US History – Tradition vs. Modernism in the 1920’s

Vocabulary
- Traditionalist
- Modernist
- Flapper
- Volstead Act
- Speakeasy
- Scopes trial

1. How did economic opportunity divide urban and rural dwellers?

2. How did cultural values divide traditionalists and modernists?

Topic 1: Generations Clash over the New Youth Culture

Traditionalist Thoughts

Modernist Thoughts

3 important pieces of historic information
Topic 2: Wets and Drys Clash over Prohibition

Traditionalist Thoughts

3 important pieces of historic information

Modernist Thoughts

Topic 3: Clash over Evolution

Traditionalist Thoughts

3 important pieces of historic information

Modernist Thoughts
The Clash between Traditionalism and Modernism

Introduction
Most of the trends and changes that made the 1920s roar emerged in the nation's cities. Although rural life was changing as well, Rockwell's paintings appealed to a longing for the reassurance of the simple life. Some people who lived in rural areas did not approve of the changes they had witnessed since the end of World War I. They were traditionalists, or people who had deep respect for long-held cultural and religious values. For them, these values were anchors that provided order and stability to society. For other Americans, particularly those in urban areas, there was no going back to the old ways. They were modernists, or people who embraced new ideas, styles, and social trends. For them, traditional values were chains that restricted both individual freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

Urban Attractions - Economic Opportunity and Personal Freedom: During the 1920s, some 19 million people would move from farms to cities, largely in search of economic opportunities. Urban areas, with their factories and office buildings, were hubs of economic growth. As the economy boomed, the demand for workers increased. Wages rose as well. Between 1920 and 1929, the average per capita income rose 37 percent. Cities also offered freedom to explore new ways of thinking and living. City dwellers could meet people from different cultures, go to movies, visit museums, and attend concerts. They could buy and read an endless variety of magazines and newspapers. They could drink, gamble, or go on casual dates without being judged as immoral.

Rural Problems: Falling Crop Prices and Failing Farms
In addition to losing their younger generation to cities, rural communities faced other problems during the 1920s. Farmers had prospered during the war, producing food crops for the Allies and the home front. Enterprising farmers had taken out loans to buy new machines or extra land in hopes of increasing their output and profits. After the war, however, European demand for U.S. farm products dropped sharply, as did crop prices. With their incomes shrinking, large numbers of farmers could not repay their loans. Hundreds of thousands of farmers lost their farms in the early 1920s alone. For the rest of the decade, farmers' share of the national income dropped steadily.

Changing Values Lead to Mutual Resentment
The divide between urban modernists and rural traditionalists was not just economic. Modernists tended to view rural Americans as behind the times. Sinclair Lewis, the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, mocked small-town values. In one of his novels, he described the residents of a small Midwestern town as a savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.

Rural traditionalists, not surprisingly, resented such attacks on their behavior and values. In their eyes, they were defending all that was good in American life. They saw the culture of the cities as money-grubbing, materialistic, and immoral. At the same time, however, many rural people could not help but envy the comfort and excitement city life seemed to offer.

The defenders of traditional values often looked to their faith and the Bible for support in their struggle against modernism. As a result, the 1920s saw a rise in religious fundamentalism - the idea that religious texts and beliefs should be taken literally and treated as the authority on appropriate behavior.
Topic 1: Generations Clash over the New Youth Culture

The Youth Perspective: The Old Ways Are Repressive: During the 1920s, a growing drive for public education sent a majority of teenagers to high school for the first time in U.S. history. College enrollment also grew rapidly. As young people spent more time than ever before outside the home or workplace, a new youth culture emerged. This culture revolved around school, clubs, sports, music, dances, dating, movies, and crazy fads.

The most daring young women broke with the past by turning themselves into "flappers" — young women who broke with traditional expectations for how women should dress and behave. They colored their hair and cut it short. Their skimpy dresses barely covered their knees. They rolled their stockings below their knees and wore unfastened rain boots that flapped around their ankles. Flappers wore makeup, which until that time had been associated with "loose" women of doubtful morals. Draped with beads and bracelets and carrying cigarette holders, they went to jazz clubs and danced the night away.

