

Flirtation

Flirtation and coquetry are often synonymous and represent behavior that demonstrates a playful social or sexual attraction to someone else. It may involve verbal or written communication, but very often non-verbal suggestions involving body language, such as eye contact. It may be used to convey a deeper relationship with the other person, or if done in a playful manner, for sheer amusement. It may be therefore executed with total sincerity or utter frivolity. Another definition of flirtation is, after all, "a short period of interest in something," such as flirting with an idea.



Paulette Darty

In 1904, Parisian-born chanteuse Paulette Darty (1871 – 1939) articulated what she believed was the distinction between flirtation and coquetry. "One has said that a flirt is one who pays attention without intention – n'est ce pas?" she asked. "Every Parisian woman is a coquette, but comparatively few are flirts."

She went on to explain:

"Flirting is a shameless show of one's power. Coquetry does not affirm power but merely suggests it. Flirting is deliberate – coquetry is subtle. Flirting is dangerous – coquetry delicious."

"There's no use in being aggressive," she resumed. "The more subtle and deep and intangible it is, the more elusive and fascinating is coquetry. No man can resist it. There is no need of smiling at a man, a long, deep, serious look will accomplish twice as much in the end."

Now don't blame me for these views. They're over a century old, but it is interesting to observe how the guidelines and definitions for flirtation have changed through the years.

Flirting.—Flirtation in a woman is an excusable pastime. It is a proof of innocence, just as the amusement of impaling cockchafers is an evidence of a good heart in a youngster.

Flirting defined in the Daily Picayune, June 17, 1845

A definition of flirting from the *Picayune* in 1845 indicates it is an innocent means of communication. However, for the cockchafer (a flying European beetle), it didn't seem innocent - but deadly!

For those of you who've "flirted" with the idea of an electric car, one of physicist Nikola Tesla's first "inventions" as a child was an engine powered by harnessing four cockchafers.

Flirting.—Men flirt because it is exhilarating; women because it is natural. A moderate quantity of flirtation is a positive good. It is only when it is carried to excess and becomes deceptive, that it is an evil. People should never flirt except with their eyes open.

Flirting defined in the Daily Picayune, August 7, 1868

Moderation and honest intention were seen as important factors. It was only natural that, especially in Victorian times, women (and men) would need an unwritten language for communicating interest or

disinterest when mere come-hither glances, alluring smiles or a demure fluttering of the eyelashes were not enough to telegraph their feelings. Often these signals relied on a woman's accessories, such as a fan, an umbrella, gloves and perhaps the most powerful tool in a lady's arsenal - her handkerchief.

Today in New Orleans, I'm happy to say that pocket squares are making a comeback with men, and New Orleanians of all sexes and races enjoy taking out their handkerchiefs when a second line hits the streets. But back in the nineteenth century, the handkerchief was a most useful tool in the art of flirtation. But there was a code. The *Journal of the Telegraph* warned:

"It ... is only to be used at balls, parties, theatres, and on the street, but never in church."

Just some of the signals conveyed in the 1800s by means of handkerchief flirting:

- Drawing it across the cheek — I love you.
- Drawing it across the forehead — Look, we are being watched.
- Drawing it across the lips — Desirous of an acquaintance.
- Letting it rest on the left cheek — No.
- Letting it rest on the right cheek — Yes.
- Opposite corners in both hands — Do wait for me.
- Taking it by the center — You are most too willing.

Too late – or was it:

- Twisting it in the right hand — I love another.
- Winding it around the forefinger — I am engaged.
- Winding it around the third finger — I am married.
- Drawing it through the hands — I despise you.

Umbrellas, also used in second lines, signalled certain messages in the 1800s. The *Picayune*, on May 8, 1881, offered a lengthy list, just a few of which (although not very romantic) are mentioned below:

- An umbrella carried over the woman, the man getting nothing but the drippings of the rain, signifies courtship.
- When a man has the umbrella and the woman the drippings, it indicates marriage.
- To give a friend half of your umbrella means that both of you will get wet.

Flirtation.

With Gloves.

Yes—Crushing up in the left hand.
No—Crushing up in right hand.
I love you—Dropping both gloves.
Do you love me?—Pulling on left glove, leaving thumb exposed.
Kiss me—Pulling on right glove, leaving thumb exposed.
Indifference—Pulling on left glove half way.
I wish your acquaintance—Holding the gloves with finger tips down.
Follow me—Striking them on the shoulder.
I love another—Touching them to the chin.
I am engaged—Throwing them up in the air.
We are watched—Twisting round the fingers.
I hate you—Turning them inside out.
Introduce me to your friend—Fanning yourself with them.
Get rid of your friend—Folding them up.

With a Handkerchief.

