

Beverly, the first “material girl”

Scholarly sources:

Brooks, Victor (2012). *Last season on innocence: The teen experience in the 1960s*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Doherty, Thomas (2002). *Teenagers and Teenpics: The juvenilization of American movies in the 1950s*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Meet Beverly

Beverly Schneider was fourteen-years-old in 1959. She lived during prosperous times—long after the Great Depression and World War Two had ended.



Beverly was in junior high.

She lived in a nice house near downtown in Milwaukee and her parents could afford to give her a healthy allowance.



Other than collecting the allowance, Beverly didn't pay much attention to her parents. For many years, she'd kept company with a group of friends her own age. They called themselves The "hip girls."

The hip girls hung out as far away from their parents as they could.



Their clubhouse was a bomb shelter that Beverly's dad had built in an abandoned garage. Back in the 1950s people in big cities were building nuclear fall-out shelters. This is where they would go in case of a nuclear attack.

During those times the United States and the Soviet Union were threatening each other with invasion. It was a period of time called the Cold War.



The bomb shelter had everything—electricity, plumbing, food, furniture, water, a record player, and even a TV.



Beverly and her friends had seen the newsreel on television when Nikita Khrushchev, the head of the Soviet Union, banged his shoe on the table at the United Nations and threatened to "bury America."



But Beverly and The hip girls didn't pay much attention to all of that. Mostly they hung out in the bomb shelter so they could be away from their parents.

They had their own interests and almost all the time these interests were about things they could buy.



There were no trendy products they didn't own. Anything they saw on television they bought.

From hula hoops . . .



... to slinkies ..

.

... to transistor
radios ...



. . . to every pop record
ever recorded by Paul Anka,
Little Richard, Elvis
Presley, Frankie Avalon,
Rickie Valens, Buddy Holly,
Fats Domino, and Jerry Lee
Lewis.

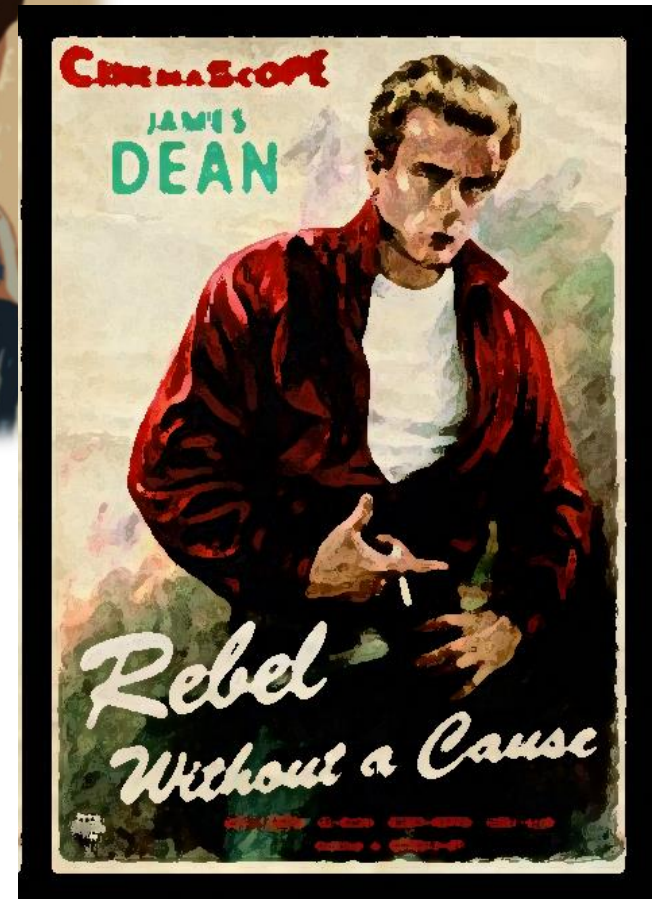


Their only other interest was
drinking phosphates at malt shops
and—of course—BOYS