Modern young couples traded old-fashioned courtship for dating. Whereas the purpose of courtship had been marriage, the main point of dating was to have fun away from the watchful eyes of parents. Sedate tea parties or chaperoned dances gave way to unsupervised parties. Older people fretted about the younger generation's "wild" ways. After witnessing the war's waste of life, they decided that the adults who had sent young men into battle did not deserve respect.

Easy access to cars and the mass media helped fuel the youth rebellion. Cars gave young people a means to escape the supervision of their elders. Magazines and movies, in the meantime, spread images of a good life that was often very different from the way their parents had grown up.

The Adult Perspective: Young People Have Lost Their Way: Many adults considered the behavior of young people reckless and immoral. One way they tried to restore the old morality was censorship. Traditionalists pulled books they saw as immoral off library shelves. They also pressured filmmakers for less sexually suggestive scenes in movies. The Hays Office, named for former Postmaster General Will Hays, issued a movie code that banned long kisses and positive portrayals of casual sex. In bedroom scenes, movie couples had to follow a "two feet on the floor" rule.

Some states tried to legislate more conservative behavior. They passed laws to discourage women from wearing short skirts and skimpy swimsuits. Police with yardsticks patrolled beaches looking for offenders. Mostly, however, the older generation restricted itself to expressing loud disapproval. When nagging did not work, many parents crossed their fingers and hoped for the best. More often than not, they were not disappointed. Most young people, even the most rebellious flappers, usually ended their dating days by getting married and raising the next generation of rebellious youth.

In this 1922 photograph, a Washington, D.C., a policeman checks to see that a bathing suit hits no higher than six inches above the knee.
Topic 2: Wets and Drys Clash over Prohibition

The "Dry" Perspective - Prohibition Improves Society: They pointed to evidence that alcoholism caused crime, violence, and the breakup of families. "Drys," as backers of prohibition were known, believed that stopping people from drinking would result in a healthier, happier society.

Support for prohibition centered mainly in rural areas, and many drys saw the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages as a triumph of rural over urban Americans. In addition, many traditionalists were suspicious of foreigners. They associated beer drinking with immigrants of German descent and wine drinking with Italian immigrants. At first, prohibition seemed to the drys to deliver its expected benefits. The national consumption of alcohol did decline and fewer workers spent their wages at saloons, to the benefit of their families.

The "Wet" Perspective - Prohibition Restricts Freedom and Breeds Crime: Many modernists attacked prohibition as an attempt by the federal government to legislate morality. Prohibition seemed doomed from the start. In October 1919, Congress passed the Volstead Act to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment. But the federal government never gave the enforcement agency, called the Prohibition Bureau, sufficient personnel, money, or supplies.

As a result, prohibition led to an increase in illegal behavior by normally law-abiding citizens. Millions of Americans simply refused to abstain from drinking. Some learned how to brew their own "bathtub gin." Others bought "bootleg" alcohol that was distilled illegally or smuggled into the United States from Canada. As thousands of bars and pubs were forced to close, they were replaced by nearly twice as many secret drinking clubs, called speakeasies. The term speakeasy came from the practice of speaking quietly about illegal saloons so as not to alert police. A 1929 issue of New York City's Variety boldly reported, "five out of every seven cigar stores, lunchrooms, and beauty parlors are 'speaks' selling gin."

The growing demand for liquor created a golden opportunity for crooks like Al Capone. Bootlegging — the production, transport, and sale of illegal alcohol—was a multibillion dollar business by the mid-1920s. To keep his profits flowing without government interference, he bribed politicians, judges, and police officers. He also eliminated rival bootleggers. His thousand-member gang was blamed for hundreds of murders. In 1931, Capone finally went to jail—not for bootlegging or murder, but for tax evasion.

