite their elegance, long skirts were not popular in Cuba where women wear skirts 3 to 4 inches below the knee. She argued that short skirts which were “lighter and more comfortable” suited the dusty and warm conditions of the island, a factor that forced Cubans to think about making “fashion styles especially for us.” Two years later, Planas noted the widespread appeal of short and tight skirts, a trend that “after reigning for so long will be difficult to substitute,” since it is “hygienic and comfortable.” The embrace of attire based on its convenience and suitability to women’s needs did not apply solely to the short skirt. On the contrary, it


was just one of the many emergent styles created to accommodate the everyday demands of modern women.

Inspired by the realities of modern life, international designers modeled their clothes to suit women’s increasingly active lives. Through numerous advice columns, editorials, and advertisements, it became evident that women adopted certain trends as a means of meeting practical needs, and not just simply to keep up with the times. Fashion sections referred to the requirements of this new lifestyle in their depictions of “outfits for the street,” “outfits for the automobile,” “outfits for the beach,” and “outfits for sports.”29 Planas described street clothes as “more sober and rational” with “a very practical sporty air.”30 Portrayals of casual attire presented readers with the visual and descriptive imagery of a vigorous daily routine that included shopping in the city, outings in the country, and playing sports at the club. Moreover, depictions of athletic women played a central role in a variety of columns and advertisements, these included illustrations of them by the ocean, on the golf course, on horseback, and on the tennis court.

Fashion experts endorsed specific articles of clothing and looks for their adaptability to the demanding lives of modern women. Among the products that had been modified to correspond better with outside activities and allow women greater freedom of movement was the girdle. Advertisements for “Bon Ton” girdles claimed that they provided support as well as comfort, with one in particular using an illustration of a woman playing golf to make their point.31 Planas described how modern girdles fit more

29 Fashion columnists in a variety of magazines, including Social, Elegancias, and Chic labeled outfits according to outings.

comfortably, and moreover were used only to enhance certain outfits. Writer Isabel de Palencia celebrated the limited use of girdles, and other items deemed “uncomfortable and unhygienic.” However, she lamented the prevalence of other “complications and dangers,” including make-up, hair dye, perms, and massages, activities that took as much time as “tying up the dress with ribbons and corsets.” The introduction of modern trends resulted in less restrictions in certain respects, but continued emphasis on women’s physical attributes meant that women had to spend time, money, and energy on maintaining their appearance.

Female writers stressed the correlation between practical outfits and the demands of modern life. However, they recognized the irony within the fashion industry of creating styles that facilitated women’s busy schedules, while insisting that women keep up with the latest trends. “The problem of modern life, daily life,” commented columnist Ana María Borrero was that every day it was more “complex and dizzying,” but nevertheless “it imposed like a contradiction, the simplification of accessories.” Others argued that the style of the Modern Girl epitomized simplicity and practicality. According to Nena and Juanita, the customary daytime outfit of the flapper, undecorated hats, sporty shoes without heels, and short skirts, made them appear as if they had just been playing tennis. In fact, they argued that flappers believed in substituting fashion for comfort, and rejecting “superfluous clothing.”

31 “Bon Ton” Bohemia 12:42 (October 16, 1921), 19; “Bon Ton” Social 8:9 (September 1923), 66.
33 Isabel de Palencia, “Eva moderna” Social 12:1 (January 1927), 53, 68.
The issue of how to incorporate new fashion trends became a primary concern of Cuban women. Their uncertainties centered on the acceptability of certain styles for their own social circles, class, age, and marital status. Numerous fashion and advice columns dealt with the issue of choosing age-appropriate clothing. A set of illustrations in *Elegancias* delineated the six stages of women’s lives according to age brackets and fashion designs.\(^{36}\) Overly-decorative and outlandish attire was viewed as unacceptable and unattractive on women over a specific age. *La Política Cómica* mocked older women for adopting the dress style “*a lo garsona,*” claiming that “young and pretty women” can wear anything and provoke love, but that older women should realize that the attire only suits “young women between fifteen and thirty.”\(^{37}\) Marital status did not necessarily limit women to a certain wardrobe. Arza explained that the “the color and style” of clothing may vary depending on a person’s age, but that a young married woman can wear outfits similar to those of single women.\(^{38}\) Female writers also targeted adolescent women in hopes of demonstrating the necessity of dressing according to age as well as social function. *Magazine del Hogar* presented young women with two types of fictional characters as a means of illustrating that there were variations of modern attire, with one option deemed more appropriate and attractive for young women to emulate. María in her “very simple dress, a white georgette” (a sailor girl-type outfit) and very short blond bob received more attention and admiration than Elena, a young


\(^{36}\) “Las seis edades de la mujer, según el modisto” *Elegancias* 1:9 (October 1921), 6-7.

\(^{37}\) “La tiranía de la moda: Los vestidos de las ‘garsonas’” *La Política Cómica* 19:983 (October 19, 1924), 8.

woman dressed with “bows, lace, and designs, giving her the impression of an exhibition doll.”  

The notion that fashion had rendered women into dolls and mannequins appeared in numerous other articles and editorials. Either explicitly or through satire, these metaphors often connoted disdain for modern trends and behavior. Female critics tended to be more direct in their disapproval. Fanny Crespo scorned women’s revealing attire and compared women to “cut-out dolls from French magazines.” She warned that women were behaving so strange that future generations would be puzzled by the “immorality of these girls.” The humorous editorials of male writers often took on a more light-hearted tone, while still criticizing the frivolity of the fashion world and women’s devotion to it. The comparison of women to dolls and mannequins served to belittle women by turning them into lifeless bodies incapable of emotion and intellect. This was an especially useful technique that facilitated maintaining the patriarchal order, since women could easily be dismissed as unfit to compete with men as equals. Male commentators often ridiculed specific trends, rather than blaming women directly. Writer Roberto de Arbin accused the fashion industry of “feeding off the bodies of adolescents and blooming dreams.” He viewed women in bobs and masculine attire as mannequins looking for “something mundane and exotic, anything but sadness.” De Arbin pitied their victimization by others who stared at them, but forgot about them, seeing only “the dress, the extravagance of fashion, [and] the designers.” Thus, female


40 Fanny Crespo, “Clises” *La Lucha* (September 26, 1929), 12.

41 Roberto de Arbin, “El alma del maniquí” *Bohemia* 15:36 (September 7, 1924), 9.
opponents of the Modern Girl held women accountable for their actions, while male critics feigned concern for women who had become victims of international whims.

The metaphors of women as dolls and mannequins also provided a means of sexually objectifying women. These correlations converted women not only into superficial entities void of value and substance, but into sexual predators. The expensive and revealing attire of the Modern Girl played a central role in these portrayals. Fictional writers that incorporated the terms dolls and mannequins created a persona admired and sought after for her beauty and elegance, while also vilified as frivolous and dangerous. Depictions emphasized the attire of female characters as a means to call upon a certain archetype, that of the Modern Girl whose selfish attitude and carefree lifestyle victimized men. The short story “Bajo los antifaces” presents an encounter between a woman and man who had ended a relationship when they were both adolescents. He laments that she has become a member of frivolous society, a “beautiful doll” and “mannequin of silk and pearls.” She has attained certain luxuries, but is leading an empty life lacking in the love she had with him, a humble poet whose affection she discarded.42 In the short story “El casino de la playa,” the father disapproves of his son’s habit of going to casinos where he wastes money and spends time with “suspect women,” represented as “mannequin women of the great designers who wear their outfits too short, transparent, and showing too much cleavage and back.” One woman in particular steals money from the son and thus forces him to return home in disgrace.43

42 Gerardo del Valle Albareda, “Bajo los antifaces” Bohemia 15:9 (March 2, 1924), 6, 23.
Representations of the Modern Girl as scantily-dressed and frivolous mirrored as well as affected the perception of modern fashion styles as overly-sexual and corrupting. “Female fashion styles of today are tempting,” asserted a humorous editorial in La Política Cómica. “Large cleavages, transparent blouses, short skirts and throbbing curves…delirium! If we keep this trend, soon elegance, chic, and honorability will have to be looked for in the undergarments.”44 The perception of modern fashion trends as immoral resulted in condemnation from Catholic clergy members who instructed female parishioners to dress more discreetly.45 La Política Cómica interjected their views on the issue by offering their support to women who had rejected the demands of the church. In an attempt to mock the concerns of the clergy, La Política Cómica urged women to “present their beauty just as it is.”46 The satirical publication not only ridiculed the church, but it also dismissed their views as over-reactionary and old-fashioned. To make their point, La Política Cómica included a conversation between a fictional female character and her husband. The wife recounts how at mass the priest had denounced women’s attire, as well as dances, the theater, and long courtships. When asked whether he agrees, the husband replies to not worry since the priest was only addressing “dumb and crazy women.”47 With this dialogue, the publication imparted to readers that all these concerns were trivial and harmless, since only “dumb and crazy women” posed a threat. The problem was that representations of the Modern Girl often belittled and dismissed women, attributing a broad range of behavior to “dumb and crazy women.”

44 “Lo que dice en la Habana” La Política Cómica 15:747 (April 11, 1920), 12.
45 “La pastoral de un obispo: Los trajes de las señoras” La Política Cómica 15:769 (September 12, 1920), 6.
46 Lo que dice en la Habana” La Política Cómica 15:773 (October 10, 1920), 13.
47 “A tontas y a locas” La Política Cómica 15:783 (December 19, 1920), 14.
The question of how modern trends affected perceptions of women drew a variety of responses. An examination of the conflicting opinions of men and women uncovers discrepancies in respects to how the sexes understood the impact of modern cultural practices on heterosexual relationships. Some male commentators embraced the popularity of revealing clothing as the fulfillment of their own sexual fantasies. “So attractive, so picaresque,” declared writer Rafael B. Santa Coloma in reference to short skirts. “And with so many possibilities.” Others preferred the allusion associated with traditional-dress styles. Published within the Cuban magazine Más Allá, an unnamed American male actor and female novelist debated how the reemergence of the long skirt had influenced male reaction to women. The male actor believed that bare legs and cleavage had been inducing at first, but that the novelty had worn off. “Now we return to the mystery, the hidden beauty. This change will help the eternal feminine coquette whose primordial purpose is to obtain or keep a husband.” The novelist argued that long skirts hampered friendships between men and women because “the dignity of the clothing imposes reserve.” As a result, she believed the trend of short skirts would return. The perception of many men was that alterations in female attire reflected strategies intended to appeal to male desires. In contrast, women focused on practical issues. The American novelist believed modern clothing encouraged female confidence, and hence led to friendships with men. As discussed earlier, Cuban journalists referred to hygiene, comfort, and the needs of active women in their commentaries on short skirts. Sexuality rarely entered into discussions dictated by women.

48 Rafael B. Santa Coloma, “Charlas del domingo” Bohemia 15:31 (August 3, 1924), 16-17.

49 Sofia, “Faldas largas” Más Allá 3:2 (January 15, 1930), 32.
The introduction of modern notions of womanhood corresponded with the adoption of international fashion styles and the proliferation of sexualized images of women. Some viewed the newly-liberated, scandalously-dressed Modern Girl as immoral, while others understood the icon as an indication that Cubans had joined the cosmopolitan trendsetters of North America and Europe. Discussions pertaining to emergent fashion styles were central to debates over shifting gender norms. The mainstream media presented readers with diverse characteristics of the Modern Girl. For the most part, female authors focused on the practical nature of fashion designs and male authors portrayed the Modern Girl as either a passive mannequin/doll or an overtly sexual body. These representations served to critique, belittle, and objectify female expressions of new-found freedoms through fashion. The opinions expressed within popular culture served to reflect, comment on, simplify, and stimulate public conversations on the impact of the Modern Girl on Cuban society. As the next section illustrates, many of the same characterizations and arguments used in discussions of female fashion were pertinent to the heated debate over women cutting their hair.

The Shorter the Better

Among the most significant changes in women’s appearance in the 1920s was that of cutting long hair into short bobs. There was a great deal at stake in Cuban women’s embrace of this symbol of the Modern Girl. An international phenomenon causing a stir at home and abroad, the new hairstyle became the focal point of debates over Cuban womanhood and appropriate gender norms. Similar to emergent fashion trends, the popular media through opinion pieces, contests, editorials, and advice columns
contributed its varied perspectives regarding the latest trend sweeping the nation. Explanations for the acceptability of this style included those of hygiene, comfort, and aesthetics, while those against it argued that Cuban women looked unsightly and manly. The majority of explicit remarks tended to be in favor of the trend, since vocalizing opposition would have gone against the inevitable tide of popularity. However, once again female and male proponents differed in tone, with women stressing its practical elements and men emphasizing its sexual appeal. Consequently, most men disapproved of the hair style on older women. Through their commentaries, readers and journalists alike offered more than their views on a hairdo. Rather, they used the opportunity to comment on national concerns regarding modernity, propriety, and acceptable gendered behavior.

By the end of the previous decade, it was evident that the international trend had reached Cuba, becoming a widespread and acceptable hairstyle by the mid-1920s. The narrative and illustrations found in most popular magazines, as well as the majority of photographs of female readers, revealed that by that time the bob had become ubiquitous.\(^{50}\) Those glancing at a magazine came across less than one in twenty women with long hair, and that included women from the provinces.\(^{51}\) As part of a national contest, *Bohemia* published over thirty photographs of women from throughout the

\(^{50}\) For example, see photograph depicted above: *Social* 8:2 (February 1923), 38.

\(^{51}\) I have not been able to verify whether black and *mulata* women also wore their hair in a bob, since I have been unable to locate photographs of Afro-Cuban women during the 1920s. They rarely appeared in popular magazines, and I have not been able to find any copies published during this time period of the elite Afro-Cuban magazine *Minerva*. I have also searched within secondary sources to no avail. However, photographs of black women in the United States during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance indicate that this trend was adopted within African-American communities. Moreover, the style was popular among prominent African-American women, including Josephine Baker, Bessie Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, and Florence Mills.
island. They included their name, city, and number of received votes, with the top three candidates receiving 7871, 6048, and 4993 votes, respectively. Participants resided in both large cities and small towns, including among them Havana, Ciego de Avila, Sancti-Spiritus, Caibarién, Jatibonico, and Pinar del Río. Moreover, cities throughout Cuba held their own local contests.

Despite the overwhelming adoption of the bob, women continued to question whether they too should cut their long locks and join the international fad. Their hesitation could be explained in part by the desire that the hairstyle first become acceptable and widespread within their own social circles and community. This reluctance was especially understandable for women with strict parents or controlling husbands. Those within the popular media tried to appease their concerns. From 1921 to 1924, advice columnist Estela Arza reassured female readers of all ages that the style continued in popularity and that they should join in the trend. In 1924 and 1925, advice columnist Enriqueta Planas de Modeda told readers the same. “The bob will still be used and it is really difficult that it end,” Planas wrote. “They assure you that it is no

52 “Nuestro concurso de melenitas” Bohemia (March 23, 1924-June 1, 1924).


54 In On Becoming Cuban, Louis A. Pérez Jr. notes that there were cases in which husbands divorced, and even murdered, their wives in reaction to their cutting their hair in a bob. Ibid., 319.


longer used? It is a shame that you allow yourself to be influenced and do not judge with your own eyes.”⁵⁷ She suggested that women who doubted this claim call a particular beauty salon in Havana where they could be informed of how many bobs were cut in a day. And as late as 1930, La Mujer claimed that “The bob has imposed itself and despite the efforts by some restless individuals to eliminate it, all women regardless of age and social position embrace it.”⁵⁸

Those in support of the bob explained that the style was hygienic, comfortable, and ideal for women’s active lives. Moreover, they affirmed its popularity. “The bob is the universal haircut most in style,” Arza asserted. She insisted that just based on comfort and hygiene it should never cease to be popular, especially in Cuba where the heat, dust, and lifestyle of women have forced her to wash her hair daily.⁵⁹ Planas used a similar argument when convincing a reader of the acceptability of the bob. “With the terrible heat, it is a blessing being able to bathe every day, submerging the head in the water.”⁶⁰ Advice columnist María Antonieta also encouraged a reader to bob her hair and become yet another “propagator of short hair,” explaining that not only is it “comfortable and hygienic,” but “one needs to march with the times.”⁶¹ She argued that long hair was appropriate during their grandmothers’ era when women left the house once a week at most and had servants helping them do their hair. “But today a time when women spend their lives on the street some by choice and others by necessity,” María

⁵⁷ Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” Bohemia 15:50 (December 14, 1924), 23.
⁵⁸ “Peinados” La Mujer 1:16 (June 30, 1930), 9.
Antonieta added, “la toilet must be as quick as possible…I repeat the bob will continue.”

Similar to the arguments made for short skirts, female journalists cited hygiene, comfort, and the changing lifestyle of Cuban women as not only justification for the bob, but logical reasoning for its acceptance based on the practical needs of women.

The significance of the discussion was not lost on the mainstream media. Journalists understood the importance of women’s hair in debates over modernity and the role of women in society. The male advice columnist of “Consultorio de belleza” asserted that the bob was “a symbol of women’s progress in our century.” La Mujer claimed that “the modern woman” was aware that long hair has been “one of the chains that enslave and impede her,” forcing her to focus her energies on grooming, rather than on more important tasks. Believed to be “one of the symbols of female weakness,” the magazine argued, it has allowed for the dismissive accusation that women never arrive anywhere on time. Others associated present-day reactions to the bob to the response other hairstyles have received in the past. Writer Marie Lyons argued that no other part of women’s physical appearance has caused such bitter controversy as the varying hairdos women have used over time. “A new style cannot come about without some moralist waiting to censure it,” Lyons asserted. “If a woman wears her hair in curls on top of her head” she is accused of being a vamp, and “if she cuts her hair into a bob, sacrificing her glorious curls, it is even worse.” And still, other writers focused on the significance of hair in respects to ideals of femininity. Writer Manuel Calzadilla asserted

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62 Sr. Editor de Belleza, “Consultorio de belleza” Social 9:7 (July 1924), 60.

63 “Peinados” La Mujer 1:16 (June 30, 1930), 9.

64 Marie Lyons, “Los peinados y su origen” Elegancias 1:8 (Septemebr 1921), 4-6.
that “the most natural adornment of women” has always been the beauty of her hair, a trait that makes her more feminine.65  *Magazine del Hogar* made a similar claim calling hair “something of great importance in life, greater without a doubt, than what we recognize at first. In it we place our strength, honor, beauty, [and] desire to please…In one word, everything that matters most to humans.”66

Trends in fashion and hairstyles facilitated self-expression of modern freedoms, but they also served to typecast women. Numerous editorials attested to the notion that clothes, accessories, and hairdos could be used as indicators of certain types of women. Women who adopted modern styles became associated with the Modern Girl. However, a variety of versions of the Modern Girl were available to women through the emulation of different looks. Simply by altering their hair, women could embody another persona. “El alma del bob” argued that a woman “reveals everything through her hairstyle,” including her temperament, vigor, and way of thinking. The article then went on to describe the personality of ten different types of women according to hairstyle. Long hair implied the woman possessed the traits of femininity, timidity, love of tradition and domesticity, short blond hair those of independent thinking, simplicity, and warmth, short hair with curls pointed to the characteristics of frivolity, fickleness, and flirtatiousness, and so on. The last three, *a la garconne*, Boston, and Bernice were ultra-short haircuts whose personality traits included independence, extravagance, materialism, and a masculine character.67 In “La flapper y la garconne,” writer María Monvel described the

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65 Manuel Calzadilla, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” *Bohemia* 15:7 (February 17, 1924), 10.


67 Ibid., 11.
personality of these two types of Modern Girls, including their hairstyles and fashion sense. The flapper was depicted as carefree and childlike with “a boyish bob,” while the garçonne with her more severely-cut hair was viewed as a sad, jaded woman.  

The classification of women according to the style and length of the bob influenced perceptions regarding who should use the modern hairdo. In “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas,” over twenty male and half a dozen female writers expressed their views on the bob, with the overwhelming majority of them favoring the new trend. However, most male proponents tended to include stipulations, including that older women should not be among those who cut their hair. These prejudices reflected the tendency among men to sexualize the Modern Girl. Women who did not fit their sexual fantasies were labeled ridiculous and frivolous. Arguing against the use of the bob by women of a certain age, Manuel Calzadilla stated that in women younger than twenty-five “it more or less looks nice.” However, in married women “it takes away a certain seriousness,” which they should maintain in order to differentiate themselves from single women. G. Jiménez Lamar favored the bob because it made women look more gentle, beautiful, and adorable. Nevertheless, he believed that older women, especially those with adolescent daughters, look “unpleasant and ridiculous,” because it gives the impression of “restless happiness and innocent frivolity.” Among the men who appreciated the style on women over a certain age, M. Franco Varona claimed that he

68 María Monvel, “La flapper y la garçon” Social 11:11 (November 1926), 39, 74-75, 92.
69 “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia (February 17, 1924- March 30, 1924).
70 Manuel Calzadilla, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:7 (February 17, 1924), 10.
71 G. Jiménez Lamar, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:7 (February 17, 1924), 10.
loved the bob on both younger and older women, finding it seductive on either one. Varona did not challenge the male proclivity to regard the Modern Girl in sexual terms. Rather, he considered a broader spectrum of women sexually appealing.