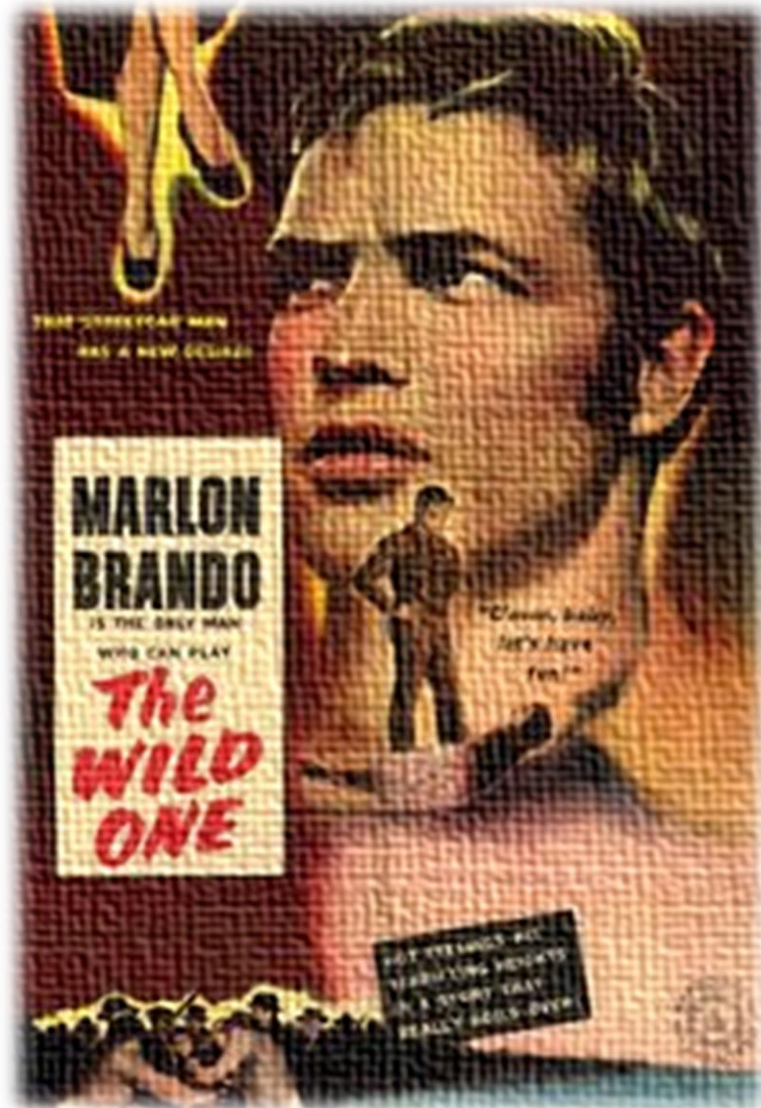


They shrieked every time they saw Rickie Nelson sing on television.

They swooned when they saw James Dean at the movie theater.



In fact, everything they knew about boys and, for that matter, girls, they'd learned on TV or at the movies.



All of this was really worrying Beverly's mother, Evelyn. Beverly had shut out her parents. These days all that mattered to Beverly was what her peer group or what the popular media had to say. As her involvement in material culture grew, her grades had fallen.

Evelyn knew that Beverly would not take guidance from her. She decided to call in a younger person for help—Beverly's twenty-five year old sister Helen.



Helen's insight

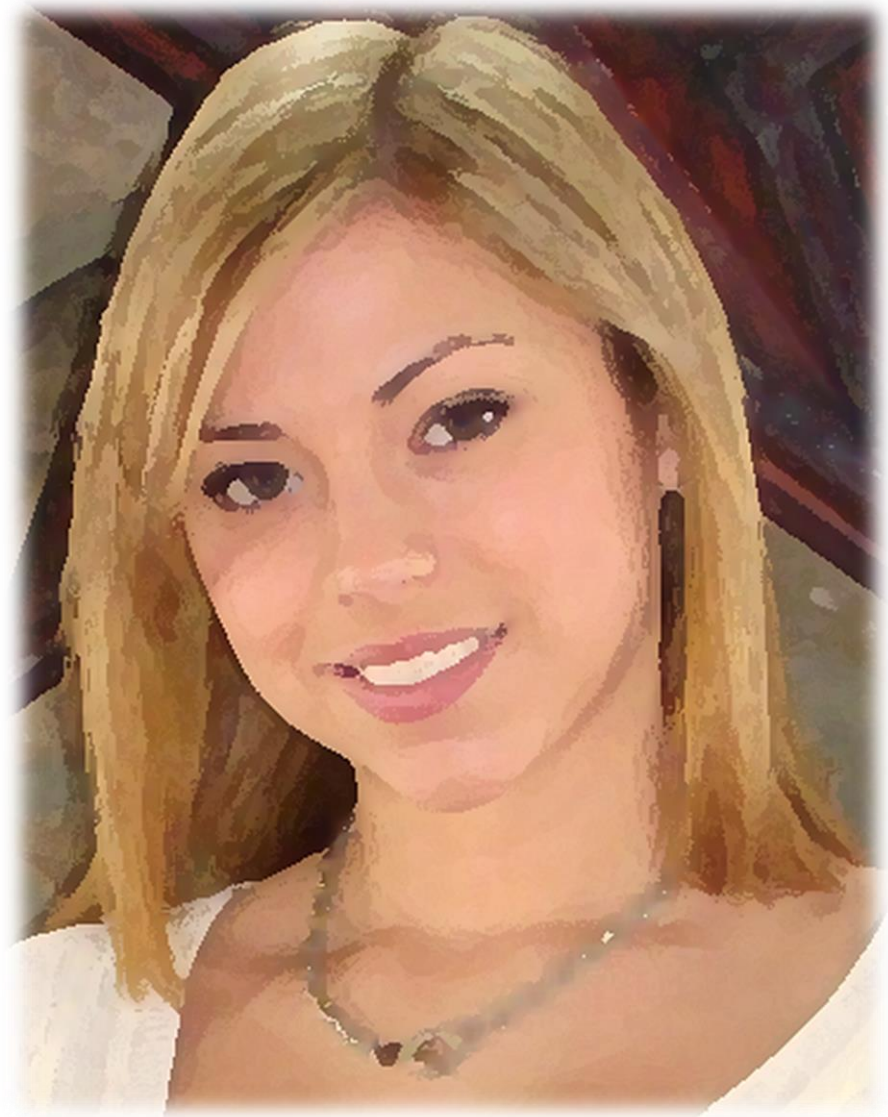
Helen worked as a secretary and had her own apartment. She lived on Milwaukee's east side—an area even Beverly considered to be hip.



