**Bernice Bobs Her Hair**

In A Nutshell

[F. Scott Fitzgerald](http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/biography.html) was a famously fast-living kind of guy, and his works of fiction document the lives of young, hip people like him. Fitzgerald's stories chronicled a new generation of American youth whose excesses astounded their elders, and his delightful, bold, and infuriating characters provided a template for the modern socialite. Any talk of the "Jazz Age" (also known as the "[Roaring Twenties](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/the-roaring-twenties.html)") of the 1920s immediately brings to mind images straight out of Fitzgerald's world – devastatingly charming flappers and their debonair dates. The collection that features "**Bernice Bobs Her Hair**" is actually titled [*Flappers and Philosophers*](http://books.google.com/books?id=BIMjRfeFXZ0C&printsec=frontcover#PPP11,M1) (1920), a label that immediately announces its subject matter.

Fitzgerald strove to faithfully and entertainingly depict the changing face of youth in his time; the women are envisioned as forward-thinking, revolutionary "flappers" (slang for the kind of new, fast-talking, Charleston-dancing, jazz-listening, leg-baring gal that emerged at this time), while the men, who either narrowly missed or survived the horrors of [World War I](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/world-war-i.html), are labeled "philosophers." This title sums up the hedonistic modus operandi of the period: life might be short, so you might as well make it as sweet as possible.

"Bernice" isn't quite as dramatic in its embrace of this philosophy as some of Fitzgerald's other works, but it still gets the message across. The young characters we encounter here are on a different schedule than their parents; instead of planning for the future, they're all about living in the moment. Marjorie proudly claims to be a "gardenia girl" (31), a blossom that's incredibly beautiful, but whose beauty fades fast. Rather than plodding along steadily and never really enjoying herself, Marjorie's motto is something akin to "live fast, die young." Bernice, on the other hand, represents the traditional mode of womanhood – she's totally predictable, and *totally* boring. The conflict between the two cousins demonstrates the tumultuous social conditions of Fitzgerald's time, with a freshness and accessibility that still impresses readers even ninety years down the road.

If you're a fan of Fitzgerald's novels, be sure to check out more of his short stories – he may have written them to pay the bills, but that doesn't stop them from being among some of his most delightful work.

**Why Should I Care?**

Here's the plot, in a nutshell: a new girl arrives in town, and is taken under the rather uncomfortable wing of the queen bee. She learns the ABCs of popularity, and quickly becomes popular herself. Soon enough, the student eclipses the master; the queen bee is disturbed and seeks vengeance (which then backfires on her). The upstart triumphs in the end, and the social order is ultimately shaken up. End of story.

Sound familiar? Well, since this *is* a guide on "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," we certainly hope it does. However, even if you haven't read the story yet, it might ring some mental bells if you've seen [*Mean Girls*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0377092/). Yep, that's right – if you think about it, the two plotlines are really pretty close.

Now, we're not accusing screenwriter [Tina Fey](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0275486/) of ripping off what's essentially one of the oldest stories in the book of adolescent life; we love Tina Fey. Instead, we'd like to focus on the *reason* for these uncanny similarities – the simple fact that girl culture has operated in a certain way for a long time, and will, in all likelihood, continue to do so for ages to come.

Both [Fitzgerald](http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/biography.html) and Fey touch upon some of the central themes of youth – think jealousy and competition – and use them to remind us of how savage we're all capable of being, despite our big talk about being civilized, modern citizens of an advanced world. Sure, we may have invented some pretty complicated social structures for ourselves (in Fitzgerald's story, the social hierarchy of a small town; in *Mean Girls*, the convoluted maze of relationships that is adolescence), but fundamental human nature never changes: we're capable of being competitive, vicious beasts on the inside.

Both "Bernice" and *Mean Girls* point to the particular viciousness of female competition. The concept of femininity is central to both works; they ask us to question our expectations of girls and girlhood, and to reevaluate what makes women the way they are. The conclusion (spoken in *Mean Girls*, unspoken in "Bernice") is that no strict definition of femininity can do any good – any concept of an ideal woman causes nothing but competition, jealousy, and flat-out trouble, regardless of how you define it. "Bernice" doesn't offer us any solution to this; we're not sure what happens to our short-haired newly-minted flapper friend after the last line of the story, and honestly, we're a little nervous for her. However, we can take some consolation in the moral of *Mean Girls* – hopefully, all of the diverse definitions of womanhood will someday be equally accepted, and will be able coexist peacefully.

http://www.shmoop.com/bernice-bobs-her-hair/