All of the women who expressed their views in “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” supported the use of the bob by older women. In contrast to their male counterparts, they did not consider sexual appeal an important aspect of the hairstyle, nor did they deem it inappropriate on older women. Instead, they celebrated the bob for its ability to make women look younger. Rosalinda De Seymur explained that as a woman in her forties, she loved the cut because it gave her “the appearance of a fragile girl,” and as a result, “took off ten years.” Estela Arza also embraced the style for its tendency to make women look younger. “The bob makes a woman beautiful, rejuvenates her, making her therefore more attractive,” Arza asserted. “Who cares if who wears it is fifteen years old or much older?” Arguing for the same viewpoint in her advice column, Arza answered questions regarding the acceptability of the bob for women of varying ages and marital status. In her reply to one married woman in particular she insisted that, “Yes dignified and serious women also cut their hair in a bob. It is a question of style, comfort, cleanliness, [and] appearance. Ridiculous prejudices are not proper of superior people.”

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72 M. Franco Varona, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:8 (February 24, 1924), 10.
73 Rosalinda de Seymur, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:9 (March 2, 1924), 10.
74 Estela Arza, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:9 (March 2, 1924), 10.
The desire to look younger, participate in current trends, and meet practical needs led to the adoption of the bob by a wide-range of women. Support for the style could be measured through the large number of women who opted to cut their hair as well as by the positive remarks of those within the popular media. Nevertheless, apprehension pervaded in the form of allusions to immorality. With the emergence of the Modern Girl, public fears regarding challenges to the patriarchy transferred into expressions of social angst over women’s decorum and propriety. The propensity of Havana’s intellectuals to value modernity resulted in their rejection of references to immorality. Thus, most prominent commentators dismissed as antiquated and ludicrous correlations between the bob and illicit conduct. Critics necessarily remained less vocal, but remarks within the mainstream media indicated that at least some Cubans regarded the fashionable hairstyle with some trepidation.

Most commentators addressed public anxieties over the bob through rebuttals and justifications. By negating the idea that the modern hairstyle posed a threat to notions of decency, proponents participated in the larger dispute over shifting gender norms. Their responses corresponded with similar arguments made in favor of broader cultural changes. In her reply to a reader whose husband was apprehensive about the bob, Arza advised the woman to remind him of the popular saying, “Neither the heat is in the clothes nor the honorability in the hair.”76 Jiménez defended the new trend by citing the same popular saying. “The bob within the moral order has little to do with women’s honor,” Jiménez argued “since ‘the heat is not in the clothes.’” He believed that “virtue fundamentally depends on the internal constitution” of women, namely their intelligence.

education, social position, and lifestyle. Planas used similar language when she addressed the issue of the bob as representative of morally-suspect women. She replied to a reader that she was not surprised by her question “because many have asked it before.” Planas reassured her that “morality has nothing to do with hair length, but rather with individual conduct,” and as a result those who behave appropriately “should style their hair as they wish because they will never be bothered.” Even some critics of the bob dismissed the notion that it was immoral. After asserting his dislike for the haircut, Candido Fernández claimed that “All immoral women have cut their hair in a bob, but not all women with a bob are immoral.”

With their varying views, writers referenced public concerns over the corrupting influence of the bob. But most outspoken critics did not cite immorality as the reason they opposed the style. Rather, they expressed disdain for what they perceived to be the disintegration of ideal femininity. The blurring of traditional gender markers appeared to trouble many, especially men. Most male writers expressed their support for the style, but a few emphatically declared their disapproval. Those who

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77 G. Jiménez Lamar, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” *Bohemia* 15:7 (February 17, 1924), 10.


79 Candido Fernández, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” *Bohemia* 15:8 (February 24, 1924), 11.
viewed the bob unfavorably often labeled the modern haircut unattractive, manly, and ill-suited for women. This was especially the case with the emergence of the ultra-short bob, *a la garconne*. The bob became increasingly shorter with this French-inspired cut gaining international acclaim at mid-decade.\textsuperscript{80} Planas recommended the latest Parisian trend to readers stating that although a variety of bobs were in style, “the most modern one” was the very short bob, in which the hair “completely disappeared.”\textsuperscript{81} This haircut received the most critique, with male opponents voicing their concerns over the transformation of female femininity. Rafael B. Santa Coloma did not find any type of bob attractive, but he especially disliked the *a la garconne*, which he described as manly, inappropriate, and inexcusable.\textsuperscript{82} Candido Fernandez argued that “a woman with short hair and a shaved neck has become masculine, no longer remaining a woman but rather a hybrid,” making it difficult to treat her romantically with flowers, music, and poetry.\textsuperscript{83} Manuel Aznar agreed, stating that the short hairstyle did not fit with his notion of “the archetypical woman,” and therefore resulted in “women contradicting themselves.”\textsuperscript{84}

Men opposed to the bob often condemned the world of fashion, rather than women themselves. Employed by male critics of modern attire as well, this form of censure depicted women as powerless victims. Thus, while women asserted their increased independence through fashion, men dismissed their autonomy as imposed and

\textsuperscript{80} For example, see illustration depicted above: Conrado Massageur, *Social* 10:12 (December 1925), 1.

\textsuperscript{81} Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” *Bohemia* 16:18 (May 3, 1925), 23; Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” *Bohemia* 16:52 (December 27, 1925), 29.

\textsuperscript{82} Rafael B. Santa Coloma, “Charlas del domingo” *Bohemia* 15:31 (August 3, 1924), 16-17.

\textsuperscript{83} Candido Fernandez, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” *Bohemia* 15:8 (February 24, 1924), 11.

\textsuperscript{84} Manuel Aznar, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” *Bohemia* 15:8 (February 24, 1924), 10.
false. The practice of categorizing women as victims served to disprove their recently-gained sense of agency. It also re-enforced traditional power dynamics between men and women. Adolfo Galindo used this form of critique when he blamed “the curse of fashion” for encouraging women to cut their hair.\footnote{Adolfo Galindo, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” \textit{Bohemia} 15:8 (February 24, 1924), 20.} Rafael B. Santa Coloma viewed the popularity of the bob as one of the biggest crimes perpetuated by fashion, adding that it caused women to become “slaves to fashion.” He argued that the advice went against nature, and was given by “those who have bad intentions or are crazy.”\footnote{Rafael B. Santa Coloma, “Charlas del domingo” \textit{Bohemia} 15:31 (August 3, 1924), 16-17.} Men also cited the reluctance of women as an indicator that they had cut their hair against their will. De Arbin recounted how one woman in particular told him that she hated her bob and loved her long hair, cutting it off only as a result of “the tyrannical fashion.”\footnote{Roberto de Arbin, “El alma del maniqui” \textit{Bohemia} 15:36 (September 7, 1924), 9.}

Similar to the embrace of modern clothing, most men looked upon the bob favorably. However, their approval did not echo the sentiments of women who referenced practical demands, comfort, and hygiene. Rather, bobbed women became sexual objects much in the same way as women in short skirts and low-cut blouses. Men demonstrated their approval of the Modern Girl by sexualizing women who adopted the revealing attire and bobbed hair. Thus, positive yet sexualized remarks functioned as another means of expressing support for the Modern Girl, while devaluing women and dismissing cultural changes as non-threatening. Male writers expressed their love of the hairstyle by claiming that women looked young, alluring, and charming. Gonzalo Menendez asserted that the bob “seduced his soul and made his heart beat,” especially
those that showed the neck and ears of an attractive woman. Writing in favor of the bob, Rafael González insisted that it made women look more beautiful, sweet, young, and charming. He believed that “a beautiful bob on a frivolous head is like a ray of light, a tempting illusion, a sweet dream.” M. Pot-Rodo, a fan of the hairstyle, had urged his sister and girlfriend to bob their hair, claiming that if it were up to him he would “condemn all women” to use the bob indefinitely.

While these male authors embraced the style whole-heartedly, others claimed that because it was too alluring and provocative it caused jealousy in husbands and significant others. Sergio Acebal stated that he liked the bob too much, so much so that he would not want to see one on the woman he adored. He continued by asserting that other men probably think like him and that many fights have surely occurred as a result of this hairstyle. Oscar Lombardo agreed, stating that the stylish and attractive haircut made distrustful husbands and boyfriends nervous. These assertions of jealousy revealed one of the problems inherent with sexualizing the Modern Girl. If men viewed the icon as a sexual fantasy, then how could they accept for their wives, girlfriends, and sisters to become a Modern Girl? Clearly, some men understood the irony in sexualizing behavior that had appealed to a wide-range and number of women across the island. These contradictions expose the difficulties Cubans faced in confronting the rapid transformation of cultural understandings of womanhood.

88 Gonzalo Menendez, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:9 (March 2, 1924), 10.
89 Rafael González, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:10 (March 9, 1924), 10.
90 M. Pot-Rodo, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:8 (February 24, 1924), 10.
91 Sergio Acebal, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:7 (February 17, 1924), 10.
92 Oscar Lombardo, “Que opina Ud. sobre las melenitas” Bohemia 15:7 (February 17, 1924), 10.
The bob hairstyle produced a variety of reactions from both women and men. Viewed as practical, comfortable, and fashionable by its female advocates, the bob was characterized as a central component of the stylish Modern Girl. Female proponents argued that it suited the practical needs of active, modern women who no longer had as much time to get ready. Moreover, they made the case that the heat and dust of the island resulted in the haircut being especially ideal for Cuban women. Male opponents rejected the characteristic haircut of the Modern Girl as manly, unattractive, and in some cases, immoral. Expressing their disdain for the style, they depicted women as victims of the international trend, and certainly not as representative of their idealized notions of Cuban womanhood. Male authors in favor of the hairstyle spoke of women as objects of their desire whose frivolous and sexy demeanor corresponded well with their ill-suited intentions. Their voyeuristic perspective was exemplified best in their embrace of the trend only when adopted by young and attractive women. For women the bob symbolized a practical choice and an expression of their modern identity, while for men it became another mark of female autonomy that needed to be devalued, chastised, and rejected.

**Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder**

Through multiple and diverse perspectives, the mainstream media guided young women in their efforts to become a Modern Girl. As demonstrated in the previous sections, the remarks of female journalists often differed greatly from those of their male counterparts. Women in popular magazines offered female readers an empowering and inspirational viewpoint of life as a Modern Girl. It was from them that young women
could learn that their wardrobe and hairstyle had to meet their changing needs as modern women. This section on beauty examines how female authors also emphasized the necessity for women living in a modern Cuba to be well-rounded individuals through education, participation in sports, and exposure to a variety of social interactions. Modern ideas of womanhood were of utmost importance with the characterization of the new ideal woman as educated, attractive, and fashion savvy. Intermittent emphasis on traits other than physical beauty served to challenge the notion that women were mere objects of male desire. Yet in many respects, the focus on diversifying the scope and realm of female activities and experiences continued to be connected to traditional expectations for women. By writing about gender norms in stereotypical language, they perpetuated the societal view that attracting and pleasing men remained women’s main objective. Traditional notions often prevailed, since taking on characteristics of the Modern Girl simply became a new means of appealing to a potential suitor and attaining the ultimate goal of marriage.

Popular magazines provided women with guidance on not only how to dress in the latest fashions, but how to stay beautiful, young, and fit. Columnists recommended numerous beauty tips, exercises, and products, while advertisers tried to convince readers their happiness and well-being depended on their purchasing a particular item. Concerns revolving around weight, breast size, hair maintenance, and complexion stemmed from a desire to meet national as well as foreign standards of beauty. North American and Western European representations of ideal femininity reached the island through Hollywood films, tourism, advertising, and consumer goods. These notions of beauty contributed to perceptions of how women should look, how much they should exercise,
and what items they should purchase. Advice columnist Estela Arza advised a reader from Cienfuegos to follow the beauty tips of Elizabeth Arden, and to another outside Havana she promised to send L’Oreal hair dye.⁹³ Among the vast foreign products sold in Cuba were pills for enlarging breasts popular among European pharmacists, “Crema Oriental” facial cream out of New York, “Polvera Zara” facial powder from Chicago, and Gillette razors for keeping bobs short.⁹⁴

Notions of ideal beauty excluded a large portion of the population with illustrations, photographs, and narrative depicting and targeting white, upper and middle class Cubans. When relaying to readers the 30 attributes that denoted true beauty, advice columnist Enriqueta Planas de Modeda included, “Three white things: skin, teeth, and hands.”⁹⁵ The desire to possess white skin reflected internal and external conceptions of beauty based on race. However, columnists and advertisers also prescribed certain beauty solutions to help women outside the idealized norm meet standards related to racial make-up. Tips and products for whitening skin were directed at white as well as mulata and black women hoping to appear whiter.⁹⁶ Planas offered advice to women on how to achieve whiter skin, including recommending lemon juice added to water for hands, wearing gloves when doing housework, and applying “Loción Lis” body lotion to

⁹³ Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:12 (March 20, 1921), 26; Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 14:24 (June 17, 1923), 20.

⁹⁴ “Píldoras Circasianas” Bohemia 16:5 (February 1, 1925), 28; “Crema Oriental de Geuraud” Bohemia 16:8 (February 22, 1925), 28; “Polvera Zara” Bohemia 14:34 (August 26, 1925), 18; “Gillette” Social 11:11 (November 1926), 2.

⁹⁵ Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” Bohemia 15:46 (November 16, 1924), 22.

the body, neck, arms, and hands twice daily. To a woman from the provincial town of Caibarién, Arza recommended honey, rose water, and lemon juice as remedies for whitening, and to another reader she recommended and offered to ship a whitening product called “Sunburn Cream.”

Young women trying to gauge how they should look, behave, and feel often turned to advice columnists for answers. But even within the same source, they encountered contradictory and varied messages regarding the roles of women. Their remarks tended to introduce modern notions of womanhood, while also reinforcing traditional stereotypes. This was the case in comments that reflected the question of whether the value of women lay in physical beauty or positive personality traits. Advice columnists stressed the importance of personal development in one reply, only to harp on the necessity of beauty in another. This tendency of columnist to contradict themselves is exemplified in the advice Planas gave to readers on how to attract men. Planas offered women suggestions that departed from the conventional prominence on looks by emphasizing personality, social skills, and education, while devaluing physical appearance. “Social etiquette, personal charm, vast knowledge, [and] natural and refined elegance,” she argued “in many cases supersedes beauty.” To attain these multiple traits, she recommended that women employ their time “reading good books, studying music and languages, and attending social outings.” This advice contained both modern and

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traditional messages in that other characteristics besides physical beauty had been stressed, but nonetheless they were for the purpose of engaging potential love interests in conversation, rather than as a means in and of themselves.

On the one hand, columnists offered advice geared towards moving women beyond their value as objects of desire, and on the other, they perpetuated traditional expectations. By emphasizing other qualities, columnists recognized the value of women outside of physical beauty. Moreover, they encouraged women to seek an education and gain life-experience, but ultimately the goal of marriage, and not work outside the home, remained the same. Planas mixed modern and traditional rhetoric when she explained that physically attractive women had to develop other attributes in order to compete with women with well-rounded personalities. She warned pretty women that their looks were not sufficient if they were “fake, vulgar, frivolous, and egotistical,” since men appreciated women who were “gentle, strong, loyal, cheerful, and good-hearted.” Planas believed that one cannot control their physical beauty since they are born with it, but that it is possible to change appearances through one’s attitude. She explained that jealousy and apathy can make even the prettiest person ugly, while sweetness, generosity, and diligence can make someone look more attractive. 100 This advice empowered women in that it suggested that physical beauty did not define a woman, but these comments also mirrored traditional notions of womanhood. Young women were instructed that they had to tailor their personality for the purpose of attracting men, and moreover, that in most cases physical appearance continued to be more appealing than a good personality.

Published within the same magazine a few years earlier, “Para las damas” appeared to be more conscious of the contradictions facing women in terms of gender expectations. Columnist Estela Arza understood that women continued to face challenges as they maneuvered among the rapidly changing norms. Arza gave straightforward advice that took into consideration the complexities and contradictions of modern womanhood. “I cannot judge you as frivolous,” she wrote to a reader. “Women have the duty to conserve their beauty, because with it we make the lives of those we love pleasing and at times make our own bearable, inspiring something that gives us moments of happiness that soothes and stimulates us. If only moral beauty was enough! But it is not so.” To another reader she asserted that it was natural that women wanted to conserve their appearance and physical attraction, since “disgracefully [good looks] are more necessary than moral merits. That’s how things are…and that’s it.”101 Arza acknowledged that society judged women based on their physical appearance, but she also recognized the inequalities inherent in these expectations. Thus, while her commentary suggested a more progressive tone than that of Planas, the view that women’s value lay in their physical beauty remained the same.

The idea promulgated by Planas and Arza that physical appearance should not be the primary value of a woman contradicted the prominence of advice on beauty within the columns. The dismissal of physical appearance became most necessary when responding to women insecure about their looks. Thus, columnists dismissed physical attributes in their advice to women who felt inadequate, while their overall emphasis on beauty continued to endorse traditional stereotypes. Planas reassured a reader who

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claimed that she was unattractive that many readers wrote in concerned about the same
issue, but that if they have “merit and talent” then they cannot be called ugly.102 In
similar instances, Arza outright dismissed the importance of physical appearance. “Do
not worry about being pretty,” she advised. “Try to be pleasant and that’s enough. There
are many pretty but disagreeable women. And happiness does not belong to pretty or
ugly women, it belongs to those who are lucky enough to obtain it.” In her response to
another reader who called herself ugly, Arza stated that she doubted it, but that even if it
were true, what mattered was beauty of the soul.103 Planas and Arza both tried to impart
the same message to readers. They asserted that in their modern era it had become
necessary to be more than beautiful to appeal to the opposite sex. It was rather about
what women did with the multiple positive attributes they possessed. But the columns’
emphasis on ideal features, beauty rituals, beauty products, and fashion seemed to
contradict their dismissal of physical attractiveness as a vital component for women.
Moreover, newly-introduced issues such as nutrition and exercise were viewed as more
than just beneficial to women’s health.

The popular media participated in the recent international focus on hygiene,
exercise, and nutrition associated with modernity.104 However, this emphasis on a
healthy lifestyle was linked to the well-being of women as well as to the development of
their physical beauty. Columnists promoted exercise to female readers of all ages,
explaining that it was no longer believed to harm women’s body or take away from


103 Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 13:17 (April 23, 1922), 24; Estela Arza, “Para las damas”
Bohemia 15:6 (February 10, 1924), 16.

104 For example, see illustration depicted below: “Para estar a la última moda, Señora” Crítica
1:1(December 15, 1929), 25.
women’s gracefulness. Planas explained that women from abroad had persuaded Cubans to recognize that not only do women not hurt themselves, but that with exercise “they become more beautiful with grace, vitality, health, agility, and harmony.”

Advertisements for supplements and medicines also connected health to physical appearance. An advertisement for a supplement from the United States claimed that to be as beautiful as an actress you needed to take care of your health, while one for pain relief medication during menstruation stated that “if you want to have admirers, or keep your husband’s love, you should never let your beauty decline.”

An advertisement for a digestive tonic made similar claims about physical attraction and health, suggesting that a bad nervous system weakens individuals and turns them into only half a person with women “losing half their beauty, charm, and appeal.”

Thus, once again mixed messages in the mainstream media produced discourse that was both modern and traditional. The emphasis on health associated with modern science encouraged women to participate in sports, eat nutritiously, and take care of their bodies, but they did so by stressing the importance of maintaining one’s beauty.

Health and beauty were linked once again with the issue of women’s mental health. Discussions in the mainstream media of nervous conditions, depression and

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106 “Vino Tónico de Stearns” Bohemia 15:1 (January 6, 1924), 26; “Dr. Alarid” Bohemia 12:16 (April 17, 1921), 25.

107 “Tanlac” Bohemia 14:6 (February 6, 1923), 23.
personal loss had very little to do with treating actual illnesses, addressing women’s concerns, and helping them feel better. The central issue was how these conditions would negatively affect women’s appearance, and hence their ability to attract men. In one issue, Arza stated that as a result of the nervous system some women look old prematurely, while in another she blamed sadness for making some women unattractive. She told two separate readers that if they did not stop pinning over their failed romances, they would become ugly. Planas gave similar advice to readers, telling one “to avoid bad times and hardship in daily work.” She then referred to the negative effect catering to others’ demands had not only on beauty, but health and happiness as well. Planas also correlated one’s attitude with one’s behavior and physical appearance, calling a bad mood “a woman’s enemy” for its ability to make facial expressions unattractive. In another issue, she claimed that “happiness, hope, and tranquility transform a person’s face,” just as hair and clothes can also make a person look prettier. These remarks suggest that advice columnists emphasized modern-day concerns regarding women’s health as a means of imparting traditional messages about gender roles.

Women became concerned with losing their physical charms as a result of a variety of factors, including aging. The question of whether women’s value lay in their physical beauty or in other attributes became especially relevant when women passed a certain age, as exemplified in the despair of a single, thirty-year-old woman concerned


that “her youth had passed.” Once again, columnists contradicted themselves within
their advice on getting older. Opinions appeared modern in that they emphasized
personal attributes, and traditional in that they often continued to emphasize the
importance of attracting men. Nevertheless, the views broke new ground in that they
presented older women as attractive, confident, and deserving of male attention. As a
result of changing perceptions over aging, it was no longer considered a fact that women
lost their looks, appeal, and youth once they reached thirty.