Evelyn asked if Helen could spend some time with her little sister and figure out why she seemed so aloof. "I fear that she and her friends have been living with all these Cold War fears so long that they can't grow up normally," the mother claimed. "Every day they are bombarded with the threat of nuclear war."



"Mother, pardon the disrespect," interjected Helen, "but that's a little far out. Think what life was like when you and dad were young. First you both lived through the Great Depression . . ."



"... And then came World War Two. Dad had to go overseas to fight and risk his life. You had to care for us alone while having to work in a weapons factory. Please don't make excuses for Beverly. I'm seeing young girls all over town falling into her trap and I think I know what the problems are."

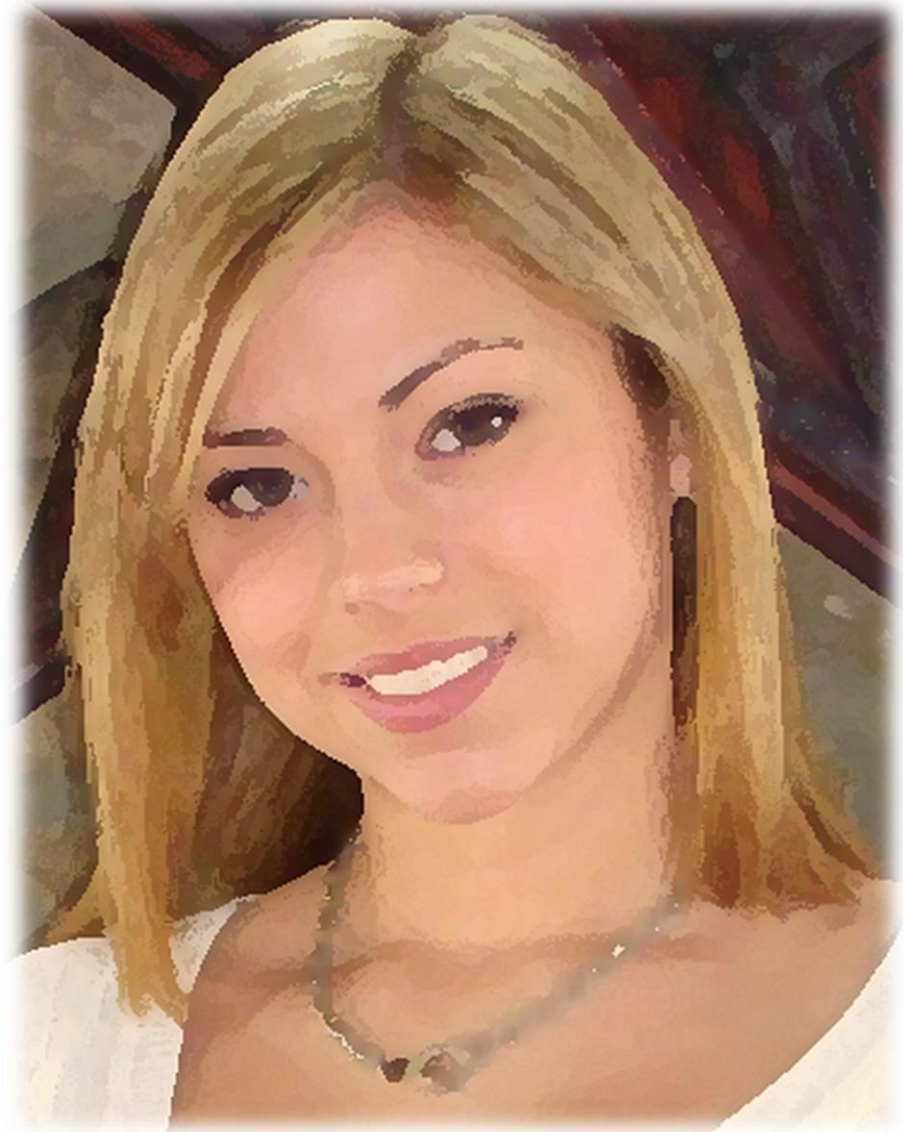


She called Beverly the next day and suggested the two go to a movie that night.