Yes—Holding to right cheek.
No—Holding to left cheek.
I desire acquaintance—Drawing it across lips.
I love you—Drawing across cheek.
I hate you—Drawing through the hands.
You have changed—Holding to the right ear.
You are cruel—Holding to the eyes.
Follow me—Throwing over the shoulder.
We are watched—Drawing across forehead.
Indifference—Twisting in both hands.
I love another—Twisting in right hand.
I am engaged—Winding round finger.
I am married—Winding round third finger.

With a Parasol.

Yes—Touching right cheek.
No—Touching left cheek.
I love you—Dropping it.
Do you love me?—Touching tip to lips.
I wish your acquaintance—Carrying it open in left hand.
Meet me at first crossing—Carrying closed in left hand.
Follow me—Carrying closed in right hand.
Speak to me—Carrying over right shoulder.
We are watched—Twirling around.
Get rid of your friend—Folding up.
Introduce me—Fanning yourself with it.
Kiss me—Handle to lips.
I love another—Tapping chin with handle.
I am engaged—Swinging it on left side.
I am married—Swinging it on right side.

Bygone Flirtation Signals

Back in 1838, one of the *Picayune's* writers landed in Bay St. Louis and described the walkway out to the wharf in front of the hotel and how on "soft summer nights" it was "much frequented" as "a rendezvous for the 'young people' on a moonlighted eve." He continued "I suppose many hearts have been lost there ... *Such* flirting!"

In 1944, President Theodore Roosevelt's eldest son, Brigadier General Theodore "Ted" Roosevelt, Jr., was the only general to land on Utah Beach with the first wave of troops on D-Day. Despite a heart condition and arthritis that forced him to use a cane, he heroically walked ashore aided by that cane, inspiring his men with his courage and calm leadership. Many will remember his portrayal by Henry Fonda in the 1962 film *The Longest Day*. Roosevelt died in France of a heart attack a little over one month after the landing.

But back in his teens, 17-year-old TR Jr. was punished and forced to stand in a corner with his face to the wall for, of all things, flirting. The *Picayune* reported the story April 5, 1905, explaining that Roosevelt was "one of a party of Lads" visiting Abington, Virginia, where they flirted with pretty schoolgirls at Stonewall Jackson Institute in that city. After Miss Kate Hunt, Principal, assured young Roosevelt and his companions that the girls would be relieved from the remainder of their penalty, they agreed to stand in the corner for thirty minutes "while the remainder of the young folks danced."

Sounds harsh for just flirting, but the *Times-Picayune* reported in May 1922 that two young men residing in the 2800 block of St. Charles Avenue were arrested for "accosting and flirting with women."

On July 25, 1905, the renowned Dorothy Dix, nationally syndicated advice columnist of the *Picayune*, wrote in her article, *THE ETHICS OF FLIRTATION*:

"Out in the West a judge," she wrote, had ruled " a man may lift his hat, without offense, to a lady whose appearance pleases him, and whose acquaintance he desires to make. He may also smile sweetly while doing so. If the lady smile [*sic*] the man is justified in speaking to her, but if she regards him with a cold and haughty glance he must desist from his attentions under penalty of being run in by the police.

Thus are the ethics of the street flirtation defined – a pastime so vulgar and so dangerous that it is a wonder that any girl would indulge in it."

Dix believed "a woman is playing the game of flirtation fairly when she renders herself as attractive as she can to every man she meets ... to be as good looking, as well dressed, as entertaining, and as charming as possible." Brightening up the life of her fellow-man "is merely doing her Christian duty." But for a man, she said, "he has no right to make concrete love to a woman unless he is ready to name the wedding day."

My, how things have changed! Today, *Concrete Love* is the name of the fourth studio album from British indie rock band The Courtenears, released in 2014.



A Western Judge Says a Man May Bow to a Woman He Doesn't Know.

"A Western Judge Says a Man May Bow to a Woman He Doesn't Know," *The Picayune*, July 25, 1905 - *Not the right concrete mix here.*

For more traditional romantic musical fare, I highly suggest the song *Coquette*, whose lyrics begin:

"Tell me why you keep foolin', little Coquette,
Makin' fun of the one who loves you."

Excellent renditions of the song by three New Orleans artists make this tune a Crescent City favorite. The artists are Sidney Bechet, James "Gonzo" Booker and Antoine "Fats" Domino.



"Fats" Domino sings of "tenderly dreamin' of ... little Coquette"

Here's a good time to ask the question, how come *coquette* refers to a flirtatious female? What is the male equivalent?

Originally in French it was just *coquet*, the diminutive form of *coq* in reference to the showing off, strutting gait and amorous characteristics of the cock. It formerly indicated both sexes, and in both spelled *coquet*, but in the 18th century the female became *coquette* and the masculine became obsolete. Men still flirt, but women have the *coquette* terminology locked up.

By the way, the pronunciations for *coquet*, as well as *coquette*, are identical.

On January 5, 1913, the *Picayune* reported inappropriate behavior by the coquette's male counterpart, a 16-year-old men's clothing salesman, who was arrested and fined \$5 for flirting with a young lady who was "not relishing his supposed attention."