However, this modern way of thinking did not dissipate women’s fears and
prejudices. Women wrote to columnists anxious over losing the assets they had
dedicated all their efforts to cultivate. Single as well as married women were greatly
affected by the assertion that after a certain age women could no longer display their
physical beauty and charm. If they were married their qualities were supposed to be
shared exclusively with their husbands, and if they were single they were supposed to be
ignored all together. Women fostered their beauty and personality for the sole purpose of
attracting a potential spouse, and once that goal had been accomplished there was little
use for it. The popular media’s emphasis on the fashion world, sexualized view of the
Modern Girl, and new attitude about aging contradicted prevailing notions regarding
women over a certain age. Despite their embrace of older women’s inner and outer
beauty, those within the mass media continued to frame women’s objective as that of
attracting men.

Beginning as early as thirty years old, women expressed that they no longer felt
attractive and that their life choices had become limited. Advice columnists recognized

\[110\] Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” Bohemia 16:28 (July 12, 1925), 25.
that this manner of thinking was widespread, affecting both married and single women. They noted how from thirty on women chose age-appropriate clothing, hid their laughter for fear of seeming juvenile, and married the first man that asked them. Planas answered numerous letters on the issue, responding to one reader that it was not about age, but attitude. She gave similar advice to another, who she scolded for calling herself old at thirty-one. Planas claimed that these concerns were specific to women within “la raza latina,” and that in contrast all other races believed that women were at their most beautiful at thirty, because that was when “the look in their eyes is the most suggestive and alluring” and “conversation is most animated.” Consequently, it became the time in women’s lives when they possessed an advantage and could choose a partner of their liking. Planas tried to persuade readers of the validity of this foreign-influenced way of thinking, adding that not until thirty did women “open their eyes to the world.” And that moreover, even if most men enjoyed spending time with younger women, they ultimately chose older, well-rounded women to settle down with.

The idea that women were actually more attractive and appealing after the age of thirty was echoed by other Cuban writers as well. With their remarks, those within the mainstream media attempted to displace previous prejudices regarding older women. Discussions on the subject revealed a new way of thinking that benefited women in that the conception of physical beauty was more inclusive. Women over thirty received praise for their physical attributes as well as for their life experiences. Nevertheless, the

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111 Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” Bohemia 16:28 (July 12, 1925), 25.
113 Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” Bohemia 16:28 (July 12, 1925), 25.
notion that society could determine “an ideal age for women” continued to confine women to certain expectations. An editorial in *Bohemia* argued that the ideal age for women was between twenty-five and thirty, since that was the age at which Venus was always depicted, while one in *Mundial* cited Cleopatra, Josefina, and Helen of Troy as proof that women over thirty-five were the most beautiful.114 Despite arguing for the notion of an ideal age, *Mundial* recognized that women were beautiful at varying ages. “Women do not lose their charm at a certain determined age,” it argued “since if it is true that there are women that at thirty are already old, there are also women that at fifty are very attractive.”115

The recognition of physical beauty in women over fifty contrasted greatly with previous notions on aging, but even more empowering for women was the emphasis on attributes unrelated to physical appearance. “Sr. Editor de Belleza,” the male advice columnist for *Social* believed the perfect age for women was thirty-two. According to him, that was when “women have combined all the necessary traits with the experience to use them.”116 Married women over a certain age were also valued for their looks and knowledge on life. An editorial in *Magazine del Hogar* argued that forty year olds were taken more seriously than those of twenty because they could give advice about life. It was at that age that they were in full possession of themselves, having learned how to carry themselves and employ their attraction and charm. Furthermore, the editorial

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114 Manuel Reguera Gallego, “La mujer bella, Venus y el arte” *Bohemia* 16:32 (August 9, 1925), 5; “¿A que edad es vieja la mujer?” *Mundial* 5:1 (January 5, 1921), 15.

115 “¿A que edad es vieja la mujer?” *Mundial* 5:1 (January 5, 1921), 15.

116 Sr. Editor de Belleza, “Consultorio de belleza” *Social* 13:2 (February 1928), 66.
added that at forty women were physically beautiful, especially if they had taken care of themselves and had been loved by their husbands and children.\footnote{117 "Una mujer de cuarenta años" Magazine del Hogar 1:2 (June 30, 1926), 17.}

Discussions on beauty as related to a woman’s age carried empowering messages for women in that their value was no longer viewed in such tangible and fleeting terms. Especially encouraging were commentaries that focused on how characteristics other than physical appearance contributed to women’s sex appeal. However, the more inclusive definition of female beauty also led to further challenges for women. The perception that beautiful women ranged in age correlated with the modern trend of sexualizing women. These emergent views of older women also connected to the public fascination with Hollywood and the fashion world as personified in the figure of the Modern Girl. Women older than thirty gained a sense of identity outside the roles of either a wife and mother or an old maid, but as a consequence society placed greater emphasis on the physical appearance of women of all ages and marital status. “Women should never let themselves go,” argued advice columnist Arza, “because pretty or ugly, women are the ones responsible for flirting.”\footnote{118 Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia (February 6, 1921), 30.} To Arza life experience was vital, but it was equally important for women to take care of themselves by eating a healthy diet, exercising, and using beauty products. According to her, a beautiful woman exhibited inner beauty through her life experience and outer beauty through the diligent maintenance of her looks. “If you have nice skin, bright eyes, are intelligent, and your soul is young,” she asserted, “then why should you not take care of yourself and why should you not feel and
inspire love.”

New perceptions of beauty and aging allowed women to retain a vital aspect of their identity, that of using their looks to appeal to others. However, it also placed increased pressure on women to preserve their physical characteristics.

The opinions espoused in popular culture carried the underlying message that women’s value was not exclusively related to their physical beauty. The characteristics that attracted men to a potential spouse included numerous personality traits not related to outer appearance. Oftentimes, life experience offered women confidence and knowledge that made them more attractive than their younger counterparts. Prevailing notions challenged common prejudices that perceived women over a certain age as either a homemaker or a spinster, both of whom were no longer supposed to attract the opposite sex. The incorporation of modern influences redefined ideas of beauty to include positive personality traits, self-development, and maturity. This new concept of modern femininity allowed women to have power and worth beyond marriage. Nevertheless, progressive views continued to perpetuate the notion that attracting the opposite sex remained a priority. Physical beauty ultimately superseded all other characteristics as essential to finding a suitable marriage partner, a task that continued to be of utmost importance despite women gaining some independence outside of their roles as wives and mothers.

Conclusion

Popular magazines offered readers a diverse set of representations which served to mirror, contribute to, and encourage the debate over appropriate gender norms.

119 Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 13:23 (June 4, 1922), 25.
Central to this discussion was how the influence of international fashion trends affected Cuban womanhood. Not only did the short skirt and bob transform the appearance of Cuban women, it also affected their behavior. Changes in women’s roles and options, both abroad and at home, influenced the expression of this new-found sense of freedom within female attire and hairstyles. Both explicit and subtle messages within the editorials, advice columns, ads, short stories, and illustrations created different versions of fashionable, modern women. The fashion world as depicted on the streets, magazine pages, and movie screens offered Cuban women an opportunity to express themselves and experiment with their own versions of the Modern Girl. Popular culture reflected their mixed views over becoming Modern Girls, but it also made them aware of how much was at stake in their embrace of modern fashion trends. It was clear to writers and readers alike that commentaries on the bob, short skirts, and beauty were about more than women’s embrace of international fashion styles. The debate over female appearance was central to a much larger discussion on the role of women within the early republic. Fashion trends were not the only seemingly insignificant topic that Cubans connected to notions of womanhood. As will be discussed in the following chapter, new dating practices created just as much deliberation and controversy.
Chapter Four: New Dating Practices and the Modern Girl

Introduction

In 1921, a young woman from the province of Camagüey wrote Bohemia about the sudden break-up of her relationship. She sought guidance from Estela Arza, the columnist who during the three years of the publication of “Para las damas” had given countless women advice on matters of love. In her letter, the young woman recounted how a trivial argument had caused her boyfriend of over a year to end their relationship. Arza urged the jilted woman to forget about her failed romance and to “live life, go out, have fun, dance, go out every day at all hours” and “flirt.” Following this advice would not help her win back her boyfriend, Arza acknowledged, but it would lead her to forget her fickle love and perhaps begin again with her true “prince.”¹

Also on sale in Havana bookstores during this time was La Doctora Fanny’s etiquette book, Como debo comportarme en sociedad.² Its conservative tone and advice contrasted sharply with that found in “Para las damas.” The use of the English word “flirt” by Arza and coquetiando by Fanny indicated to readers that respectively each

¹ A variation of the English word “flirt” was used within the advice column; it was spelled “flirtee.” Different variations of the word were adopted as part of the Cuban vernacular, including, “flirt,” “flirtee,” “flirtear,” “flirteadora” and “el flirt.” Coquetiar was also used to describe female flirting and “galantear” for that of men. Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:6 (February 6, 1921), 30.

² Cuban advice columnist, Enriqueta Planas de Moneda recommended this book to readers in various 1924 and 1925 issues of Bohemia. Her referral to this source may have indicated that a Cuban etiquette manual for women did not exist, and that therefore the closest approximation to Cuban cultural practices could be found in Spain. La Doctora Fanny, Como debo comportarme en sociedad: Manual de prácticas sociales, 2d ed., (Barcelona: Sociedad General de Publicaciones, 1930).
viewed themselves as an advocate of modernity on the one hand and traditional values on the other. Rather than encouraging young women to go out, have fun, and flirt, Fanny warned them that “the dangerous game of flirting should be avoided.” To make her point she used the metaphor of a battle, stating that countless times it was women who were defeated in a battle in which they were the first to shoot their guns. Her cautionary suggestion to women that flirting led to seduction and dishonor differed greatly from the carefree phrases on dancing, going out at all hours, and flirting, advice that epitomized Arza’s approach to solving relationship problems.

The image of young Cuban women flirting openly in public spaces conflicted with notions of traditional courtship customs. The new republic’s emphasis on modernity affected the position of women in a variety of ways, including their roles within the courtship process. In a short time span, women moved from a highly-restrictive space in which their interactions with men were closely regulated and monitored to a more open system in which they socialized casually with the opposite sex. The traditional courtship process had consisted of supervised visits in the young woman’s home followed shortly afterwards by marriage. In most cases, a broken-off engagement had guaranteed that a woman would remain an old maid. Most women believed that their central objective was to fall in love and marry, but ironically limited choices had often impeded women from attaining their goal. The emergence of modern dating practices drastically expanded their options. Within this social sphere, women interacted more freely with the opposite sex, played the role of pursuer, dated casually before committing to marriage, and ended unsuccessful relationships without negative consequences. These new gender norms

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3 Fanny, Como debo comportarme en sociedad, 147.
influenced how they understood themselves within a modern nation as well as how society viewed their role within it.

The introduction of modern dating norms did not go unchallenged. In fact, the emergent practices created a space for Cubans to reassess the terms of womanhood. An expanding media had created opportunities for the public to debate the development of new dating customs. The clash between traditional and modern gendered expectations produced multiple and conflicting views on appropriate gendered behavior. In respect to dating, women received contradictory advice on how to behave within this unfamiliar scene. Advice on how to attract the opposite sex, keep up with modern trends, and conform to standards of proper behavior often contradicted one another. As a result, young women faced the challenge of negotiating through divergent understandings of gendered behavior. Those that viewed the mainstream media as a source from which to assess their own actions found conflicting versions of Cuban womanhood. Nevertheless, varied representations did not produce a haphazard and incoherent interpretation of gendered behavior, but rather a discernible pattern emerged in which female behavior fell under the classifications of following traditional norms, embracing modern trends, or transgressing lines of appropriate behavior.

The recurrence of certain themes, plotlines, and issues within popular culture created certain archetypical standards of behavior from which young Cuban women could choose, reject, or adapt. The myriad of images and anecdotes offered models, as well as anti-models, from which women fashioned their own identities. As a result, multiple representations contributed to the development of a modern understanding of womanhood, while simultaneously reminding women of the dangers lurking within
modernity. The freedoms and opportunities of modernity presented new hazards and burdens. Women who enjoyed the liberties of a modern social life confronted the constant need to protect their reputation, while simultaneously joining their peers in adopting the latest acceptable norms. They had to pay close attention to the changing fashion trends, socializing expectations, and dating practices without straying too far or too quickly from traditional customs. Representations of modern womanhood within popular culture assured women that changes in gendered behavior had become mainstream, while cautionary tales, satirical depictions, and concerned editorials warned them against departing too much from traditional norms.

Moving Beyond the Home

Young Cuban women in the 1920s found themselves in situations vastly different from those of their mothers. Unlike the previous generation, an increased number of women from within the middle class obtained degrees beyond grade school, joined the wage-labor force, and experienced increased freedom within social settings. New technology, especially the telephone and automobile, facilitated greater accessibility and mobility for women. The desire to be cosmopolitan and up-to-date led to the implementation of technological conveniences as well as the embrace of rapidly-changing social practices. Much more so than in earlier times, it became common for middle-class women to engage in leisurely activities outside the protective realm of the family. They spent their days participating in sports, swimming in the ocean, strolling down the shopping street, and going for a drive. In the evenings, women danced at parties, met at the movies, attended the theater, and gathered in the park. Along with
increased independence outside the home came changes in dating norms. The introduction of new courtship practices affected how men and women interacted with one another within public spaces as well as within secluded locations.

Traditional courtship practices placed men in the role of pursuer, women in a state of waiting, and parents in a supervisory position. In *Como debo comportarme en sociedad*, Fanny described a traditional courtship process in which couples had very little contact before formalizing their relationship. Only after committing to get married were they permitted to interact freely in public or have supervised visits at home. Further limiting women’s role, she placed the responsibility for initiating contact on men, recommending that mutual friends introduce them to their love interests. In the testimonio *Los abuelos*, Rodolfo Sotolongo, Josefina Pérez, and Carlos Montero depicted a similar period of courtship. They recounted how before receiving the consent of the parents, young men strolled the street where their love interest lived in hopes of catching her attention. The couple then exchanged letters and spoke secretly through her window. Once the parents had approved of the match, they attended social events chaperoned by several female relatives. In his account, Montero joked that there were different types of relationships, those restricted “to the window and those that entered the home.” He added that “it was considered inappropriate for a young girl to go out alone. You had to go with the mother, the aunt, or with some family member.” Pérez described the scene of the visits in the home. She recalled how the young couple sat in the living room to talk with an adult nearby. “You never left the couple alone.”

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During the 1920s, women encountered other options besides waiting for love interests to approach their window, initiate contact through a third party, or make an official visit to their home. Among the significant changes in courtship was the ever more acceptable social venue of group outings. Going to the park, movies, and countryside as a group became a popular means of allowing for a romantic encounter, while having female companions look after each other. The park or central plaza served as a rendezvous for young couples. It also became a place for women to play a more active role in the dating process, since it facilitated their meeting a potential love interest. In *Los abuelos*, Ricardo Cobián recalled how on Sunday evenings in Pinar del Río the park became “the gathering site of the youth,” while Manuel García Iglesias remembered “the grand amusement” of strolling in the evenings in the Sagua la Grande park. García Iglesias explained how in order for “men to see the women’s face and vice versa,” men walked in one direction, and women in the other. “Then, they strolled together in one circle.” Within their accounts, Celestino Suárez and Félix Medinilla recounted how the prevalent courtship practice of strolling in the park in opposite directions was segregated by race with whites walking in a circle within the center of the park and blacks in the outskirts. Cabaret dancer Rachel remembered a similar scene in the testimonio *Rachel’s*

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6 Short stories often featured the private encounters of unmarried couples, see for example the illustration depicted above: Rosario Sansores, “La Princesita del Rhin” *Bohemia* 13:1 (January 1, 1922), 11, 22.


8 Ibid., 95.
Song. In reference to a park in Santa Clara, she explained its partition by “an invisible stripe, whites to one side, the preferred one of course, and colored to the other.”

These new dating practices offered women the opportunity to mingle with the opposite sex without the constant supervision of on-looking family members. They provided an acceptable middle-ground in which couples claimed more autonomy, while still remaining within view of their social circle and community. Gathering with friends also allowed young women to gain some autonomy from older relatives who served as chaperones. Some couples experienced greater freedom when siblings or cousins took over the role of chaperone from older relatives. In 1923, literary critic Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring commented on how restrictions for young women had “changed completely.” They were no longer “permanently locked up at home,” but rather went out often “as much alone as accompanied by sisters, cousins and friends.” Others socialized with friends without any type of chaperone. Advice columnist Enriqueta Planas de Moneda informed two female readers in 1925 that they could attend the five o’clock showing of the theater “without another escort,” since “at that time, many damas and damitas go alone or with a female friend.” She gave similar advice to a married woman, insuring her that it was safe and acceptable for her to go to the movies by herself or with her daughter. “Every passing day it is more acceptable for women to attend the movies or theatre alone,” Planas confirmed. “Many women do it.”

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10 Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, “Los novios de ventana” *Carteles* 5:10 (October 1923), 23.
11 Enriqueta Planas de Moneda, “Sugestiones” *Bohemia* 17:3 (January 17, 1926), 35.
12 Enriqueta Planas de Moneda, “Sugestiones” *Bohemia* 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 31.
The presence of chaperones did not always thwart couples seeking privacy. As it became increasingly appropriate for love interests to engage in intimate conversations and kissing, some older chaperones became less diligent in their duties. In the short story “Frívolo, muy frívolo,” writer Armando R. Maribon described a group outing in which the presence of two older chaperones was almost non-existent, with young men and women riding in separate cars, strolling in the nearby garden, and kissing on the dance floor. Maribon also offered his perspective on the acceptability of couples displaying affection in public. “This is no longer a concern,” he argued “and no one has the bad taste to notice or much less criticize it.”\(^\text{13}\) Visits at home also provided an opportunity for couples to share romantic moments. In the comical editorial “La influenza en la Habana,” two fictional female characters kiss their boyfriends despite the fact that their parents are in the adjacent room. One pretends to be concerned that her mother may see them, while the other initiates the kiss asking for “a long one.” Once the men leave, the mother informs her daughters that she is aware of their actions.\(^\text{14}\) The mother’s failure to stop the intimate exchanges and the daughters’ untroubled response indicate that at least some Cubans considered kissing a minor peccadillo.

Satirical editorials provided further evidence that kissing had become common practice among unmarried couples. They also demonstrated the mainstream media’s support of the new trend by belittling efforts to curtail it, specifically those coming from the medical community. In “Los microbios del beso,” La Política Cómica mocked officials who hoped to reduce the health risks of kissing by suggesting that “enamorados” (lovers) kiss in the morning, rather than the afternoon. “It is a shame that there are no

\(^{13}\) Armando R. Maribon, “Frívolo, muy frívolo…” Bohemia 16:16 (April 19, 1925) 18.

\(^{14}\) “La influenza en la Habana: Los peligros del beso” La Política Cómica 15:745 (March 28, 1920), 11.
movies [playing] in the morning,” the publication joked, but regardless “everyone should kiss when they feel like it.”\(^{15}\) In “La influenza en la Habana,” \textit{La Política Cómica} dismissed health concerns all together. “The Health Department does not know what they are talking about…Long live the kiss and love.”\(^{16}\) Satirical publications promoted the modern dating practice by devaluing critique, but they also revealed that young women understood the need to remain discreet. In a \textit{Crítica} cartoon about the unhygienic habit of kissing in a poorly-ventilated room, the young woman responds to her boyfriend, “What a horrible disgrace, Zebedeo. If we kiss behind closed doors, we can get sick; and if we open the window, they’ll see us from the streets.”\(^{17}\)

Parents faced the choice of reacting to emergent dating practices by maintaining or adjusting household regulations. However, parental resistance did not necessarily lead to compliance on the part of adolescents. Young women engaged in relationships secretly through the exchanges of letters, private meetings, and telephone calls. Regardless of parental consent, many adolescents participated in new dating practices. In the editorial “Los novios de ventana,” Roig de Leuchsenring described how young women used the drugstore telephone to arrange meetings with their love interests. Either alone or with female peers, young women went to the cinema, park, Malecón, stores, and “many other places that offer magnificent opportunities to meet their boyfriends.”\(^{18}\)

Fictional accounts in particular provided suggestive examples of secretive romantic encounters, implying that they had become common practice among the youth.

\(^{15}\) “Los microbios del beso: amor matutino” \textit{La Política Cómica} 15:747 (April 11, 1920), 13.

\(^{16}\) “La influenza en la Habana: Los peligros del beso” \textit{La Política Cómica} 15:745 (March 28, 1920), 11.

\(^{17}\) \textit{Crítica} 3:8 (February 23, 1930), 18.

\(^{18}\) Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, “Los novios de ventana” \textit{Carteles} 5:10 (October 1923), 23.
Female protagonists were often depicted not only partaking in these clandestine interactions, but initiating them and acting as the pursuer. In “Engañar por su felicidad” an eighteen-year-old girl with many admirers chooses the one she likes most, arranges for him to telephone her, declares her love for him at a party, and invites him to her house where they meet alone. At the end, her father approves of the match and of their getting married after only a two-month courtship. The moral of this story was that her bold behavior had garnered success.\(^{19}\) Settings, narratives, and plotlines such as these called attention to the familiar clash between two increasingly different generations. The depiction of illicit relationships played a central role in short stories because they added suspense to the plot, but they also revealed a tension between established and modern courtship practices.