As lawlessness, violence, and corruption increased, support for prohibition dwindled. By the late 1920s, many Americans believed that prohibition had caused more harm than good. In 1933, the states ratified the Twenty-First Amendment, which repealed prohibition.
Topic 3 - Clash over Evolution

The Modernist Perspective- Science Shows How Nature Works: Many modernists looked to science, not the Bible, to explain how the physical world worked. Scientists accepted as true only facts and theories that could be tested and supported with evidence drawn from nature. By the 1920s, people could see the wonders of modern science every time they turned on an electric light, listened to the radio, or visited their doctors.

One of the most controversial scientific ideas of that time was British naturalist Charles Darwin's theory of evolution that all plants and animals, including humans, had evolved from simpler forms of life. The evolution of one species from another took place over thousands or millions of years. It worked through a process he called "natural selection." Others called it "survival of the fittest." In this process, species that make favorable adaptations to their environment are more likely to survive than those that do not. As favorable adaptations pile up, new species evolve from old ones. In such a way, Darwin argued, human beings had evolved from apes.

Modernists embraced the concepts of evolution and natural selection. Rather than choosing between science and religion, they believed that both ways of looking at the world could coexist. By the 1920s, the theory of evolution was regularly taught in schools.

The Traditionalist Perspective - The Bible Is the Word of God: Traditionalists were more likely to see science and religion in conflict. They rejected the theory of evolution because it conflicted with creationism - the belief that God created the universe as described in the Bible. During the early 1920s, fundamentalists vigorously campaigned to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools. They found a champion in William Jennings Bryan. A spellbinding speaker, Bryan had played a major role in American politics for 30 years. He had run for president three times and served as secretary of state under President Woodrow Wilson. Bryan toured the country, charging that modernists had "taken the Lord away from the schools."

Creationism Versus Evolution in Tennessee: 1925 Dayton, Tennessee, was a sleepy town of almost 2,000 people, plus a freethinking New York transplant named George Rappelyea. That year, the state legislature passed a law making it illegal for a public school "to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible." One of his friends knew a young science teacher named John Scopes, who would be willing to teach a lesson on evolution. Rappelyea then asked the American Civil Liberties Union to defend the young science teacher before going to the police and having Scopes arrested.

The Scopes trial tested the constitutionality of a Tennessee law that banned the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in schools. The whole country was following this contest between creationism and evolution. "If evolution wins," Bryan had warned, "Christianity goes." Darrow argued, "Scopes isn't on trial; civilization is on trial." The Scopes trial pitted the respected fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan against the brilliant defense attorney Clarence Darrow. Science teacher John Scopes was found guilty and fined for his conduct. Although Bryan won the case, he did not win his war against the teaching of evolution. Five days after the trial, Bryan died in his sleep.
Summary
Culturally, the United States became a deeply divided nation during the Roaring Twenties. Tensions arose between traditionalists, with their deep respect for long-held cultural and religious values, and modernists, who embraced new ideas, styles, and social trends.

Urban versus rural By 1920, the United States was becoming more urban than rural. Urban areas prospered as business and industry boomed. Rural areas declined economically and in population.

Youth versus adults Suspicious of the older generation after the war, many young people rejected traditional values and embraced a new youth culture. Chaperoned courting gave way to unsupervised dating. Flappers scandalized the older generation with their style of dress, drinking, and smoking.

Wets versus drys The Eighteenth Amendment launched the social experiment known as prohibition. The Volstead Act, which outlawed the sale of alcohol, was supported by drys and ignored by wets. The Twenty-First Amendment repealed prohibition in 1933.

Religion versus science Religious fundamentalists worked to keep the scientific theory of evolution out of public schools. The Scopes trial, testing Tennessee's anti-evolution law, was a legal victory for fundamentalists but a defeat in the court of public opinion. The issue of teaching creationism in biology classes is still current today.