Later that year, the *Picayune* featured the comments of English

playwright Cosmo Hamilton who said "One cannot flirt with the American girl," since she "cannot sit in one place long enough" and "does not possess sufficient concentration for the necessarily gradual and therefore artistic rules of flirtation. She either disqualifies a man at once, or is simply 'crazy' about him straight away."

My guess is that Cosmo must have been shot down, i.e., disqualified at once.



*Coquetry, old postcard view Mock Cosmo, 18th Century Edition
Did you notice that handkerchief is misspelled?*

In the 1941 Preston Sturges film *The Lady Eve*, we witness flirtation in every form. Henry Fonda, the wealthy and handsome heir to the Pike Ale fortune, is aboard a cruise ship. Con artist Barbara Stanwyck, observing all with the mirror on her compact, provides commentary on the sad flirtation skills of women, young and old, as they smile engagingly at him and bat their eyelashes, pass his table with swinging hips and drop their handkerchiefs.

"Holy smoke, the dropped kerchief!" she exclaims softly. "Hasn't been used since Lily Langtry."

She bypasses all those usually employed subtle signals and flat-out trips him. Whether or not that is considered assault, I'll leave that to

modern readers to decide, but a lot of close touching ensues, which in old movie jargon is known as a "mock seduction scene."

As you can see, the rules of flirtation, have been changing continually throughout the 20th century.

Even military gentlemen need a special place to escort their ladies, and for West Point cadets it's been Flirtation Walk for over a century and a half. They even made a movie in 1934 with that title. The cadets' *Bugle Notes* refers to Flirtation Walk as a "scenic walk where only cadets and their escorts may go." Cadets refer to it as "Flirtie Walk", or simply "Flirtie".

In 1987, Ronnie Virgets, writing for the *Times-Picayune*, attended a mix 'n' mingle CBD Singles Association event at Café Panache on Magazine Street with psychotherapist Anne Teachworth as the "flirting instructor."

She, with her "great purr of a voice" was there to teach them about "that wonderful stage between being friendly and making a pass." She said, "The biggest problem is that we have such a low tolerance for our own excitement level. So when we see someone we're really interested in, we revert to fifth grade behavior. We act like we're totally uninterested."

She also said that flirting doesn't always mean you have to wind up in the bedroom. "They have to realize that flirting is the courtship dance and is quite enjoyable on its own."

If you ask about a person's job, she explained, it takes one down "the road marked 'friendly.'" But if you say something personal like 'I'm really enjoying myself here, aren't you?' it begins the process of self-disclosure so necessary for romance." She also stressed that being "warm" was more important than being "cool".

In some ways, present-day norms seem by many to be more archaic than in the past. People sense that nowadays men and women (and others) are less likely to flirt and that flirting has taken on negative connotations. If a man flirts with a woman, he may be considered sexist, or viewing women as sex objects and not taking them seriously. There is also the issue of sexual harassment in schools and in the workplace that has made flirting somehow threatening. On the other hand, if a woman is desirous of a sexual connection, many feminists feel that in today's world she should just say what she

wants; but men, on the other hand, have to tread carefully. They shouldn't even begin to try the naughty humor of a double entendre. As Paulette Darty might have asked, "Aren't the sexes missing out on the wonderful and delicious thrill of coquetry and courtship?"



*More going on here than eye contact, from 1901 -
Who's seducing whom?
Artwork by French illustrator Henri Gerbault*

If only there were an Ann Landers or Dear Abby for millennials so that everyone would be aware of the new set of rules. Or are the rules being constantly retooled and retweeted as we speak? Actually, the "Dear Abby" column is still out there today. Jeanne Phillips took up the column from her mother, Pauline Esther "Popo" Phillips (née Friedman), whose pen name was Abigail Van Buren and who was

also Ann Landers' twin sister. Trouble is, Jeanne Phillips was born in 1942, senior in age even to baby-boomers.

Young people today are all for authenticity, but many feel that flirting is inauthentic. Don't they realize that taking a sincere interest in someone else is the greatest expression of authenticity?

This could, in large part, be due to the view by some that flirting is manipulative, and therefore disingenuous.

Ronda Rich, in *What Southern Women Know About Flirting*, wrote:

"The firmest rule of seductive flirting is to spoil your man until he is reduced to a pile of soft grits. Baby him, and your slightest whimper will be his heart's command. Fussing over him like a baby will send his manly urges soaring through the roof of a three-story Tennessee plantation house. That's because detailed attention is an irresistible force akin to that of a hurricane hitting New Orleans. It will knock him down and sweep him away."

Oh, please! And spare us the hurricane similes. It's descriptions such as these that give flirtation a bad name, not to mention the South.

So be aware and take care, or you may find yourself flirting with disaster.

P.S., for the love language of fans, see my article entitled *Before A.C.*

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Flirtation"
Ned Hémard
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