As young women and men interacted more openly they encountered challenges from more conservative sectors of society. Multiple and contradictory representations within the mainstream media pointed to some degree of public resistance. Fictional portrayals of modern couples appeared side-by-side with those depicting more traditional notions of romantic relationships. Making it even more confusing for female readers, the majority of writers included both traditional and modern elements within their stories. They adopted the themes of love at first sight, true love, destiny, and marriage as the ultimate fulfillment to probe as well as perpetuate established gendered values. The integration and fluidity of both traditional and modern behavior revealed that new gender norms were being simultaneously represented, questioned, and normalized.

Some short stories simply reinforced conventional notions, while others promoted modern dating practices without referencing societal fears of new trends. However, the

\(^{19}\) Estrella Tren, “Engañar por su felicidad” *Bohemia* 13:10 (March 5, 1922), 17.
majority of them revealed the nuisances and contradictions of the archetypical love story. They used traditional and modern references to caution women against following either model too closely. These stories found dangers in upholding traditional values as well as in emulating modern behavior. The cautionary tale “El desengaño” contains long-established language and perceptions of love, including the familiar allusion to a prince in shining armor, a “príncipe soñado.” Love at first sight quickly tarnishes when it is revealed that the new beau is a “seducer” with various girlfriends in different towns.\textsuperscript{20} “Crepúsculo sin sol” employs a similar plot with a romance in which love at first sight leads to a quick engagement. Once again, the fairytale comes to an abrupt end when the female protagonist learns that the young man is a womanizer and gambler. After he carelessly ends the relationship, she starves herself to death.\textsuperscript{21} These stories included much of the stereotypical discourse and narrative, but they used modern-day concerns to demonstrate that romances were not always fairytales. They dismissed the ideas of love at first sight and prince charming, and moreover they criticized short courtships. Yet, they also discouraged women from either taking on the role of pursuer or entering into physical relationships.

Young women gained insight from romantic fiction, but they also acquired contradictory messages regarding love, courtship, and marriage. Their romanticized version of relationships often conflicted with reality. Advice columnists were aware of the effects romantic fiction had on young women. As a result, they warned young readers against reading romantic literature. In one issue, Estela Arza advised a lovesick adolescent to forget her “fleeting illusion” by going to the theater, studying, exercising,\textsuperscript{20} Mary Morandeira Estévez, “El desengaño” \textit{Bohemia} 14:28 (July 15, 1923), 9, 18.
\textsuperscript{21} Rafael U. González, “Crepúsculo sin sol” \textit{Bohemia} 15:28 (July 20, 1924), 5, 18.
and avoiding romantic novels.²² The resulting convergence of fiction and reality came through as well in “Ellas y yo,” a weekly advice column based on the published letters of female readers and the response of columnist Roger de Lauria.²³ The magazine also published the responses of the women to each other, allowing for the public to witness the debate between scorned women who no longer believed in a “príncipe azul” and those who claimed that they had obtained their happily ever-after. References to prince charming, destiny, and true love were cited alongside those of adultery, divorce, and disillusionment.²⁴ This debate allowed for readers to juxtapose the familiar language and plotlines employed within short stories with the lived experiences of Cuban women. The behavior, attitude, and circumstances of the women writing to the advice column provided readers with diverse consequences. As a result, female readers

²² Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:10 (March 6, 1921), 27.

²³ The above illustrations appeared in the weekly column, in reference to a specific topic and individual woman. In the first illustration, the caption reads: “The existence of women is one of waiting; waiting indefinitely.” The second one was a bit more optimistic: “Ziomara still loves, believes, and waits.” Roger de Lauria, “Ellas y yo: epistolario romántico” Bohemia 13:29 (July 16, 1922), 12; Roger de Lauria, “Ellas y yo: epistolario romántico” Bohemia 12:49 (December 4, 1921), 12.

²⁴ Roger de Lauria, “Ellas y yo: epistolario romántico” Bohemia, May 1921-Jan 1924.
gained an opportunity for insight and a deeper understanding of changing gender norms from the varied life lessons of the women.

Women looking at printed material for guidance on how to behave within society had multiple options available to them. They could turn to numerous magazines, each with their respective novelists, short story writers, essayists, editorialists, and advice columnists. They could also find assistance within etiquette manuals. The two most popular manuals, La Doctora Fanny’s *Como debo comportarme en sociedad* and Andrés Segura y Cabrera’s *La vida social*, catered to the particular needs of the sexes. *Como debo comportarme en sociedad* offered women a detailed and specific guideline on social comportment. Enriqueta Planas de Moneda recommended the book as a good reference, stating that learning “the current formality” is not as important as acquiring a good basis. In contrast, *La vida social* provided readers with a less stringent means of negotiating through the difficulties of social formalities and courtesies. Written from a male perspective, it served mainly as a guide book for men uncertain of social customs. Perhaps as a result, it contained less detailed information on dating practices as compared to Fanny’s manual. Despite differences in their intended audience, numerous correlations existed between the two manuals. They addressed similar topics, including behavior at public venues, the customs of formal visits, and attire for specific social events. In respects to interacting with the opposite sex, they both warned against men and women

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25 Fanny, *Como debo comportarme en sociedad*.


socializing without being properly introduced, talking on the streets, and dancing with the same partner more than once.

Young women uneasy with the mixed messages found within their favorite magazines may have turned to etiquette manuals of their own volition or the encouragement of their elders. Descriptions of traditional customs may have comforted some, while others may have found them outdated. Nevertheless, most of them would have noticed the drastic discrepancy between the notions of appropriate gendered behavior presented within the etiquette manuals and popular magazines. Fanny recognized that at least some women were not abiding by her prescribed courtship regulations. She admonished couples she had witnessed exchanging glances in church, being overly affectionate on the train, and attending movies alone.28 Her acknowledgement that at least some of the traditional customs had been disregarded served to reinforce that dating practices were being questioned and challenged. Articulations such as these revealed to young women the inherent difficulties in adhering to traditional codes of conduct in an environment of rapidly changing norms.

Etiquette manuals appeared outdated and unappealing, especially when compared to depictions found in popular culture. The majority of Cuban magazines presented a very different interaction among the sexes, with abundant examples in both fictional and non-fictional accounts of women flirting, going out with friends, and dating multiple partners before marriage. Socializing outside the home was becoming increasingly acceptable for women, a trend that facilitated the move to less formalized dating processes which did not necessarily lead to marriage. This new approach allowed couples more time to get to know each other, while also giving women with previously

28 Fanny, Como debo comportarme en sociedad, 117, 121, 124.
unsuccessful relationships an opportunity to find another partner without being considered sexually suspect. The prevalence of casual dating also minimized the stigma previously associated with terminating a relationship.

Traditional courtship practices limited options for men and women in that couples became engaged soon after beginning their relationship. They often knew very little about each other and based their decision to marry on mutual attraction, timing, and economics.\textsuperscript{29} The mainstream media encouraged this shift to casual dating by endorsing the acceptability of the practice as well as by stressing the dangers of marrying too young or after too short of a courtship period. In the satirical publication \textit{Muecas}, a cartoon depicting a woman with a man on either side of her cited a popular saying, “The woman who loves two men is not dumb, but rather savvy, if one flame turns off, another remains lit.”\textsuperscript{30} Enriqueta Planas de Moneda urged her readers “not [to] fall in love with the first man that looks at you, nor the one who impresses you because of his position. Wait, go out, read, and compare.”\textsuperscript{31} The personal letters of women writing in to advice columns presented Cuban women with disheartening accounts of unsuccessful marriages, divorces, and overall disillusionment.\textsuperscript{32} These bleak and cautionary tales indicated to female readers that women’s situation needed to improve, and as a result, traditional courtship practices had come under attack and new conventions had emerged.

\textsuperscript{29} For example, see: Estela Arza, “Para las damas” \textit{Bohemia} 12:27 (July 3, 1921), 20; Estela Arza, “Para las damas” \textit{Bohemia} 15:1 (January 6, 1924), 26; Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” \textit{Bohemia} 16:5 (February 1, 1925), 28; Enriqueta Planas de Modeda, “Sugestiones” \textit{Bohemia} 16:27 (July 5, 1925), 25.

\textsuperscript{30} “La alcaldía de coquetos” \textit{Muecas} 2:27 (July 2, 1922), 17.

\textsuperscript{31} Enriqueta Planas de Moneda, “Sugestiones” \textit{Bohemia} 16:24 (June 14, 1925), 25.

\textsuperscript{32} The column “Ellas y yo” portrayed women’s perspective in their own words. They published the letters of women, many of whom wrote about their relationship problems. Roger de Lauria, “Ellas y yo: epistolario romántico” \textit{Bohemia}, May 1921-Jan 1924.
The introduction of modern dating practices led to questioning parental control. Adolescents caught between the gender norms of their parents’ generation and those of their own generation confronted the challenge of maneuvering between the two. Those engaging in emergent cultural customs did so openly or covertly, depending on the strictness of individual household regulations. Parents as well often discovered that they had to adjust their policies to the changing times. Planas commented on these new parental limitations when she explained that in previous times marriage had been a contract between parents in which they discussed money and that “nowadays it is also a contract, but the parents become involved in the marriage discussion only after the couple have sworn their mutual love for one another.” She recounted how a young man had spent his time “courting the parents,” only to find that his love interest had become engaged to another man.33 These types of accounts suggested to female readers that it was increasingly possible for them to choose their potential partners, a process that often led to rejecting or ignoring the opinions of their parents. It also informed parents that dating customs had changed, even if they had not yet adjusted to the new ways.

Parental influence did not disappear altogether. Even in cases where parents exerted less direct influence, many young adults continued to be shaped by their parents’ social preconceptions. This made it more likely for them to choose partners that their parents would approve of, especially in relation to class and race. In her response to a female reader, Estela Arza assimilated this prevalent mode of thinking when she connected the worthiness of the potential suitor to her family’s acceptance. “Why is your family opposed [to him]? Does he not have merit? In that case, forget him.”34

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33 Enriqueta Planas de Moneda, “Sugestiones” Bohemia 16:24 (June 14, 1925), 25.
short story “Escrito en su tumba,” writer Salvador Quesada Torres referred to the pervasiveness of family influence, but criticized it as detrimental and crass. In the story, the young woman’s family opposes her engagement to the protagonist as a result of his having lost his fortune. The author argued that the word *porvenir* (future economic security) “has been invented by mothers who love money above everything else in order to scare their daughters and hamper the impulses of their hearts.”

The development of modern courtship practices did not supplant all previous concerns and influences. Yet, increasingly women gained a certain amount of liberty and flexibility within the dating realm.

To develop their own norms on dating, young women combined what they learned from their parents, peers, and community with the multiple messages found in the popular media. These varied sources allowed them to gather information on how to meet men, what to expect at different stages of the relationship, and how to respond to problems as they arose. Some were required to, or chose to, adhere to a more traditional approach, while others embraced contemporary views on dating. However, new courtship practices were not simply accepted or rejected. The rapid introduction of modern trends created a transitional moment in which gender behavior became contested and fluid. Thus, young adults could modify their understanding of the dating process, while still retaining aspects of traditional values. Rarely did women conform to one distinct representation of womanhood, but rather they encompassed both traditional and modern elements. This convergence of diverse gendered norms was a reflection of conflicted views, expressed in wavering, guilt, and rationalization as Cubans mediated

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modernity. As a result, young women searching for partners received more than just guidance from the numerous forms of popular culture. They also found validation for their varying behavior and beliefs. Fictional and non-fictional accounts served to present young women with multiple scenarios, roles, and consequences. Happy endings did not necessarily correspond with particular behavior, complicating the trajectory of the characters, and consequently that of female readers. The mixed messages women encountered allowed them to create new dating guidelines that they could continuously modify.

Modern Dating Practices

The introduction of new dating norms offered women greater freedom and flexibility, but it also placed added pressure on them to not transgress the ever-moving boundaries of acceptable gendered behavior. As a consequence, women had to present themselves in a manner to attract men and keep their interest, without compromising self-respect. To accomplish this, they had to continuously monitor their conduct, paying close attention to maintaining the right balance of certain ascribed female characteristics. The most obvious concern was the stigmatization of being labeled too forward, or worse yet promiscuous. Popular magazines imparted women with some guidance on managing constantly shifting gender norms and establishing a code of conduct that fit with their individual social realities and personal viewpoints. Advice columns, editorials, and personal letters presented readers with a glimpse into the social reality of women across the island. As a result, these sources provided them with insight into their own circumstances and hardships. Fictional accounts offered numerous examples of female
characters that encompassed the traits of a Modern Girl without crossing into the realm of inappropriate behavior. By paying attention to their assertive dialogue, body language, and overall behavior, readers discovered multiple ways in which they too could masterfully maneuver through the expectations of emergent dating practices.

Mastering the art of flirting became a primary expectation of new gender roles. Flirting was such an integral aspect of the modern dating realm that Chic magazine jovially proclaimed to its readers, “Men and women, old and young! The flirt is the vast space where we live with happiness and in which every glance connotes a world of illusions.”36 The act of flirting was not new, but the means of flirting differed in that it offered women an opportunity to assert themselves. Modern methods of flirting often called upon women to be overt and forward, behavior that often scandalized members of previous generations. Critique stemmed in part from the male tendency to sexualize the Modern Girl. Women thus had to discover ways to express their modern identity, attract the opposite sex, and still remain within the bounds of acceptability.

The emphasis on flirting empowered women to play a more active role in the dating process, but it also prompted critique of modern trends. Under modern dating practices, it was expected for women to employ the right balance of flirting, since too little made women uninteresting and too much made them the object of derision. However, according to traditional norms, most modern forms of flirting transgressed notions of appropriate behavior. Cultural expectations based on traditional gendered practices prohibited openly flirting and socializing with the opposite sex in public, unless the relationship had been made official. Etiquette manuals clearly delineated the bounds of social interactions between men and women, with Fanny condemning informal

36 “El eterno flirt” Chic 12:100 (December 1923), 42.
exchanges in public. She not only demanded that when walking on the streets men stop bothering women, but that women avoid any prolonged or unnecessary interaction with men, especially strangers. Furthermore, she scolded women for calling attention to themselves by wearing “extreme outfits” or “adopting daring postures.”\(^{37}\) The introduction of modern trends altered gendered expectations, including perceptions about women’s role in the courtship process. By emulating the characteristics associated with the Modern Girl, women acquired increased options within the dating realm, but they also faced new challenges.

Flirting was as integral a component of the Modern Girl’s identity as stylish clothes and a short bob. It could be used to attract a specific love interest or as part of a woman’s demeanor as she walked down the street. It could be direct or subtle, based on words or that of body language. One of the primary factors that differentiated modern dating practices from previous customs was the increased expectation for women to pursue men more actively. Thus, capable flirting became a necessary tool for both becoming a Modern Girl and attracting a suitable partner. *Elegancias* explained how feminine *coquetería* had become a crucial part of all social events. It emphasized the importance of connecting conversational and flirting skills, describing how women “laugh, tease, joke, and purposefully talk about nothing and everything” all in an effort to appease “male pride.”\(^{38}\)

Intense female competition required for women to interact strategically with the opposite sex. Personal stories provided useful tools to women hoping to attain the necessary skills of flirting. *Más Allá* published first-hand accounts of women who had

\(^{37}\) Fanny, *Como debo comportarme en sociedad*, 114.

\(^{38}\) Henriette “Por los salones” *Elegancias* 5:40 (October 1924), 6.
“conquered” their boyfriends, some of whom later became their husbands. Many of these women employed specific tactics to acquire male attention, often times taking it away from their female peers. One woman explained to Más Allá that she had pursued her love interest by imitating the fashion style, mannerisms, and way of speaking of a mutual friend the young man had been interested in. “One has to offer the client what he likes and not try to create a new product.” Another based her approach on the notion that “men like themselves more than they like women.” Her strategy was to make her love interest feel important by asking him questions about himself. Through this method, she successfully lured her him away from her pretty, but self-involved cousin.49 Through personal accounts, women acquired insight on how important it was to smile, play coy, and ask the right questions. They also gained perspective on the expectation that women “conquer” their love interests, often by vying with one another. The acts of flirting and pursuing love interests empowered women, but they also forced them to use manipulative techniques, compete with each other, and accentuate their sexuality.

Flirting occurred at numerous social occasions, including the movies, theatre, and parties, but it also took place in more unlikely places. Writer Carlos Deambrosis Martins noted that Sunday mass had become the perfect setting for “the art of flirtear.” “One goes there to exhibit oneself, to show off an outfit, to practice a pose, a smile,” Deambrosis declared. “One goes there to meet ‘someone.’”40 Flirting also took place between strangers in the street and on public transportation. In writer Eugenio Mario Hernández’s short story, the protagonist approaches a beautiful woman on a train, only to

49 “Como conquisté a mi novio” Más Allá 2:17 (September 1, 1929), 20; “Como conquisté a mi novio” Más Allá 1:9 (December 15, 1928), 20.

40 Carlos Deambrosis Martins, “Pinceladas” Bohemia 16:37 (September 13, 1925), 20.
be initially rejected by her. She claims to not believe men when they compliment her, “cuando la galantea,” but nevertheless spends the rest of the train ride conversing with the stranger. Modern dating practices allowed for more frequent and spontaneous interactions among the sexes. Women and men no longer had to wait to be formally introduced or to limit socialization to prearranged supervised meetings. Moreover, when approached by a potential love interest, women no longer had to act offended and ignore them.

Women did not always have to play the role of pursuer to actively flirt. They also flirted by expressing interest in being pursued. At times, men approached women and employed a savvy remark to obtain their attention. They also demonstrated their attraction by following women down the street and staring at them from afar. These tactics did not divert drastically from traditional customs, but women’s reaction to them did. Chic described how men flirt by giving the look, smiling, and saying a passionate phrase. It then parodied a woman as having said, “Today a young man followed me that looked beautiful in an American suit. Why can’t Daddy buy him for me the way he bought me a car?” The notion that women could enjoy male attention was suggested as well in a cartoon of a mother and daughter on the beach, in which the young woman declares “You can’t imagine mother how much it flatters me that men admire me in this bathing suit.” These representations suggested that modern women enjoyed the game of being pursued and watched, and moreover, they considered it a natural part of interacting with the opposite sex. They also added to the sexualized images of the

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41 Eugenio Mario Hernández, “Evocación” Chic 12:93 (May 1923), 34.
42 “El eterno flirt” Chic 12:100 (December 1923), 42.
43 Muecas 2:7 (February 12, 1922), 3.
Modern Girl, representations which celebrated female sexuality, but belittled modern womanhood and provided critics with grounds to censure modern trends.

The sexualization of the Modern Girl manifested in a variety of ways. Among them was the prevalent custom of *piropeando*, complimenting female strangers within public spaces. Looking back years later, Manuel García Iglesias remembered how young men spent their evenings at the park “*piropeando a las muchachas*” with phrases such as “you are so beautiful,” “how pretty,” and “my girl.”44 *Pirapos* transformed parks, city streets, and public venues into a place where women of all social backgrounds received male attention. Previously, young middle-class women rarely left the home without adult supervision. The emergence of modern trends facilitated mobility, but it also exposed women to attention that was not always welcomed.

The widespread practice received mixed reactions of both toleration and disapproval. Some recognized it as typical male behavior, heightened by the sexualized image of the Modern Girl. They believed women’s revealing attire invited commentary and that women enjoyed the attention. *La Política Cómica* commented on the pervasiveness and condemnation of shouted compliments, explaining that “once again the campaign against *pirapos* has been activated in Havana. A beautiful woman cannot go out into the street without being *piropeada*.” According to the publication, “a charming *pirapo* is always appreciated by the woman who inspires it, and some even smile and say thank you,” but that many times they are offensive and in bad taste.45 Others denounced the behavior as insolent and counteractive to positive heterosexual dynamics. They viewed modern womanhood as a reason to further value women and treat them as equals,

not as a justification for lewd remarks. *La Mujer* warned men against making inappropriate comments, declaring that they demonstrated disrespect towards women as well as themselves, and moreover gave the impression that men were “unable to sustain a more serious and interesting conversation.”46 The reaction of the feminist magazine suggested that women recognized the dangers inherent in the sexualization of modern women.

The emergence of new dating practices impelled women into an ambiguous and fluid social space in which the standards of conduct were constantly being questioned and reinvented. An emphasis on female sexuality and a lessening of parental restrictions furthered male demands for physical interaction. Most women recognized that they were the ones responsible for sexual propriety, but modern dating norms required them to recognize the differences between behavior deemed inappropriate in public, but expected and acceptable in private. Changes occurred within the dating realm in the form of group outings and flirting, as well as behind closed doors. The distinction between the public and private became most evident in the personal accounts of women and men. A young woman recounted to *Más Allá* how one day walking on a narrow street, her lips accidentally brushed a young man’s cheeks. She quickly checked to make sure no one had seen them, and after he apologized, they began to talk. The young woman explained that even after they began dating, she continued to make certain that “when my lips brush his cheeks we are far away from the window…and people.” In another letter to *Más Allá*, a young man explained the events that had caused him to break-up with his girlfriend, a decision he later regretted. When the electricity went out at a party, he had seized the opportunity to caress his girlfriend’s thigh, “something very natural among a couple who

46 “Como comportarse en sociedad” *La Mujer* 2:22 (September 30, 1930), 13, 16.
love each other.” When the lights turned on the room filled with laughter, since it was not her leg he was caressing but that of her brother. Different expectations in public and private required women to maneuver discreetly through the fluid and ever-moving bounds of appropriate gendered behavior.

