

THE TWENTIES

Viewpoints

The idea of the 1920s “New Woman” pleased some people and alarmed others. Popular magazines of the time dealt with the issue from different perspectives. Some called for a return to old-fashioned ways, but others welcomed the change as progress that would improve society.

Directions: Read the two excerpts below. Then, answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of paper.

The “New” Woman

Woman now has very nearly the same political and educational advantages as man, but you cannot be much impressed by the use she has made of them. . . . [E]ducation seems to have persuaded some women to think that their highest aim in life is to produce a feeble imitation of [men]. . . . I have even heard it said in praise of the modern woman that she does not look upon marriage as her aim in life. . . . To me, this schoolgirlish contempt of natural emotions is just as bad as early Victorian prudery [excessive concern for proper behavior]. If a woman does not look forward to marriage as the central hope of her life it means either that she intends to pursue her love affairs anti-socially, or, worse still, that she does not mean to have any at all. . . .

—Sheila Kaye-Smith from
“The New Woman”
Living Age Magazine, 1929

“Feminism” has become a term of [disrespect] to the modern young woman. . . . Yet she and her kind can hardly be [called] “old-fashioned” women. What are they, then? . . . These women if they launch upon marriage are keen to make a success of it. . . . But at the same time, they are moved by an inescapable inner compulsion to be individuals in their own right. . . . Furthermore, they are convinced that they will be better wives and mothers for the breadth they gain from functioning outside the home. . . . [T]hey are highly conscious creatures who feel obliged to [make use of] their own resources to the very depths, despite the fact that they are under no delusions [misunderstandings] as to the present inferior status of their sex in most fields of endeavor.

—Dorothy Dunbar Bromley from
“Feminist—New Style”
Harper’s Magazine, 1927

Questions to Think About

1. According to Sheila Kaye-Smith, what does it mean when women do not see marriage as the primary goal of their lives?
2. According to Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, what is the attitude of the “New Woman” towards marriage?
3. **Detect Bias** Which of the two writers’ attitudes seems closer to the traditional Victorian outlook about women? What indicates this to you?