Women had to calculate every move within a constantly shifting social realm in which following the rules was imperative, but nearly impossible. However, as a result of changing courtship practices, violating them carried less-dire consequences. The prominence of dating multiple partners before marriage gave women whose relationship had ended an opportunity to pursue other love interests. No longer did a failed relationship necessarily determine a woman’s fate as an old maid. Moreover, women and men had the option of interacting as friends, spending time to get acquainted, and ending the relationship if so desired. Empowered by a new sense of freedom, women demanded more from their partners. Emergent dating practices allowed women to set higher expectations in regards to how they were treated, since terminating relations seized to have such negative consequences. As modern women, they could assert themselves by demanding respect and fair treatment. They could break-up with their unappreciative boyfriends, flirt at parties, and casually date several boys before committing to one.

Changing gender roles provided Cubans with an opportunity to discuss male behavior. Oftentimes, fictional and non-fictional sources depicted men in unflattering terms. Within fictional portrayals, male protagonists cheated, seduced, abandoned, and even killed the women in their lives. Female characters were described as victims, survivors, and villains, with reactions varying depending on the intended message of the

47 “Como conquísté a mi novio” Más Allá 3:5 (March 1, 1930), 20; “El momento más embarazoso de su vida” Más Allá 3:7 (April 1, 1930), 29.
writer. Negative portrayals of men were also conveyed in real-life circumstances. Of particular concern to advice columnists was the manner in which men took advantage of naïve women. Roger de Lauria informed one woman with relationship issues that her love interest was not serious about committing to her. He warned that similar to many men, he only wanted to convert her into “an instrument of pleasure.” Men like him, who are only interested in the conquest, “take advantage of the inexperience of their victims as a means to pervert their souls.”

Estela Arza used a metaphor to attract the attention of a woman in a troubled relationship. She claimed that “men play with some women’s hearts the way cats play with little mice.”

Women encountered numerous cautionary remarks about the perils of becoming enamored with a womanizer. These commentaries became especially relevant in an era of diminished parental control. Heightened societal fears, greater female autonomy, and higher scrutiny of male misconduct resulted in critical depictions of self-involved men and credulous women. “Casanovas like him” Madame La Fleur advised one reader “have to be avoided as if they were the devil.” La Fleur warned another reader that with her inexperience she could have become “his conquest, victim, or plaything,” as a result she should not let herself become impressed with those “Don Juanes” who despite “their irreproachable courtesy turn out to be dangerous.”

Some women viewed the transitional time period as a chance to renegotiate gender norms. Editorialist Sofia called for women to “ask, persuade, plea, and convince” men who are in the dominant position

49 Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:17 (April 24, 1921), 25.
50 Madame La Fleur, “Consultorio social” Almanaque Social 2:19 (Novemebr 1930), 64.
that women should no longer be “the slaves, the mistress, the eternally deceived, [and] the eternally mocked.”

The introduction of modern trends not only created a space for Cubans to examine negative male behavior, it also offered women solutions to their relationship problems. Among the advantages of modern dating practices was the prominence and acceptance of casual dating. Women were able to engage in multiple relationships before settling down, and moreover, they could end relationships with men who mistreated or deceived them without harming their reputations. Advice columnists frequently encouraged women to terminate their relationships and find men that appreciated them. Arza directed a young woman with romantic problems to have fun and forget her selfish boyfriend, so that when she becomes involved with a man who treats her well and loves her, she can give him her affection. Another reader was warned that her boyfriend’s love was false and egotistical and that she should end the relationship. According to Arza, it was not enough for him to profess his love, but rather he needed to be supportive in her time of need. Arza informed another young woman that if her boyfriend was like most men, “selfish, without a soul, someone who only loves himself, does not understand you, and does not know how to appreciate you then there is no hope.” Arza’s disdain for what she viewed to be chronic negative male conduct often led to sweeping generalizations and encouragement to terminate relationships. Female readers were told repeatedly and explicitly that they no longer had to tolerate maltreatment from their boyfriends. On the

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contrary, they were taught to be confident when dealing with men by showing their self-worth, ending unsuccessful relationships, and moving on with a new love.

Conversations about negative male conduct forced women to examine their position within the courtship process. As modern women, they had multiple options available to them, but their decisions were often reactionary. Even within the modern dating realm, women continued to operate from a vulnerable and powerless stance within heterosexual relations. Roger de Lauria recognized the imbalance as natural and necessary. “To be able to eternally love a woman it is necessary for her to be sufficiently savvy as to not let us escape,” de Lauria declared, “she has to construct a sweet chain that neither disillusion nor boredom could break.”53 The emergence of modern trends did not promote an atmosphere of equality, rather it perpetuated the notion that men strayed and lost interest. Responsible for maintaining male affection, women were encouraged to employ deception as a defensive tool. Arza recommended employing trickery, since indifference drove men crazy, “lo que los mortifica.” To a young woman trying to make her love interest commit, she proclaimed “have fun and go out” and perhaps then “he will become interested and finally make up his mind.” Arza advised another reader never to appear shy or jealous and if he threatens to leave, simply “hand him his hat and laugh…when he sees that nothing affects you, or very little, then certainly he will be more interested.”54 These strategies may have provided women with temporary advantages over men, but they nevertheless propagated the traditional gender hierarchy.


Traces of traditional expectations remained embedded within the very sources that persuaded women to be assertive and selective in their search for a partner. The idea that even within modern understandings of gender relations women remained powerless became especially evident with the numerous references to destiny. A common theme within most discussions of love and romance, destiny was used to justify fortunate circumstances as well as ill-treatment and hardship. In “Ellas y yo,” a woman using the pseudonym “Orquídea Camagüeyana” referenced destiny as evidence of her happy existence as wife and mother, while “Otra que sueña” claimed that she had spent her life “struggling boldly against her harsh destiny.” Advice columnists also used the concept of destiny to rationalize the outcome of life circumstances. Enriqueta Planas de Moneda explained to readers that “if destiny denies us our notion of happiness, it is useless to waste time and effort in a pointless struggle.” After counseling a reader on the unpredictable behavior of men, Arza dismissed her previous advice and urged the young woman to resign herself to destiny, because “with this philosophy you have patience to wait for the good and resignation to put up with the bad.” References to destiny greatly contrasted with advice columnists’ exhortations for women to take charge of their relationships by flirting, not tolerating negative behavior, feigning indifference, and looking for love with someone else if necessary.

Modern dating practices offered women greater control and increased options. By gaining some autonomy and flexibility, women acquired an enhanced awareness of their


position and thus sought new ways to achieve command over their romantic lives. However, modern trends did not always facilitate greater equality among the sexes. The sexualization of the Modern Girl devalued women and exposed their vulnerable situation, while the acceptance of deception as a necessary female tool reinforced gendered stereotypes. Moreover, empowering messages that stressed female agency were at times countered with traditional ideas about heterosexual relations. This often resulted in the juxtaposition of romantic fantasies with female experiences of disillusionment. Nevertheless, the introduction of modern trends prompted a shifting cultural space in which women could reexamine gender norms and affirm their new identity as modern women.

**Pursuing their *Principe Azul***

The sense of independence that women discovered in the changing social climate of the 1920s allowed them to assert themselves by taking on an active role in dating. Women who followed modern dating practices went on group outings with male and female friends, actively flirted, played the part of pursuer, and dated casually before marriage. Modern dating methods also appeared in the form of marriage contests and personal ads. These trends received acclaim in Cuba, further revealing the extent to which courtship practices had been transformed. Yet, even within these new dating formats, Cubans continued to incorporate traditional values into their modern identities.

Representations within the popular media informed women that as a result of new dating practices women were no longer passively waiting for their *principe azul*. Short stories used numerous plot lines to reveal the varied ways in which women could take on
the role of pursuer. Female characters made the initial contact, took charge within social interactions, acted seductively, and even propositioned their love interests. Popular magazines also exposed female readers to the real life experiences of young women like themselves. Through the series Como conquisté a mi novio, women shared with others the circumstances that had led to their “conquering” their boyfriends. Their anecdotes provided ideas on how to pursue love interests, offered comfort in the knowledge that others experienced similar situations, and served as validation for participating in new dating practices.

Popular magazines also offered young Cubans a modern means to meet one another and develop a relationship. Marriage contests and personal ads were among the latest dating practices available to young men and women. The introduction of these new dating methods had become possible as a direct result of the extensive changes in dating norms. Marriage contests and personal ads were not only visible examples of modern dating practices, they were exemplary of how drastically dating norms had changed in a short time period. These modern dating practices provided women with an outlet in which to meet potential love interests as well as a space in which to play the part of pursuer. Women took on this role by answering the contests or ads as well as by placing their own information in the publications. These innovative dating methods also served as a lens to examine shifting gendered expectations and norms. In particular, personal ads provided readers with a description of ideal male and female qualities in the form of participants’ descriptions of themselves and potential mates. For many Cubans, the stage of courtship had moved from the living room to the park bench. With the introduction of
marriage contests and personal ads, it had also begun to take place on the pages of magazines.

Men and women across the nation took part in these two new dating formats. With its “Gran Concurso Matrimonial,” La Política Cómica introduced couples to one another in an attempt to turn complete strangers into potential partners. During the span of five months, the publication printed the photographs and personal information of Cubans throughout the island. The response of over 200 contestants forced them to terminate the contest without publishing all the photographs. Six men and women, one from each province, were then paired up and given each other’s addresses. The objective was for these set-up matches to end in marriage. If any of them succeeded in reaching the altar, they would win the contest, including cash and prizes.58 The magazine Más Allá also served as a liaison for prospective couples. In its series “Buzón de la Amistad,” the magazine facilitated the introduction of its readers by publishing personal ads, collecting replies, and distributing them to the corresponding party.59

The number of personal ads published in Más Allá increased quickly during the first year of the series. However, “Buzón de la Amistad” did not initially obtain the complete support of the series editor. Sofia informed readers of her initial reluctance and search for validation. She recounted how early on she had learned from an American magazine that thousands of people had met through the mail in the United States, France, Germany, and Spain. Not sufficiently convinced of the seriousness of the format, Sofia

58 La Política Cómica ran the “Gran Concurso Matrimonial” from May 1924 until October 1924. They published a total of 127 photographs of men and 23 of women. I was unable to verify whether or not any couple won the contest.

59 Personal ads appeared in Más Allá from September 1, 1929 until at least June 1, 1930. During this time, there were a total of 90 ads published by Cubans, 54 of them by men and 36 of them by women. This magazine was published in Havana, but was circulated throughout Latin America.
conducted an experiment by placing her own personal ad in the Cuban magazine. As a result, she was among those participants to have made a successful romantic connection, announcing in one of the issues her resignation due to her impending marriage.60

Sofía appeased her initial apprehension with her own promising match as well as by the overwhelming popularity of the series. Cubans responded eagerly to the modern dating method, with Más Allá receiving over a thousand letters within its first year.61 The growing success of this format in Cuba was also attested to by the success stories of participants. One couple announced their engagement and numerous others wrote in to express their gratitude. A man from Camagüey shared how in “search of dreamy friendships, and tired of the vulgar,” he placed an ad and found a wonderful woman who “thinks like me, guesses what I am thinking.” Writing to Sofía, another male reader applauded the section, stating that “what in many years I had not accomplished in trips, outings, dances, parties, and theaters, which was to interest my heart in something worthwhile, Más Allá accomplished in only one month.”62

The women who participated in this new dating practice acquired an outlet in which to meet potential love interests, play the role of pursuer, convey their requirements for a partner, and present themselves as modern Cuban women. Some ads were brief, simply including age, height, hair color, and social standing, but the majority contained information regarding their physical attractiveness, interests, and personality traits. Despite, or perhaps as a result of, using this modern dating method, most female

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62 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:24 (December 15, 1929), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:22 (November 15, 1929), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 3:3 (February 1, 1930), 36.
participants were careful to emphasize traditional characteristics and expectations. They asserted themselves by controlling the dating process and corresponding with numerous men, while simultaneously describing themselves as “decent” women from good families. The women of the “Buzón de la Amistad” served as an example to readers from across the island that as women of respectable social standing they could have greater command over the dating process and take on a role traditionally designated for men.

One seventeen-year-old girl using the pseudonym “Naïve” was among the young women who in the late 1920s turned to the magazine as a way of meeting young men. “Naïve” chose to place an ad detailing information about herself and her expectations in a suitor, rather than simply responding to ads previously published by male readers. But having her own ad allowed her to articulate her requirements in a partner. Moreover, it provided her with the opportunity to assess the responses of prospective suitors, answering all or some of the letters. Using this dating method, she asserted that she was interested in corresponding with a reserved young man from society between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four. But more importantly, she emphasized her need for someone who would understand and accept her. Informing male readers of her own class, age, and personality traits served as a means to attract potential love interests as well as to stress her particular concerns and needs. As a result, “Naïve” made it clear that as a “privileged type” interested in music and poetry, she was not only looking for a partner that like herself was from a good family and between a certain age bracket, but rather someone that shared her interests and was attracted to her “type.”

Women may have wanted to counter the implied stigma associated with this assertive and modern method of searching for a partner. As a result, many of them

63 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:22 (November 15, 1929), 32.
alluded to their social status. The ad placed by “Naïve” resembled many of the other ads by women in that she referenced a middle-class status by claiming to be well-educated and from a good family. Thirteen of the thirty-six women also incorporated phrases that alluded to social standing, such as that they were “from a distinguished family,” “from a good family,” or “educated,” while seven of them included references to their white skin color.64 Many of them also emphasized their desire for traditional characteristics in a suitor. Eleven out of the thirty-five women asked that the men replying to their ad be honorable or a “caballero.” “Violeta” stated that she did not like parties and therefore wanted the man to visit her at home, while “Sadly Undiscovered” emphasized that men did not need to respond if they were not “reserved, sincere, delicate, and of irreproachable conduct and morality.”65

The self-descriptors used in personal ads also reveal a great deal about the fluidity of modern identities. In sharp contrast to the traditional expectations discussed above, two women referred to themselves as “modern,” while two others stated that they were “discreet.”66 A sexual relationship was implied when seventeen-year old “Red Carnation” pronounced that she wanted to have “an intimate friendship” with a man between thirty-five and forty as well as when another woman included in her ad, “I am discreet and I like to travel.”67 However, modern views were not necessarily linked to an

64 Three women refer to their skin color as other than white, using the terms “trigueña,” “más blanca que morena,” and “de color.”

65 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:17 (September 1, 1929), 15; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:22 (November 15, 1929), 32.

66 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:24 (December 15, 1929), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 3:9 (May 1, 1930), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 3:6 (March 15, 1930), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 3:9 (May 1, 1930), 32.

67 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:24 (December 15, 1929), 32.
open sexuality. One woman wrote that she was “a not very young Srta.…of impeccable
court, a dreamer, without excessive romanticism, on the contrary, with quite modern
ideas and views, who wants to have correspondence with a serious and decent man, one
who loves honest women.” Allusions to proper moral conduct, social standing, and
modern behavior, often within the same personal ad, further demonstrate that notions of
Cuban womanhood were not clearly defined along the lines of traditional or modern
norms. Women given the opportunity for creative self-representation within a controlled
and concise format rarely defined themselves in clear terms that fit static descriptions of
either good or bad archetypes.

Personal ads placed by male readers also reveal how modernity and ideals of
womanhood intersected in Cuba. In describing their requirements in a partner, most men
reinforced the notion that they wanted well-rounded women who would be able to talk
about literature, music, art, and sports. Rather than focusing simply on superficial
characteristics and beauty, many included references to education, common interests, and
compatibility, while a few specifically requested that respondents be “modern.”
“R.C.L.,” a male reader describing himself as “young, serious, decent, and sentimental,”
only asked that the woman be similar in age and “modernizada,” while twenty-one year
old “Leon” stated that “it does not matter if she is blond or brunette, but she has to be
educated a la moderna.” Without using the specific term, other ads implied that the
male participant was looking for a modern woman. One man, whose only revelation
about himself was that he had all the requisites of a gentleman, asked that the woman

68 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 3:9 (May 1, 1930), 32.
69 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:23 (December 1, 1929), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más
Allá 3:1 (January 1, 1930), 32.
have “advanced ideas” and that “conversation depart from that which is currently in
vogue among the youth.”

“C. Ruiz” called for romantic experience when he asked that respondents be “pretty, friendly, sweet, affectionate, [and] sincere” and that they “know something about love.” A decade earlier romantic experience would have been frowned upon, but with the prevalence of casual dating this was no longer the case. Overall, the personal ads placed by men indicated that they had embraced modern dating practices and modern notions of gender relations.

An examination of the concerns and demands of men and women suggest that many of them sought modern relationships based on partnership, compatibility, and respect. Rather than stressing purity and virtue, many male participants asked for someone to console, understand, and appreciate them. “Yogi Oriental” wrote that “physical looks is secondary” and that he is looking for an intelligent woman “with a soul and heart able to understand a person who has always been misunderstood.” In a similar ad, a man describing himself as a “caballero” asked that “she have good sentiments, be affectionate, and know how to understand a sincere heart.” Women also expressed their desire to find a partner who would understand and appreciate them. A female reader from Camagüey expressed this sentiment when she asked for “someone that will comprehend me and can give a little happiness to my sad heart,” while “Misunderstood” searched for “a soul similar to mine, what until now I have not been able to find.”

70 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:21 (November 1, 1929), 32.
71 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:19 (October 1, 1929), 32.
72 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:19 (October 1, 1929), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 2:21 (November 1, 1929), 32.
73 Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 3:10 (May 15, 1930), 32; Sofía, “Buzón de la Amistad” Más Allá 3:1 (January 1, 1930), 32.
Women used personal ads to describe not only their ideal partner, but their ideal self. They portrayed themselves in a manner that garnered the admiration of their potential suitors, peers, parents, and community. They were aware of the necessity to conform to cultural standards regarding physical beauty, sexual purity, and social decorum. The mainstream media tended to emphasize these cultural norms, while simultaneously offering women the empowering representation of the Modern Girl. By doing so, it encouraged women to take on an active role in dating as well-rounded modern women, but it also pushed an image of womanhood that encompassed diverse, and often contradictory, characteristics. Women were thus faced with the difficulty of creating a persona to attract a potential partner, meet social standards of appropriate gender norms, and sustain the development of their own sense of self. They faced this challenge in their everyday interactions with the opposite sex, as well as within the realm of personal ads.

Conclusion

Women coming of age in 1920s Cuba acted with greater freedom than their mothers’ generation. This new-found sense of autonomy and ability to control one’s own future was exemplified in modern dating practices. Women became active participants in the dating process, not only through flirting and placing personal ads, but also by refusing to tolerate abusive behavior. By combining what they learned from their parents and peers with representations from the popular media, young women developed their own version of a modern identity. They turned to the archetype of the Modern Girl as a means of conforming to the outlook of their contemporaries, but most still remained within the
bounds of appropriate gendered behavior. New dating practices were not simply accepted or rejected, but rather were modified according to individual realities. The myriad of images and anecdotes allowed women to choose and create their own variation of the Modern Girl, more often than not wavering among the various representations.

The lifestyle of the Modern Girl offered women a sense of empowerment that allowed for self-assertion, but it also presented them with conflicting messages regarding their standing as members of a modern Cuba. Women were encouraged to take on an active role in dating, while encompassing diverse, often contradictory, characteristics. Faced with the obstacle of having to meet shifting standards of ideal womanhood, one that was often a composite of traditional and modern values, women constructed a sense of self that was modern, Cuban, and acceptable to mainstream society. However, the need to retain traditional values often led to the perpetuation of unequal heterosexual relations. Moreover, societal fears and anxieties often interpreted modern trends as immoral and corrupting. The sexualization of the Modern Girl facilitated this marginalization of certain types of modern behavior. Despite the challenges, changes in dating practices offered women an opportunity to assert themselves and redefine gender relations.
Chapter Five: Behaving Badly

Introduction

A woman using the pseudonym, “Corazón que duda,” wrote to advice columnist Madame La Fleur to ask whether or not she should concede to her boyfriend’s pleas to enter into sexual relations. “Should I let him do what he wants so that he doesn’t get angry?” she wondered. Describing intimacy as “so sweet and enjoyable,” the young woman seemed eager to grant her boyfriend’s request. Madame La Fleur recognized that women blinded by “passion and hope” often did not view the issue objectively, but that “a well-intentioned boyfriend does not ask… [and] he never gets angry at our negations.” Rather, he understands that rebuttals are “necessary as a means of maintaining and intensifying the flames of passion.” Furthermore, Madame La Fleur warned the young woman that outside of marriage, sexual activity was not “sweet and enjoyable,” but rather “poisonous and bitter.” The emergence of modern cultural norms led to the increased sexualization of women. New trends shaped perceptions of women within society as well as within heterosexual relationships. Thus, women found themselves torn between male demands to “let him do what he wants” and the technique of “maintaining and intensifying the flames of passion” without consenting to sexual relations.

Modern dating practices allowed women to assert themselves, date multiple partners before marriage, and end unsuccessful relationships. These favorable outcomes

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1 Madame La Fleur, “Consultorio social” Almanaque Social 2:19 (November 1930), 64.
were countered with mounted pressure for women to engage in sexual relations. The lessening of parental restrictions and emphasis on female autonomy facilitated opportunities for couples to be alone, while heightening male expectations and demands for intimacy. And while romantic activities, which varied in degrees from kissing and fondling to sexual intercourse, became progressively acceptable, sexual decorum and virginity remained imperative to upholding female reputation. The idea that women were responsible for not only dominating their own sexuality, but controlling men’s natural and unhinged sexual instinct became even more relevant once the social confines had been loosened. This task increased in difficulty as correlations between the Modern Girl and overt sexuality became a part of mainstream understandings of modern womanhood. The media brought sexuality into the public forum with narratives, illustrations, and photographs of women as the fulfillment of male fantasies, while increased autonomy, revealing fashion styles, and modern dating practices facilitated for women the move away from traditional norms into the more elusive, and dangerous, world of sexuality.

Many young women experienced uncertainty and confusion in regards to their position within this intangible and rapidly shifting social realm. They confronted a daunting challenge as they attempted to meld the values espoused by their parents with the more modern expectations of their contemporaries. Being everything to everybody proved especially difficult since multiple notions of ideal femininity often conflicted with one another. Consequently, some women found themselves in situations in which they were unable or unwilling to maintain the right balance between traditional and modern characteristics. Women who embraced too many modern traits were labeled and stigmatized for having crossed the bounds of appropriate gender norms, while those who
adhered too closely to conventional views became uninteresting and irrelevant. But understandings of model conduct were blurry and contested. Certain behavior, fashion styles, and practices were deemed attractive and acceptable in some respects, and undesirable and inappropriate in others. This was especially the case in terms of women’s sexuality. The version of womanhood that venerated women for their physical beauty, sense of fashion, and sexuality served to facilitate the increase in female authority and autonomy, but it also became a means of vilifying the Modern Girl through the perpetuation of negative stereotypes.

Representations of the Modern Girl that focused on women’s sexual conduct appeared in a variety of forms. I use the term “bad Modern Girl” to describe these archetypes, regardless of whether they were in favor of or against expressions of female sexuality. Some portrayals used the figure to celebrate and promote the notion that women’s sexuality was a vital and beneficial aspect of modernity, while others employed it as a means of labeling the Modern Girl as immoral and detrimental to society. Once again, these representations did not always fall neatly into one category or another. Critical depictions often typecast women as sexual objects enamored with the frivolous lifestyle of the Modern Girl, whereas those that appeared complimentary often reinforced the patriarchal idea of women as mere subjects of male desire. As a result, most portrayals of the bad Modern Girl served to question understandings of sexual propriety, express societal fears over changing gender norms, and challenge the power dynamic of heterosexual relationships. In many respects, sexualized versions of the Modern Girl offered women a sense of agency by allowing them to probe, reconstruct, and at times break away from previous restrictions. But these representations also attempted to define
women based on their sexual demeanor and conduct. By emphasizing women’s sexuality, Cubans continued to confine women to the dichotomies of virgin and tramp, good and bad, wife and mistress. The proclivity to sexualize the Modern Girl operated as another means of belittling and dismissing women’s worth as educated, capable members of a modern society.

Inappropriate Behavior

Modern dating practices offered young adults more freedom, but increased liberties also contributed to the questioning of modern women’s moral integrity. Focusing on female sexuality became one of the varied ways in which Cubans confronted the sudden changes in gendered behavior. The public became fascinated with the topics of seduction, premarital sex, jealousy, and adultery. These themes became especially prominent within fictional narratives, resulting in multiple representations of the bad Modern Girl. Some accounts endorsed the traditional view that sex prior to and outside of marriage was unacceptable, while others reflected the changing times by proposing a more flexible and permissible approach. Nevertheless, most portrayals of the bad Modern Girl rendered women as the embodiment of male lust. As a result, sexually-active women were celebrated, vilified, chastised, and pitied depending on the circumstances and moral of the story. Frequently, the archetype of the bad Modern Girl became synonymous with the glamorized highlife of the capital, a world that enthralled and mystified Cubans throughout the island.

With its beaches, cabarets, race tracks, and casinos, Cuba became a popular destination starting in the 1910s. Often compared to Paris, Monte Carlo, and Palm
Beach, it especially appealed to North Americans of all social classes. Havana especially became one of the many settings of the Jazz Age. Drinking, gambling, and dancing attracted North Americans eager to experience life uninhibited by the constraints of prohibition. It was also a place in which tourists sought out amorous encounters and sexual relations with each other as well as with the romanticized Other. Cuban women of all classes and races became targets of foreign men seeking sexual adventures.\(^2\) In his travel guide *When it's Cocktail Time in Cuba*, British author Basil Woon advised men visiting the island to “get acquainted with its women.” He argued that the most beautiful women did not reside in Cardenas as most Cubans claimed, but in Santiago. His preference for the women of Santiago, a city with a large Afro-Cuban population, resulted in a subtle reference to the exotic and sexualized *mulata*. “Beautiful but brunette…with a gay smile,” Woon proclaimed “its womanhood is worth a trip from Europe to see.” As for the women socializing within the various country clubs of the island, Woon warned that they avoided interacting with foreigners, especially married men. “The flappers are there but they won’t flap for you” he declared, “They are shy, adorable and unreachable.”\(^3\) From the stance of male tourists, the opportunity to interact with Cuban women served as one of the many benefits of vacationing on the island.

Foreigners seeking excitement in the Caribbean did not dominate the fast-paced and alluring scene of Havana. Prominent Cubans also spent their days and nights in hotel bars, casinos, country clubs, and race tracks. Through photographs, advertisements, articles, and short stories, popular magazines brought the glamorous experiences of the

\(^2\) For more information on Cuban tourism and nightlife, see: Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: identity, nationality and culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 166-218.

“smart-set” to the homes of Cubans throughout the nation. Defined as the social scene of the elite, the upwardly-mobile middle class entered it whenever possible, by either frequenting chic establishments or emulating the leisurely lifestyle within their own social circles. Those within Havana found comfort in the fact that they had access to the modern wonders of the cosmopolitan capital, while those in the provinces created an exclusive social sphere that set them apart from the campesinos and drew them closer to Havana. They connected themselves to the cosmopolitan center by traveling to it whenever possible, buying the most recent products via mail, hosting elegant dances and events at their local country clubs, soliciting guidance from advice columnists residing in the city, and sending pictures of themselves in the latest fashions to national magazines. As a result, the appeal and accessibility of the life of the “smart-set” reached the far corners of the island in some form or another.

Along with the tourists, middle-class and elite women frequented the popular night spots eager to join in the games at the casino and observe the son and rumba performances in the cabaret. Accompanied by their male partners, these women took part in the thrilling night life without violating cultural understandings of appropriate behavior. Another type of woman also became a fixture


within this world. Representations of the international Modern Girl as promiscuous, and therefore bad, came out of this social scene. As the personification of corrupting influences, the icon of the bad Modern Girl related to Cubans the repercussions of moving beyond the realm of acceptability. Depicted as a vice similar to gambling and drinking, critics cited her as another example of the harmful and reviled aspects of casinos, cabarets, and bars. The bad Modern Girl embodied the characteristics of the Modern Girl, except she had allowed herself to become too modern, too sexual, too materialistic, and too frivolous. As a woman of “loose morals,” she inhabited a world that had moved beyond the realm of glamour and chic to that of impropriety and scandal. In the Cuban imagination, the bad Modern Girl did not fit within the parameters of the domestic sphere, as a homemaker, wife, and mother, but rather remained eternally the other woman.

Hollywood starlets and stage actresses were among those who personified the bad Modern Girl. European and Latin American performers toured the globe enthralling audiences in some of the most renowned theaters, including those within Havana. Yet, in the minds of the general public, these women continued to cross the bounds of respectability. In fact, it was the illusive references to their sexuality that most captured the imagination of audiences. Rachel, a cabaret dancer and actress, epitomized the bad Modern Girl in that she appeared nude on stage, dressed provocatively in public, and lived as the kept woman of married men. However, she countered the belief that all theaters cultivated degenerate behavior. Unlike her first cabaret jobs at “Havana’s dives

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6 For example, see illustration depicted above: Conrado Massageur, “La peligrosa” Social 10:10 (October 1925), 12.
[where] the girls would lose their stirrups, begin to whore around right away, [and] show their thighs in the first shows,” the impresarios at the Alhambra Theater maintained “an eye on morality.” In an interview in Bohemia, Spanish actress Marta de la Torre also commented on the perceived immorality of the theater. She recalled how unsubstantiated prejudices had led her family to oppose her chosen profession. “There is nothing that compels women to be bad if they do not want to be,” de la Torre contended. “Wherever she is, a woman can be honorable, and everyone will respect her if she behaves respectfully.” Yet, sexualized depictions of actresses captured the attention of Cubans, many of whom felt simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the lascivious portrayals.

Representations of the bad Modern Girl within popular culture resonated with the Cuban public. The Hollywood vamp emerged on the movie screen, while numerous other versions of the bad Modern Girl appeared in national films, plays, song lyrics, and literature. During the 1920s, there were over a dozen Cuban movies featuring the complexities of modern-day romances, including La maldita (1921), ¿Por qué se casan las mujeres? (1922), and Entre dos amores (1925). Oftentimes, these films portrayed women as encompassing both good and bad traits as in the case of La maldita, or “The Bad Girl.” Other references to the bad Modern Girl presented her as a static character

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7 Rachel performed at the Alhambra Theater from 1915-1940. Miguel Barnet, Rachel’s Song (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1991), 91, 82.

8 Rafael Pastor, “Marta de la Torre” Bohemia 13:2 (January 8, 1922), 6, 24.

9 For more information on the Cuban film industry during the 1920s, see: Raúl Rodríguez, El cine silente en Cuba (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1992).

10 Advice columnist and actress Estela Arza played a part in the film. She hinted at the dual nature of the protagonist when she explained that similar to her character she “enjoys being the protector of good girls” like her readers and [the protagonist] La maldita. Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:43 (October 23, 1921), 22.
without misgivings and guilt. In the satirical play “Un drama razonable,” the recognizable descriptors good and bad were the only labels used to identify the archetypical characters. Hence, the adulterous wife was known as “La mala mujer,” the lover “El mal hombre,” and the unsuspecting husband “El hombre bueno.” Early on, the female protagonist declares herself “La mala mujer,” explaining to the audience that “Everyone knows that it is not possible to write a tragedy, drama or comedy without the invaluable presence of the bad woman.” She then asserts that this is a play in which the bad woman and the bad man mock the good man.11

Fictional characters within novels, short stories, poetry, and song lyrics also provided insight on the construction of the bad Modern Girl. Sexuality was the most accentuated feature, however several other traits helped audiences identify the representations as those of the bad Modern Girl. These included materialism, passivity, manipulation, frivolity, and independence. I have encountered four types of bad Modern Girl within popular culture, archetypes that I have labeled as following: the seductress, the materialistic Modern Girl, the fallen woman, and the liberated Modern Girl. The moral and outcome of these portrayals varied, with the different versions often merging with one another. For example, the materialistic Modern Girl and the liberated Modern Girl appeared carefree and invulnerable in many accounts, while in others they embodied the characteristics of the fragile and tragic fallen woman in need of sympathy and rescuing. The fluidity between villains and victims correlated with the public propensity to desire, disdain, reject, and pity the women categorized as bad. Often times, all at once. Some authors used these four archetypes to validate and encourage changes in cultural

practices, while others employed them in their warnings to both women and men. Mainly, they cautioned Cubans about the consequences of becoming entranced by the allure of luxury and materialism, straying from conventional gender roles, and engaging in premarital sex.

By defying understandings of acceptable behavior, these four archetypes offered women a guideline on which circumstances and behavior to avoid on their path to becoming a Modern Girl. They also fulfilled the public yearning for sensationalist stories about the disgrace of the Modern Girl. Narratives about seduction, deceit, and tragedy intrigued Cubans much in the same way as Hollywood films with similar themes. Fictional accounts satisfied a need for Cubans to live vicariously through the characters, justify their own behavior as modern yet moderate, and condemn those who discarded propriety. The first archetype, the seductress, encompassed the characteristics of the Hollywood vamp. Presented as the downfall of vulnerable men, the manipulative, heartless, and vindictive persona committed adultery, abandoned men, and cared about little else but her own well-being. Often depicted in casinos and cabarets, the second archetype became intrinsically connected to her desire to live a life of luxury. The materialistic Modern Girl chose temporary partners based on their material wealth. She was often the embodiment of both villain and victim. Not all women that engaged in negative conduct became the objects of public reproach and condemnation. With the third archetype, men received the brunt of the criticism. Viewed as a tragic figure in need of sympathy and pity, the fallen woman often played the role of either the mistress with few options or the naïve girl who believed in false proclamations of love. In contrast, the last archetype chose to engage in pre-marital sex and extramarital affairs. The liberated
Modern Girl did not personify either the villain or the victim, rather she engaged in relationships with men as equals.

Exemplifying the Hollywood vamp, the seductress enthralled men with her bewitching demeanor and caused envy in women wary of emulating her behavior. She embodied the characteristics of the Modern Girl most desired and reviled, most coveted and feared. By positioning the archetype as the nemesis of conservative-minded women, critics provided the public with two extremes. These narratives attempted to dissuade Cubans from the harmful excesses of modernity, but they also made the lifestyle of the Modern Girl seem moderate in comparison. Short story writer Geraldo del Valle Albareda juxtaposed the characters of bad girl Dora and good girl Azucena in a story that depicted the man as deceived and abased. He presented “maldita Dora, the satanic young girl imbued with all the frivolous fascinations of the grand capital” as the seductress who steals Ismael from “the angelic Azucena.” At first, it appears that Dora will be “the ideal wife of the century,” while in comparison Azucena seems like “an insignificant young girl.” A month after leaving his girlfriend, family, and town to move to the capital, Dora runs away with another man, Ismael turns to drinking and drugs, and good girl Azucena marries another man.12 Men did not always take on the role of willing target of the careless and selfish seductress. At times, men reacted to their tragic situation with mockery. In “Un suicidia” by Rafael U. González a man writes a suicide note to a woman who had toyed with his affections. She audaciously reads the letter to her friends, boasting that he will kill himself because she had intentionally misled him. The next

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morning, she eagerly looks for his obituary in the newspaper, and instead discovers a wedding announcement declaring his recent marriage to someone else.\textsuperscript{13}

In contrast to the seductress, the second archetype appeared less vindictive, and more opportunistic. Nevertheless, the materialistic Modern Girl was often vilified in a similar manner. Objection to this version of the bad Modern Girl centered on her decision to choose money over love, with her life of luxury resulting in a rejection of conventional understandings of women as self-sacrificing. The archetype frequently functioned as an admonition to those enchanted by the lifestyle of the Modern Girl. Most accounts warned women against the dangers of greed, with some more sympathetic portrayals blaming unfortunate life circumstances, rather than the women themselves.

The North American novel “Gentleman Prefer Blondes” brought the figure to life in a portrayal that resonated with international audiences. According to a Cuban book review, the 1925 novel used specific “clothes and customs” to define a type of woman that had existed in the United States since 1914. The author Anita Loos, which used the term “a professional lady” to describe the materialistic Modern Girl, presented readers with “a summary of all the accumulated selfishness” of women who referred to themselves as “muchachas modernas.” In the novel, the protagonist frequents the Ritz, cabarets, and department stores, hoping to “hypnotize men with her sentimental cocaine,” in order to make it less painful when she spends their money.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Rafael U. González, “Un suicidia” \textit{Bohemia} 14:32 (August 12, 1923), 5.

\textsuperscript{14} The novel became an international success with translations in various languages, including Spanish. “Una novela picaresca del siglo XX: Los caballeros las prefieren rubias” \textit{Social} 12:8 (August 1927), 31, 100.
Most Cubans writers presented the materialistic Modern Girl as either a rogue that swindled men or a casualty of unfortunate circumstances. Those who viewed her critically conveyed contempt as well as confusion over her behavior. Men especially expressed bewilderment at her proclivity to make decisions based on self-interest. In the lyrics of “Amor y oro,” song writer Francisco Vélez Alvarado berated the materialistic Modern Girl for selling “her honor for gold,” not having “decency nor modesty,” and exchanging self-worth for “luxury and pleasure.”¹⁵ The short story “La modernista” portrayed the female character as “false,” “cold,” and “egotistical” for ending her engagement to a man who cannot provide her with the standard of living she has become accustomed to. Enraged and surprised by her “dreams of self-interest,” the wronged fiancé believes that she “used him as a toy of her frivolity, enjoying herself at his expense.”¹⁶ At times, fictional accounts turned the materialistic Modern Girl into the sympathetic figure of the fallen woman. In “Julieta la de la melenita castaña,” the stereotypical materialistic Modern Girl becomes a casualty of her father, brother, and boyfriend. The male protagonist discovers that the lover of one of his friends is his half-sister, a product of his father’s illicit affair. Rather than becoming angry with her for conceding to “the vices and caprices” of the high-life, he blames his friend for taking her from “the modest home” to “the house of sin.”¹⁷

Not all depictions of the fallen woman assumed that she had become prey to the allure and greed of the glamorous lifestyle. Many of them described women as good-


¹⁷ M. Pot-Rodo, “Julieta la de la melenita castaña” Bohemia 15:46 (November 18, 1923), 5, 21.
hearted but naïve for falling in love with deceitful and shameless men. Another means of
decrying the influence of modern trends, the third archetype acted as a means of
cautions women against the dangers of pre-marital sex and adultery. By condemning
illicit sexual behavior, these accounts contested the prevalent image of sexualized
women, while still contributing to the public fixation with sexuality. Fictional
representations also expanded on cultural understandings of the long-term consequences
for women who participated in sexual relations outside of marriage. Women were not
only viewed as tragic figures, but also as survivors. The short story “La canción del
recuerdo” provided readers with a conventional account of the fallen woman. Swept up
by “false promises,” a young woman moves to the city, only to be mistreated and
abandoned by her lover. After escaping one day, she catches pneumonia and dies soon
after.18 In other versions of the fallen-woman narrative, the female protagonist is rescued
by a modern man who accepts her previous sexual relationships, and in others the
woman’s own determination and virtue saves her. In the short story “Alma de mujer,”
the protagonist leaves her hometown bitter and embarrassed after having been seduced,
tricked, and abandoned by her lover. One day while working as a nurse, her ex-boyfriend
comes to the hospital in need of assistance. She considers letting him die, but “her noble
heart” wins over “the rancor in her heart.” Moreover, helping him sets her free and
allows her to be happy once again.19

In contrast to the archetypes discussed above, the liberated Modern Girl appeared
as the romantic companion and partner of men. The fourth archetype emerged as a figure

18 Rafael U. González, “La canción del recuerdo” Bohemia 13:7 (February 12, 1922), 6, 22.
that embraced a modern outlook on relationships, including sex out-of-marriage and increased equality between the sexes. Even though the men in these depictions accepted sexual experience as a natural component of modern womanhood, a new set of problems and setbacks emerged. The liberated Modern Girl was perceived to be in control, fulfilled, and victimless, however multifaceted portrayals hinted at the difficulties in resolving the power imbalance of heterosexual relationships through sexuality. In “Paginas rotas,” writer Rafael U. González presented readers with an empowering message for women, but in turn revealed male insecurities and loss of dominance. Unfettered by concerns over her reputation and the desire to get married, the female character seems untroubled by the imminent end of her relationship. The man on the other hand, worries that she will leave him. “She swears that her love is eternal, that she will always love me. But I doubt it….She can tire of me.”20 Women also expressed apprehension and confusion over their role within modern relationships. In “El fracaso” by writer Rosario Sansores, a woman recounts how her boyfriend “offered his love, but nothing else.” Similar to her, “he believes in the hypocrisy of conjugal relations,” but she wonders if this type of arrangement will lead to happiness, and more importantly, if she is making the right decision.21

These four archetypes presented Cubans with the possibilities of modern womanhood. Confronted with overwhelming cultural changes in a short time span, the public imagined different circumstances, behavior, and outcomes. Discussions about the effect of modern trends on gendered behavior surfaced in feminist circles as well.

20 Rafael U. González, “Paginas rotas” Bohemia (June 24, 1923), 9, 20.
21 Rosario Sansores, “El fracaso” Bohemia 15:1 (January 6, 1924), 9, 22.
Feminist writer Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta used her novel *La vida manda* as a venue to question the dichotomy of either empowerment or victimization. A clerical employee by day and the mistress of a married man by night, the main character, Gertrudis, encompasses many of the traits of the liberated Modern Girl in that she is a working woman who openly expresses her sexuality, and moreover, rejects the notion that marriage and motherhood lead to happiness. However, after some time she realizes that her adulterous relationship is just as detrimental and unequal as that of the marriage she has vowed to avoid. Distraught and confused, she turns to a female friend for comfort, a nod towards lesbianism as a possible solution to the inequities of heterosexual relations. Ultimately, Gertrudis suffers a nervous breakdown, has a baby out-of-wedlock, loses her job, attempts suicide, and spends the rest of her life blind and deranged.²² Nevertheless, *La vida manda* was not a morality tale in which the protagonist fell neatly into the categories of either victim or villain, but rather it offered Cubans an in-depth portrayal of the choices, dilemmas, and contradictions facing women in a modern era. Neither marriage nor open sexuality provided the answer, but rather a revaluation of the power relationship between women and men. The novel caused a stir within Cuba with some

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²² Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta, *La vida manda* (Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Rubén Darío, 1929). For plot summary and literary analysis, see: Catherine Davies, *A Place in the Sun: Women Writers in Twentieth-century Cuba* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 41-42; K. Lynn Stoner, *From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Woman’s Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 97-102; Nina Menéndez “Garzonas y Feministas in Cuban Women’s Writings” in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, eds. David Balderston and Donna J. Guy, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 174-189. Davies argues that the novel is a critique of “women themselves, first for succumbing to pernicious romantic myths” and second, “for attempting to fulfill themselves through their relationships with men.” Stoner explains how through her articles and literary work Rodríguez Acosta argued that “only free love would liberate women from the limitations imposed by the Catholic Church and men’s repressive instincts.” Among the arguments made in Menéndez’s essay is that the rights attained by women, including increased access to education, the workplace, and birth control, had made “the concept of ‘free-love’” an option.
accusing Rodríguez Acosta of encouraging women to become promiscuous and others labeling the novel pornographic.\textsuperscript{23}

Cubans became alarmed by the idea that modern trends could transform women into the morally-suspect bad Modern Girl. They accepted modern values as necessary and beneficial to their national identity, but expressed concern over the loss of traditional understandings of womanhood. Most especially, they feared that women would become immoral and deviant. Yet, the sexualized versions of the Modern Girl captivated the imagination of Cubans. Numerous portrayals of the bad Modern Girl surfaced as evidence of public fascination, repulsion, anxiety, and confusion over the transformation of gender norms. The four archetypes served as an outlet to express mixed reactions, while also providing a means to question, dispute, and redefine notions of acceptable gendered behavior. They also granted women an expansive space from which to experiment with their modern identity, an endeavor that included new opportunities as well as challenges.

Sexualized Modern Girl

The contemporary dilemma modern women faced came through clearly in discussions on female sexuality. The debate did not only concern those eager to restrict intimate relationships outside the confines of marriage. It was also relevant to young adults unsure of how to decipher the sudden changes in dating practices. The fluidity and ambiguity of the rules of romantic relationships made women especially vulnerable. Many embraced recent freedoms within the dating realm, however the lack of a cohesive

\textsuperscript{23} Stoner, \textit{From the House to the Streets}, 99-100.
code of conduct resulted in contradictions regarding ideal sexual behavior between the sexes. In terms of romantic intimacy, neither women nor men had a clear understanding of how to present themselves, what to expect from a partner, and how to interact within relationships. This resulted in multiple and contradictory messages regarding sexual experience. Modern trends created a space for Cubans to challenge the dichotomies of good and bad, but the tendency to sexualize the Modern Girl led to the generalization that modern women were promiscuous and morally-corrupt.

Most men required that their potential partner be respectable, but they also demanded that she be assertive and have some romantic experience. Consequently, women had to learn how to encompass characteristics from both traditional and modern archetypes, often vacillating between the different personas. They had to fulfill men’s fantasies by simultaneously being good and bad, traditional and modern. At times, it seemed that men wanted to be with the virtuous good girl, while at others it seemed that they favored the bad girl. Representations within popular culture often addressed men’s wavering desire between the archetypical good and bad girl, with them often hoping for an embodiment of both types within the same person. In the poem “La mujer,” women personify “hell and heaven, good and bad, the culprit and the redeemer.”24 The ideal woman in the poem “Capricho” is “angelic and beautiful with a bit of heaven in her eyes” as well as “passionate and crazy with a bit of hell in her eyes.”25 Male preference depended on their acceptance of modern customs as well as their intentions. The manner in which they treated women often affected her disposition. Fictional accounts portrayed


the female character as both bad and good, with her demeanor changing according to the behavior of her male companions. The short story “Eso es la mujer” described the very different experiences of two friends who had been in a relationship with the same woman. She “saved” the man she loved and “ruined” the one who did not understand her.²⁶

The juxtaposition of the good and bad girl archetypes often related to stereotypical assumptions corresponding to race. Since the 19th century, the sexualized mulata had appeared in popular novels, plays, and songs, including one of Cuba’s most renowned novels Cecilia Valdés by Cirilo Villaverde.²⁷ The perception of women of color had changed little by the 1920s. The mainstream media rarely depicted Afro-Cuban women within photographs, advice columns, and editorials, nor did they emerge within representations of the Modern Girl. Sporadic representations of Afro-Cuban women materialized in the form caricatures of the mulata as a sensual, voluptuous figure posing provocatively or dancing with a dark-skinned partner.²⁸ Categorized as the mulata de rumbo, or “a ‘loose’ woman of the streets,” the sexualized mulata also entered the

²⁸ For example, see illustration depicted above: Hernández Cárdenas “Canela y ébano” Social 12:6 (June 1927), 10. Also, see: Conrado Massageur, “Los precursores del jazz” Social 10:9 (September 1925), 1; Botet, “Mi negrita” Social 12:1 (January 1927), 18.
thoughts of Cuban men through theater and cabaret shows. Performed by white and light-skinned actresses from the working class, these acts parodied the *mulata de rumbo*.

Contemporary representations of the two versions of womanhood revealed tensions between the idealization of white women of means as honorable and the stigmatization of dark-skinned women of the lower classes as sexually-available. In *Las impurezas de la realidad*, Cuban novelist José Antonio Ramos contrasts the good and bad girl within a love triangle that includes an aspiring writer and half-sisters with drastically different life-circumstances. Carmita, the legitimate daughter of a rich man personifies the ideal in that she is white, elite, and virtuous, while Luz María, the product of the father’s illicit relationship with a woman of color, follows in her mother’s footsteps by entering into a sexual relationship with the young writer. Ramos makes both female characters equally sympathetic and appealing, adding nuance to the dichotomy. Perceptions of women as either good, white, and chaste or bad, *mulata*, and sexual became complicated further with the emergent penchant for sexualizing the Modern Girl. The introduction of modern cultural practices resulted in the sexualization of women from a wide-range of social and racial backgrounds. This tendency to sexualize women more broadly was exemplified in the comments of the male advice columnist of “Consultorio de belleza.” He argued that sexual appeal took shape in different forms, including “the exotic savage you want to run away with and the princess that needs

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29 Robin Moore describes how in popular songs the *mulata* personified the “epitome of wanton carnal pleasure,” and as a consequence was perceived as “a ‘danger’ to married men.” For more information on the persona of the *mulata* within popular music and theater, see: Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 49-52.

30 José Antonio Ramos, *Las impurezas de la realidad* (Barcelona: Tipografía Cosmos, 1929).
rescuing.” Both types of women became sexualized, even as they retained their stereotypical class markers of eroticized other and damsel-in-distress.

Young women expressed confusion regarding male expectations and desires. This was especially the case when women believed that their female peers better understood how to manage modern dating practices. Young women experiencing defeat when vying with other women for male attention wrote to advice columnists for guidance. Columnists often responded by setting women against each other according to the good/bad dichotomy. In her advice to a reader whose love interest had chosen another woman, Estela Arza rationalized the man’s behavior in terms of his attraction to bad girls. She claimed that “men make fun of good girls” and look for bad girls because they prefer “vice and pain.” Arza emphasized the point by comparing men to flies who like everything, but prefer that which is rotten. In “Ellas y yo,” advice columnist Roger de Lauria informed a reader that her love interest was not interested in her, “la buena,” but rather in her competition, “la coqueta.” De Lauria explained that the love interest is “the type of man that likes la mujer facil,” and as a result he would get no pleasure from the home and children, making him an inadequate spouse.

Individuals hoping to attract a potential partner faced the dilemma of maneuvering within an unscripted and ambiguous dating realm. For women, the difficulty frequently rested in ascertaining which type of woman appealed to men. The other and perhaps more important challenge for women was that of deciphering male

31 Sr. Editor de Belleza, “Consultorio de belleza” Social 13:2 (February 1928), 66.
32 Estela Arza, “Para las Damas” Bohemia 12:50 (December, 11, 1921), 29.
intentions. Women feared that some men made proclamations of love and promises of marriage only as a means of pressuring them into a sexual relationship. Moreover, they believed that their male partners would lose interest if they conceded. Young women also worried that they would remain single if they did not join their female competitors in the latest dating trends. There were degrees of acceptability within the margins of romantic interactions. And while many viewed kissing as expected, among most social circles virginity was still a requirement for potential marriage partners. Thus, some physical interaction and kissing was permissible and expected in certain cases, but not in others. As a result, being too flirtatious, assertive, and intimate could be detrimental to ones reputation, while not exhibiting enough of these characteristics could lead to being labeled old-fashioned and unappealing.

Those who turned to advice columnists for guidance on how to find a balance between good and bad girl traits encountered multifaceted and often contradictory answers. Prevailing views indicated that it was necessary for women to not be too good and innocent that men would be compelled to either ignore or take advantage of them. But just the same, they could not be too sexually aggressive that men would disparage them and consider them unacceptable as potential wives. As a result, guidelines often included an emphasis on manipulation, coyness, and sexual restraint. In her column, Arza warned women to not be too candid, sincere, and ingenuous since “that does not appeal to the men of today.” She advised a young woman competing with another woman for a man’s attention to not be too assertive. “If the other offers herself and obtains him, the feeling in him will probably not last long and he will abhor her for being coqueta and not having merits” Arza asserted. “Trust that if he is really in love with you,
he will go to you without you calling him.” To another she declared, “Men like him, who do not know how to appreciate the merits of a simple and innocent good girl, have to be treated with contempt. They like those that are more coqueta, those that torture them, those that cheat on them.”

Arza was even more frank about the subject of sex in her advice to women uncertain of whether or not to engage in sexual relations with their partners. One of the most candid and confrontational columnists to deal with the issue of sexual comportment, Arza offered over a dozen women the same advice. Without exception, she urged them to not listen to their boyfriends’ assurances and declarations of love, because in the end they would become a fallen woman, “una mujer caída.” Referring to women as innocent, sincere, and inexperienced, she placed much of the blame on men. She acknowledged that women faced a difficult situation, one that was so common that in one issue she responded that “there are so many similar cases that I am no longer surprised.” Arza explained to one young woman that “the path you have before you now is the same one taken by many women full of illusions who now are wretched individuals” and to another that “all fallen women, who have gotten dirty, have heard the same phrases he is telling you.” Arza cautioned readers that the outcome would not be to their benefit. She told one young woman that her love interest had no intention “of making her his wife,” and to another she warned that her boyfriend will continue “until he is convinced that you are no longer worthy enough to be his wife.”

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Traditionally, women were believed to be too weak to defend themselves from the predatory nature of their suitors. Men charged with protecting the honor of their daughters, sisters, and nieces preserved the woman’s dignity as well as their family name. Under modern dating practices, women became responsible for their own sexuality as well as that of men’s. They had to restrain male sexuality, even as they appealed to their sexual fantasies. In “Flirt,” writer Real de Buenrevés explained that flirting was the act of “promising a lot to devotees without ever conceding anything to any of them.” Arza echoed these sentiments in her column. She emphasized that it was up to women to be dignified and resistant, asking one young woman to “take care, be strong, do not believe anything, [and] do not trust anyone.” A reader who had engaged in some sexual activities was encouraged to acknowledge the errors of her ways. “The first step has been taken,” Arza warned. “Temptation has taken hold of you and in the first opportunity all your good intentions will go to the abyss.”

Representations that cast the Modern Girl in sexual terms classified her as immoral and threatening, but also vulnerable and pathetic. These depictions reflected the

25; Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:39 (September 25, 1921), 25; Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 13:10 (March 5, 1922), 21.


37 Real de Buenrevés, “Flirt” Bohemia 18:10 (March 6, 1927), 9.

conflicting response of Cubans within the modern dating world. The emergence of modern trends had intensified demands for women to engage in some form of sexual behavior. Yet, it remained necessary for women to maintain a balance between modern dating practices and sexual decorum. This task was especially difficult with the emphasis on female sexuality associated with the Modern Girl. The mainstream media celebrated expressions of sexuality, just as they chastised it as immoral. A loosening of parental restrictions facilitated romantic liaisons, placing increased pressure on women to engage in sexual relations. Moreover, some forms of intimate contact became expected, and even accepted. The rapid introduction of modern notions of sexuality and womanhood concerned young women uncertain of how to manage the contradictions. Oftentimes, they sought guidance from women within the mainstream media. These prominent figures challenged notions of acceptability through their personal and professional decisions, making them especially apt at confronting the paradoxes of modern womanhood.

39 For example, see illustrations depicted above: These illustrations appeared in “Ellas y yo,” a column in which women offered their own perspective on relationships. Many of them expressed a sense of frustration and disillusionment in regards to their past and present romantic experiences. In the first illustration, the caption reads: “And Orquídea? Orquídea has been like all of them. Neither good nor bad. Just a woman.” The second one reads: “The carefree and happy child has become a young woman who has cried a great deal.”
Women Behind the Scenes

Some of the nation’s most well-known women behaved in a manner associated with the bad Modern Girl. In this section, I particularly focus on actress and advice columnist Estela Arza and writer and poet Rosario Sansores. Both of them exhibited conduct recognized as modern in that they socialized within the elite social circles of Havana, gained recognition in their professions, and raised their children as single mothers. Most of all, their non-traditional romantic relationships associated them with the archetype of the bad Modern Girl. Yet, they still received the wholehearted support and recognition of mainstream society. In spite of, or perhaps because of, their personal choices, they became role models to young women hoping to embody the traits of modern Cuban womanhood. Through their experiences and body of work, these two women spoke to the difficulties of balancing between traditional conventions and modern demands. Moreover, they often fluctuated between the two cultural understandings of femininity, referencing traditional norms in one instance and modern ones in another.

An actress and twice-divorced single mother of two, Estela Arza may have appeared to some an unlikely choice for advice columnist. But the popularity of her column demonstrates that indeed her cosmopolitan lifestyle, candid revelations, and varied experiences better equipped her to confront young women’s problems and concerns. Published in Bohemia from 1921 to 1924, “Para las damas” offered women throughout the island the opportunity to emulate her successes and learn from her failures. The outspoken columnist did not attempt to appear cautious, objective, or diplomatic. She made her opinions known, often encouraging women to take drastic measures to change their dismal situation. For instance, Arza made it clear to female
readers that they should not tolerate what she deemed reprehensible behavior from boyfriends or husbands, going as far on a few occasions as to even encourage them to seek a divorce. Arza’s pessimistic advice on life and love was a reflection of her own troubled past. She shared with readers her grief at having lost a child, her battle with a sick daughter, her problems with her own deteriorating health, and her distress over past failed relationships.

Her disparaging opinion of men made much of her romantic advice appear harsh. It was often cynical, intolerant of negative male behavior, and encouraging of indifference and manipulation as a means of keeping men interested. In 1922, she informed a female reader whose boyfriend had fallen in love with another woman, that there was no solution because “when love dies it does not resuscitate.” She advised her to forget him, and moreover to not demonstrate her love fully to future boyfriends, because “even though women have the reputation of being fickle and mean it is men who lose interest as soon as they know they are loved.” Her general perception of romantic relationships was best exemplified in her response to a male reader protesting against her unflattering portrayal of men. Arza argued that he must be the exception, since most “men are bad” and women “who are willing to believe, wait, [and] sacrifice become eternal victims.” She then added that her outlook was not simply based on her own experience, but on her constant observation. Her skeptical remarks contributed to the discussion on shifting gender norms within heterosexual relationships. Representations

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of the bad Modern Girl illustrated that at times society recognized modern women as the villain and at others as the victim. Arza’s advice reflected the notion that women often embodied the extreme personas, but it blamed men for forcing women to choose between these two alternatives. She believed harsh conduct on the part of men forced women to protect themselves by employing indifference and manipulation.

Despite her overall bleak view, Arza was willing to take another chance on marriage commenting to a reader in 1921 that she had been “married twice and may be heading for a third.” This prediction may have been left unrealized, since there was no mention of a new husband in later issues. Notwithstanding, Arza yearned to find fulfillment in a successful and happy relationship. “Women need love,” she proclaimed, since “life without love is unbearable.” Arza confessed that individuals like herself, who “consider affection a necessity for happiness,” suffer because “it is so difficult to find someone who understands us.”

Her mixed feelings towards romantic love reflected the views of others. Women expressed frustration, disillusionment, and confusion over their troubled love lives. Nevertheless, they persisted in their search for a fulfilling relationship.

The column presented young women with complex, varied, and contradictory advice on how to conduct themselves within contemporary society. As can be expected, Arza’s own experiences influenced her position on most subjects. Her counsel on romantic problems reflected her own disenchantment with men as well as her continued hope for the future. Commentary on emergent cultural practices reflected the mixed messages found elsewhere in the mainstream media in that at times her views seemed

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42 Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:30 (July 24, 1921), 25; Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 12:17 (April 24, 1921), 25; Estela Arza, “Para las damas” Bohemia 13:2 (January 8, 1922), 20.
modern and at others traditional. For example, Arza’s suggestions to forget, break-up with, divorce, or ignore unappreciative men appeared modern in and of themselves, and even more so when compared to other sources. Her encouragement of women to go out, flirt, and find new love interests also corresponded with modern dating trends.

However, Arza’s insistence that women remain respectable and not give in to sexual demands echoed traditional understandings, and left little room for individual circumstances and degrees of sexual activity. The columnists’ strident views on sexual behavior were consistent with her contention that under all circumstances women had to maintain their self-respect when interacting with men. Arza advised a young woman to forget her fickle love interest, and to furthermore avoid looking or talking to him, keeping her “dignity at all times.” To a heart-broken reader who admitted to thoughts of suicide, she emphasized that she should retain her sense of worth. “If honorable women are not dignified,” Arza asserted “then what will happen to those who aren’t [honorable].”

These ostensibly traditional remarks contrasted greatly with her modern notions on ending unsuccessful relationships.

Arza’s position seemed to exceed that of advice columnist, with her becoming a motherly figure, friend, and guide to the modern world. Despite complaining of perpetual health issues and exhaustion, she frequently encouraged readers to visit her and write her personally. She also made house calls and sent those in the provinces packages of products found only in the capital. Arza embraced her responsibilities enthusiastically, stating in one issue that she was grateful for her mission and wished she could dedicate more time to helping those who needed her. The following year, Arza claimed that she

loved her role of advisor and was keeping the column for her daughter as “an instruction manual on the dangers of the world.”

Readers demonstrated their personal connection to the columnist by expressing concern over her health, sending greetings to her daughter, and visiting her at home when traveling to Havana. During her years as columnist, she became their confidant as well as representative within the big city. She drew readers into the cosmopolitan world of Havana, encouraging them to seek medical attention, buy products, find employment, and attend schools in the capital.

It is not likely that a decade earlier a twice-divorced actress would have been viewed as the ideal candidate to guide young women through their first years of adulthood. But the times were changing, along with the requisites for the position. Arza possessed the know-how of glamorous cosmopolitan Havana, the respect of her peers and public, and the experience needed to present female readers with the necessary tools to become a woman in modern Cuba. It may have been the candid attitude she had acquired through difficult hardships and an independent existence that made her so appealing, especially to young readers eager to follow in her footsteps and become a Modern Girl. Arza’s counsel may have empowered women to take better care of themselves, but it did not differ much from the emergent notions on gender norms found within popular culture. She was more outspoken about women’s options and opportunities, but she nonetheless couched her advice in terms of remaining within the bounds of acceptability. The confusion and distress of women trying to maneuver between traditional and modern values indicated that they too felt pessimistic at times. Enriquetta Planas de Moneda,

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Arza’s successor, dealt with the despair of readers a bit more optimistically and tactfully, but her message was similar and often equally empowering.

Unlike Arza, advice columnist Planas did not reveal much about herself, making it difficult to create a similar composite of her life. However, poet and writer Rosario Sansores, known by the nickname Charito, did leave behind details from which to reconstruct some of her diverse experiences and perspectives. Born in Mexico, Sansores moved to Cuba in 1911 where she lived for twenty-one years. She had come to Havana with her Cuban husband who died several years after their arrival. Married at fourteen, she became a widowed mother of two at twenty-nine. Recognized mostly for her poetry, Sansores published a total of fifteen books on poetry as well as a collection of short stories. She made a great impact on Cuban popular culture with articles, short stories, and poetry published in many of the nation’s leading newspapers and magazines as well as over a dozen of her poems turned into musical lyrics. As a respected member of the literary community, Sansores impacted women’s perception of modern womanhood through her independent lifestyle and views. Moreover, her poetry and short stories questioned and challenged heterosexual power dynamics and societal gendered expectations. Similar to Arza, her modern, and perhaps morally-suspect, behavior demonstrate how women encompassing some of the traits of the bad Modern Girl did not necessarily garner societal disapproval.

In an interview published in 1971, Sansores reminisced about her long life, including her romantic past. She explained how she never remarried, but fell in love “in a really dumb way” at the age of thirty-seven. She recalled having lost her head over a man as a painful episode in her life, adding that “I don’t think there is anyone who has
not lost it at some point.” But, according to Sansores it had been a necessary experience. “All women need to love,” she proclaimed “because without love you cannot live,” and besides “one hour of pleasure is worth the harm of twenty hours of suffering.”

Based on the timeline and romantic sentiment of a published poem, it is possible that the Cuban man she referred to was fellow poet and journalist Roger de Lauria. In a 1925 issue of *Bohemia*, de Lauria dedicated a poem to Sansores in which he declared, “It has been many days since my anguish roars in demand of your sweet love. It has been many days that I feel in my soul the intense thump of this passion.”

Both de Lauria and Sansores revealed a great deal about their overall perceptions regarding romantic love. Through his advice column “Ellas y yo,” readers encountered many intimate details about de Lauria’s previous relationships. In one issue, a friend and former lover described De Lauria as “a sensitive man of a more romantic time,” who had had many affairs, but had become disillusioned after the death of his five-year-old daughter. The poet’s cynical disposition came through in his own descriptions of love, stating in one column that sometimes it is better “when love does not become actualized because it turns into melancholy and disenchantment.” In an editorial on relationships, he gave advice from the point of view of “a man who has loved many women,” stating that “true love is painful, torturous. Those who love suffer….Serene love, without jealousy and complications, is not love.”

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46 Unfortunately, this dedication is the only evidence I have been able to find of their apparent love affair. Roger de Lauria, “Hace muchos días” *Bohemia* 16:33 (August 16, 1925), 10.

Sansores’ skeptical stance on relationships was similar to that of De Lauria, but their varied accounts pointed to the prevalent cultural understanding that men held the upper hand. Sansores expressed this sentiment most clearly when she described her situation, as well as those of other women. “The happiness that comes from loving someone, or thinking one was loved (even if one was not) is so great,” declared Sansores “that with that one feels happy. They lied, cheated, but we were happy even if we were fooled. I truly loved as much as it is possible to love.”48 This cynical yet accepting approach may have been a result of an older woman’s reflections on life, one in which she had come to terms with it not ending happily-ever-after. It is difficult to ascertain her true sentiments regarding her seemingly tumultuous love life, but through her poetry and short stories it is possible to gain a richer understanding of her outlook on sexuality, heterosexual relationships, and the affects of changing cultural norms on women.

If her poetry served as a reflection of her actual experiences, then the mother of two continued engaging in sexual relationships long after she became a widow. Moreover, she was quite candid about this aspect of women’s lives. In particular, three poems published in Social during the mid-1920s carry explicitly-sexual tones. In “Salmo,” she directly references women’s sense of sensuality. “Lover don’t you see me wrapped in a diaphaneity that twists my transparent body?” In addition to desire, the other two poems express uncertainty and vulnerability. “Presentimiento” mirrors the revelations Sansores shared in her interview, in that it alludes to her conflicting emotions of skepticism and hope. Afraid of showing her partner too much affection, the woman in the poem wonders whether “the excess of love ends in killing the desire.” She reveals

48 Acosta, Veinte mujeres, 229.
her trepidation at waking him with kisses, regardless of the fact that “their naked bodies”
are lying beside one another. In the end, she simply seeks reassurance that “he will love
me for a long time to come.” “No me hables de las demas mujeres” includes strong
sexual language, as well as references to jealousy and insecurity. The woman informs
her partner that she wants to ignore the existence of previous women, especially those
who looked upon his eyes “in the hour of ardent ecstasy.” As a result of her fear that “the
day of separation and tiresomeness will fatally come,” she holds on fervently to their
intimate moments. “All of me is full of you. I am like an amphora filled with wine. I
want to melt in your blood and own you completely. Do not speak to me of the other
women. None of them loved you with the sincerity and violence with which I love
you.”

Sansores used direct and uninhibited references in her poetry to discuss the female
sexual experience as it related to intimacy outside of marriage. Her short stories provided
a more ambivalent and subtle means for her to address the subject of female sexuality, in
addition to a host of other prominent issues. An examination of seventeen short stories
printed in *Bohemia* between 1921 and 1926 provides a composite of her archetypical
characters, recurrent plots, and overall messages. Sansores used her storylines and
characters as a means of examining and questioning shifting gender norms and
expectations for women. Prominent among the themes she tackled were casual dating,
pre-marital sex, adultery, unfulfilled marriages, and spinsterhood. Her protagonists, most
of whom were independent and practical, often agonized over a certain dilemma, thinking

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49 Rosario Sansores, “Salmo” *Social* 10:9 (September 1925), 40; Rosario Sansores, “Presentimiento” *Social*
13:7 (July 1928), 36; Rosario Sansores, “No me hables de las demas mujeres” *Social* 13:7 (July 1928), 36, 68.
critically about their life choices. A general overview of her work during this timeframe comprises of: seven stories dealing with women’s sexuality, including those of romantic adventures, pre-marital sex, and adultery; three of women entering into marriage for practical reasons, rather than amorous ones; and three in which the woman is the weak victim of a malicious man.

An analysis of two of Sansores’ short stories reflects the conflicted perspectives of Cuban women regarding female sexuality. In “La Señorita Haydee” and “La condesa Mary,” Sansores examined the varied roles single women assumed when interacting with the opposite sex, and how these differed from those of previous generations. In “La Señorita Haydee,” the female protagonist fantasizes about romantic love stories of earlier times, but realizes that customs have changed. As a result of her “pride and romantic disposition,” she had refused to engage in physical relations, until one night when a man approaches her household gate. He proclaims his love and begins kissing her. Within a few moments, “Haydee forgot her fabulous dreams, and intoxicated by the poetry of the moment, nervously opened the gate and threw her arms around the gentleman.” This story depicted kissing as typical and expected within the modern dating world. It perceived of some women as initially reluctant to changes in dating practices, but ultimately willing participators. It also cast men as aggressive and motivated by physical attraction. The traditional conception of men in active roles and women in passive ones persisted, but with the introduction of modern trends women felt compelled to concede to male demands.

By reversing conventional gender roles in “La condesa Mary,” Sansores demonstrated how modern women faced multiple options and situations, including that of
playing the part of pursuer. Within this narrative, the female protagonist also daydreams of becoming a romantic heroine, but she transforms her fairytale into a modern-day romantic adventure by actively seeking a love interest. In an attempt to learn “the difficult art of kissing” from a poet, Mary contacts poets in Havana and arranges to meet them at a café. The shy men are tentative to “lead the conversation down the path of danger,” however Mary “with a devilish smile insinuates discreet perversions.” On one occasion, she convinces a hesitant poet to take her to the country where they can be alone. Hoping to tempt him, she exposes her legs and unbuttons her blouse, but the poet nervously refuses on account that he is already in a relationship. A year later, Mary has become a married woman and mother. Yet, Sansores leaves her romantic future open to possibilities. “Perhaps cured of her whims she has resigned herself to her role of wife and mother. Or perhaps one day she will resume her previous habits.” With this narrative, Sansores positioned women in the role of pursuer, while also suggesting that modern women unsatisfied with their limited options of marriage and motherhood found fulfillment in extramarital affairs. Thus, she placed women in empowering positions, but alluded to the contradictions of modern society that led disillusioned women to express their frustrations through their newly-experienced sexual identity.

Through their professions, Arza and Sansores offered Cuban women a tool with which to evaluate their own circumstances and choices. The journalists’ hardships and heartaches influenced their work and thus provided women with a broad and nuanced perspective on how to lead a modern lifestyle. Specifically, Arza and Sansores expounded on the difficulties facing women. As modern women, they had to retain

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certain traditional qualities, while also adapting to new demands and realities. The introduction of modern trends led in some respects to agency, but the victimization of women also persisted, resulting often times in a false sense of hope for women. Arza and Sansores commented on the paradoxes within modern society, while serving as examples of women confronting the challenges of modernity. Based on their life experiences, independence, and romantic pasts, Arza and Sansores embodied many of the traits associated with the bad Modern Girl. Yet, their position as public figures and role models demonstrated that notions of acceptable gendered behavior were ambiguous, fluid, and contested.

Conclusion

Within the new dating realm, women no longer found it practical and necessary to marry their first suitor. This led to an extended period of casual dating in which women went out with friends, flirted, and had various relationships before settling down. Changes in dating practices brought about a leniency of parental control and an increase in physical interaction within relationships. Images of the sexualized Modern Girl created an expectation for romances to mirror the plots of Hollywood films. Men wanted to be pursued by women with an assertive and flirty demeanor who engaged in some physical activity, while remaining chaste. Women felt compelled to live up to their fantasies, yet they feared becoming a bad Modern Girl. Confused by modern demands, many women turned to popular magazines for guidance. They encountered mixed messages which encouraged them to be both good and bad, but demanded that they stay within the bounds of sexual decorum. The ambiguity of modern cultural practices
resulted in women who experienced freedom and empowerment in some respects, and stigmatization and limitations in others. More and more, women expressed disillusionment at the prospects of their new roles as modern women. Discussions of unhappy marriages, adultery, and divorce exposed the contradictions inherent within the leisurely lifestyle of the Modern Girl.
Conclusion: The Uncertain Future of the Modern Girl

The emergence of modern trends transformed understandings of gendered behavior. Compared to women from a previous generation, women enjoyed a greater degree of independence within society as well as within the home. A national emphasis on modernity expanded women’s legal rights, educational and professional opportunities, social mobility, and equality within gender relations. For many women, the sudden and dramatic changes in everyday experiences produced a sense of limitless possibilities. Visible expressions of this new-found freedom surfaced in the widespread adoption of the Modern Girl lifestyle. By emulating the outlook, appearance, and conduct of the international archetype, women not only conveyed their modern identity, they also defied established notions of womanhood. The embrace of modern trends did not lead to the outright dismissal of a traditional value system. Rather, it prompted a tangible moment in history in which Cubans deliberated how the newly-established republic’s incorporation of modernity would affect the position of women. The more fluid and nuanced view of gender norms offered women an opening to extend the confines of their sex. But, it also produced conflicting emotions in women concerned over their uncertain future.

Mixed messages on the acceptability of modern customs and behavior forced women to maintain a careful balance between the positive and negative traits associated with the Modern Girl. Thus, they assumed some characteristics, and not others, carefully maneuvering between traditional and modern expectations. Women of marrying age,
primarily between fifteen and twenty-five, considered this period of their life one of boundless options. They expressed their autonomy through their physical appearance as well as through social interactions. Young women spent much of their time outside the home, socializing more openly with male and female friends and dating multiple partners prior to marriage. Some of them even received degrees in higher education and participated in the professional workforce. Many women continued to enjoy a certain amount of freedom after their nuptials. However, an increased range of choices during adolescence often created false hopes. Whether married or single, feelings of disillusion surfaced among women as the promises of youth faltered. The prescribed path for women towards marriage and motherhood minimized their alternatives, resulting in fewer differences between the lives of young married women and those of their mothers.

Previously full of anticipation and optimism, women became increasingly discouraged by the constraints of domestic life and the inequalities of their relationships. Cultural changes created a space for women to challenge gender norms, but for the most part, heterosexual power relations remained intact. The discrepancy between the possibilities and the reality appeared even more disparate in light of the opportunities afforded to young women during such a short time span. Rather, than happily accepting concessions, women verbalized their dissatisfaction and frustration. By embodying the Modern Girl, women developed a new awareness of their marginalized role in society. Thus, when confronted with unmet expectations, they experienced uneasiness, disappointment, and betrayal. Their discontent materialized in conversations about unsuccessful courtships, marital discord, and infidelity. Some demonstrated their unhappiness though bouts of depression, anxiety, insecurity, and jealousy, while others
sought fulfillment in extramarital affairs. As a last resort, women turned to suicide as a means of ending their dire emotional state.¹ Many remained dissatisfied, but the recognition of gender inequality proved vital in changing the lives of future generations.

Men responded to the transformation of cultural values differently. Their reaction came from a desire to control outside forces, whether from international movements associating modernity with women’s rights, Cuban feminists, or Cuban women adopting the traits of the Modern Girl. Hoping to restrain attacks on the existing gender hierarchy, male detractors employed various methods in their attempts to minimize the threat. Sexualized and frivolous representations meant to endorse the Modern Girl lifestyle substantiated the argument invoked by moralists that modern trends had a corrupting influence on women. Moreover, those who accentuated female sexuality devalued and objectified women, while those who employed mockery belittled and dismissed female expressions of autonomy. Consequently, most male representations of the Modern Girl repudiated the idea that women could be considered men’s equal.

The need to embrace modern notions of womanhood corresponded with Cuba’s move from a colony to a republic. In an effort to maintain the patriarchal order, it became necessary to allow women a certain degree of autonomy, while cautioning them against the dangers of becoming too modern. By permitting, and even embracing certain freedoms, the male-dominated society continued to enforce the terms of heterosexual power relations. Nevertheless, gender relations and gender roles undeniably changed, leading to an increased presence and influence of women in politics, education, and the workplace. As women gained a voice within the public sphere, they used their new

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¹ For more information on suicide among women, see: Louis A. Pérez, Jr., To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
positions to counter male discourse. The transformations experienced in the 1920s made it possible for the next generation to recognize the constraints of their sex, and thus fight to extend their rights.

Unequal heterosexual relations had a long tradition of legal sanction in Cuba. Under the 1889 Spanish Civil Code, women had been forced to relinquish all legal rights upon marriage, transferring their dependence from their father to their husband. Under the republic, Cuban lawmakers sought to transform the country into a modern nation by breaking from the colonial relationship between the Catholic Church and the state. As a result, legislation reform facilitated the move away from traditional constructs of the marriage contract. Following the U.S. model, new legislation granted women property rights in 1917 and passed a divorce law in 1918. Yet, crucial legislation that protected male honor over the rights of women persisted late into the following decade. The Spanish Penal Code pardoned men who murdered wives caught in the act of infidelity. Critics of the law, namely feminists, argued that it led to a general sanction of female homicide when committed by husbands. Moved by the appeal of feminists and the desire to shed archaic customs, legislators passed reforms in 1930 that outlawed the practice.²

These legislative amendments were representative of the inevitable dilemma the nation faced as it attempted to follow foreign guidelines for modernity and retain national notions of ideal womanhood. Debates over these controversial laws referenced female morality, male jurisdiction over women, and the prevalence of the double standard. In the end, proponents of modernity gained command as they directed Cuba along a path that paralleled its neighbor to the north. Yet, these intellectuals and politicians fought for

² For more information on legislation pertaining to women’s rights, see: K. Lynn Stoner, From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Woman’s Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 34-53; 146-166.
international recognition as a modern nation, not necessarily for women’s rights. Legal reforms redefined female emancipation in relation to husbands, but also strove to preserve the patriarchal system. Thus, despite the changes in legislation, gender inequalities persisted. Divorce remained taboo, and the double standard persisted with adultery tolerated when committed by men and condemned when committed by women. *Almanaque Social* evoked the prevalent perception towards adultery in a maxim that read: “A woman is condemned for an action that the most honorable men can commit untroubled.”³

Along with legislative reform came a shift in the mindset of Cubans. On the surface, Cubans embraced the trends associated with the Modern Girl. However, the marginalization of educated professionals within the mainstream media, the belittling of the Modern Girl lifestyle, and the emphasis on sexuality became emblematic of societal anxiety and uncertainty. The fear of losing male authority surfaced in satirical and exaggerated depictions of gender relations in the United States. An editorial in *El Correo de Oriente y de America* compared U.S. men who worked to satisfy their wives’ lavish needs to slaves under slave masters. “The supremacy of women has reached such an extreme over there,” it claimed “that it is no longer about women’s emancipation, but rather men’s emancipation.”⁴ The feminist journal *La Mujer* published a similarly critical portrayal of U.S. women by North American author, Walter R. Douglass. The editorial depicted women taking advantage of men by demanding a luxurious lifestyle, working outside the home, committing adultery, and ultimately demanding a divorce with

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³ “Máximas Pesimistas” *Almanaque Social* 2:19 (November 1930), 12.

⁴ “Correspondencia de España: la mujer yanki segun Keyserlin” *El Correo de Oriente y de America* 1:12 (September 20, 1929), 3.
The portrayal of U.S. women as greedy, unfaithful, and deceitful within both mainstream publications and feminist journals indicated that for many Cubans there existed a compromise between values conceived as foreign and those considered national. In order to incorporate modern notions of womanhood, Cubans had to accept certain aspects, while rejecting others.

Popular magazines advanced and echoed societal concerns further by promoting the idea that modern Cuban women dominated their husbands. A fear of reversed gender roles emerged in the form of cautionary editorials, satirical pieces, and fictional accounts. Parodies in Muecas and La Política Cómica featured editorials on marital discord with illustrations of women yelling and striking at their husbands. Critica asked readers to imagine the future of marital relationships with women in the 1950s enjoying “absolute liberty” within “ultra-liberal marriages.” Literary critic Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring mocked the jealousy and vigilance of wives who monitored their husbands’ outings. He urged married women who did not allow their husbands to go out at night to refrain from being “cruel,” but in turn offered them cautionary advice. “Distrust in midday outings,” he warned. “They are the most dangerous.” These representations ridiculed women for their overbearing and suspicious attitude and belittled men who acquiesced to female demands. Yet, they continued to perpetuate, and jokingly approve of, the prevalent

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5 Walter R. Douglass, “El imperio de la mujer en los Estado Unidos” La Mujer 2:24 (November 15, 1930), 8, 16.

6 “Los ‘secos’ siguen siendo malos maridos” Muecas 1:52 (September 18, 1921), 3; “La manzana de la discordia: matrimonio mal avenido” La Política Cómica 19:968 (September 14, 1924), 8.


8 Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, “Los maridos que no salen de noche” Social 9:5 (May 1924), 36.
assumption that some married men used physical force to exert authority over their wives and most participated in extramarital affairs.

While men alluded to the dangers of unleashed female power, married women recounted their sense of hopelessness and discouragement. Their hopes for the future had seemed drastically different prior to getting married. As single women, they received encouragement from the mainstream media to pursue education as a means of becoming well-rounded individuals. Increasingly, young women obtained degrees in higher education and entered the professions, but many of them returned to the home after marriage. Women found within fictional and non-fictional narratives expressions of their grievances with the limited opportunities of married life. The poem “Esperando que vuelva del club” captured the disillusionment of women as they passively waited for men. “Waiting for them to notice that we got dressed up to please them. Waiting for them to comprehend us. Waiting for them to notice how well we manage the household. Waiting for them to return from the club….And finally waiting for them to leave us as soon as we get old and ugly, to dedicate themselves to a young girl. What can we do to avoid this tragic ending?”

Expressions of disillusionment did not necessarily imply that forlorn women rejected the institution of marriage. Rather, many of them yearned for increased options and greater autonomy.

Marriage and motherhood remained the primary objectives of women. Most women believed that it was within family relationships that they would find contentment and gratification. Yet, with the changes in gender norms, the inequalities of heterosexual relationships became more apparent and less acceptable. Women began expecting that their husbands treat them with respect and loyalty. The idea of marriage as a partnership,

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9 Clara Horton, “Esperando que vuelva del club” *Carteles* 2:2 & 3 (February/March 1920), 54.
a companionate marriage, received international acclaim. *La Mujer Moderna* promoted
the notion of a companionate marriage by featuring the work of French writer Marcel
Prévost. He urged women to develop their “female personality,” since most men prefer
“an intelligent, cultured, and responsible partner rather than a caged parrot.” He
explained that nevertheless wives often needed to convince their husbands of the benefits
of “modern marriages,” because men tended to gravitate towards traditional gender
relations.¹⁰

A discrepancy existed between idealized notions of marriage emphasizing the
existence of a *principe azul*, destiny, and true love and descriptions of marital dissonance,
adultery, and divorce. Male fear of losing control and female sentiments of
disillusionment revealed tensions between gendered expectations for marital bliss. Public
perceptions of the conflict were reflected in a fascination with jealousy and adultery. The
issue surfaced most prominently in the form of satirical editorials and fictional accounts.
Humorous editorials imagined situations in which women cheated on their husbands as
well as those in which women demonstrated affection for more than one man.¹¹ Plays
and short stories featuring adulterous women and jealous husbands abounded. Especially
popular were narratives in which men killed women for infidelity, including scenarios in
which the murdered woman had been falsely accused.¹² Depictions of adulterous men
differed drastically, since they mostly ignored the existence of the wife and focused

¹⁰ Andre del Mar, “Por el hogar” *La Mujer Moderna* 1:4 (February 1926), 37-38.

¹¹ For example, see: “La mujer que ama” *Crítica* 1:1 (December 15, 1929), 8; “¡Engaña a tu marido!”
*Bohemia* 18:16 (April 17, 1927), 22.

¹² For example, see: M. Pot-Rodo, “La otra” *Bohemia* 14:26 (July 1, 1923), 10-11, 18; Vicente Pardo
rather on his romantic adventures. Thus, despite the vast achievements in women’s rights, traditional notions of masculinity and femininity persisted.

The cultural changes of the 1920s affected women’s sense of identity as well as their position within heterosexual relationships. Women lost much of their liberties and opportunities upon getting married, but the expectations and hopes of youth left a lasting impression on them. The generation of women that came of age during this transformative period acquired an awareness of their status as second-class citizens both within the public realm and the home. The gains of the 1920s propelled women forward, even if much of the momentum was lost during the following decade. Similar to the situation in the United States, the attainment of suffrage and other legal reforms led to the dissipation of the feminist movement. Internationally, the figure of the Modern Girl disappeared as the Great Depression put an end to the Jazz Age. While in Cuba, the repressive regime of Gerardo Machado dominated the political and social culture with the closing-down of universities, theaters, and other public spaces. Yet despite these setbacks, women continued to work towards gaining autonomy and respect as valuable and important members of society.\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) By 1943, more women worked in the professions than in any other area. In 1919, 13 percent of working women held jobs in the professions, 40 percent in occupations within trade, manufacturing, and agriculture, and 47 percent in domestic service. In 1943, 45 percent of working women held jobs in the professions, 32 percent in occupations within trade, manufacturing, and agriculture, and 23 percent in domestic service. Cuba, \textit{Censo de la república de Cuba: año de 1919} (Havana: Maza, Arroyo, y Caso, 1920), 628-630; República de Cuba, \textit{Informe general del censo de 1943} (Havana: P. Fernandez, 1953), 1042-1056.
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