Beverly figured they'd go to the drive-in. And although she loved drive-ins, she wasn't that thrilled about going with her older sister. "I'll go if my friends can come," she sulked.



"No, Beverly," Helen replied. "I'd like to spend some time just with you. We could go for a malt afterwards."



Beverly considered it. "Well, it would have to be a teen movie. Not some old Lauren Bacall thing like you like."

Her sister agreed to take her to a teenage film.

Beverly thought they'd be going to see *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, as it was playing at the drive-in close to her house. She and her friends had wanted to see it.



Instead, Helen took her little sister to the Oriental Theater near her east side apartment.



The film was a teen flick, but not at all what Beverly expected. It was *Gidget* with Sandra Dee.

"This is much more wholesome, Beverly," Helen said. "And it's actually about a girl—not just about wild boys like all these other teenage movies."



So the sisters sat through a movie about a teenage girl, her romantic interests, and how she developed the nerve and the skills to surf.

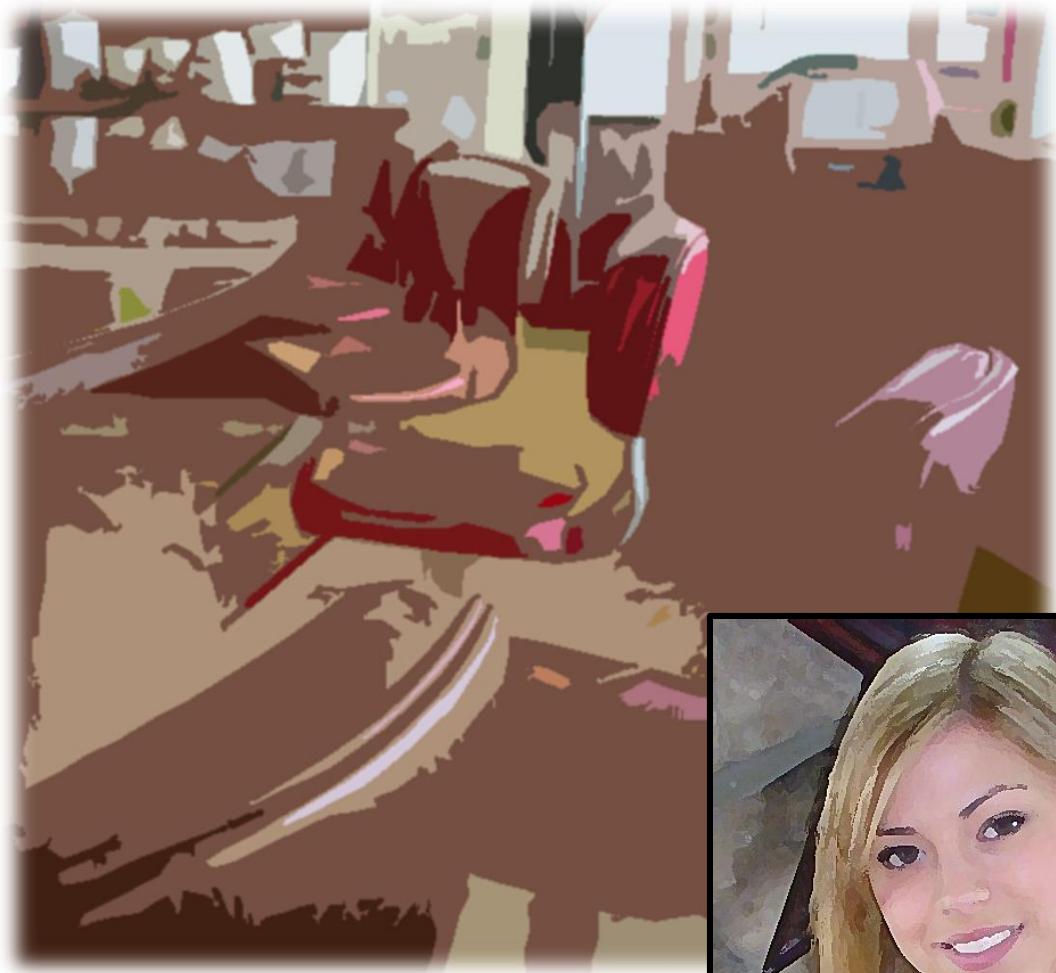
Beverly liked the movie a little bit, but didn't want to admit this to her sister. She sulked during the entire two hours.



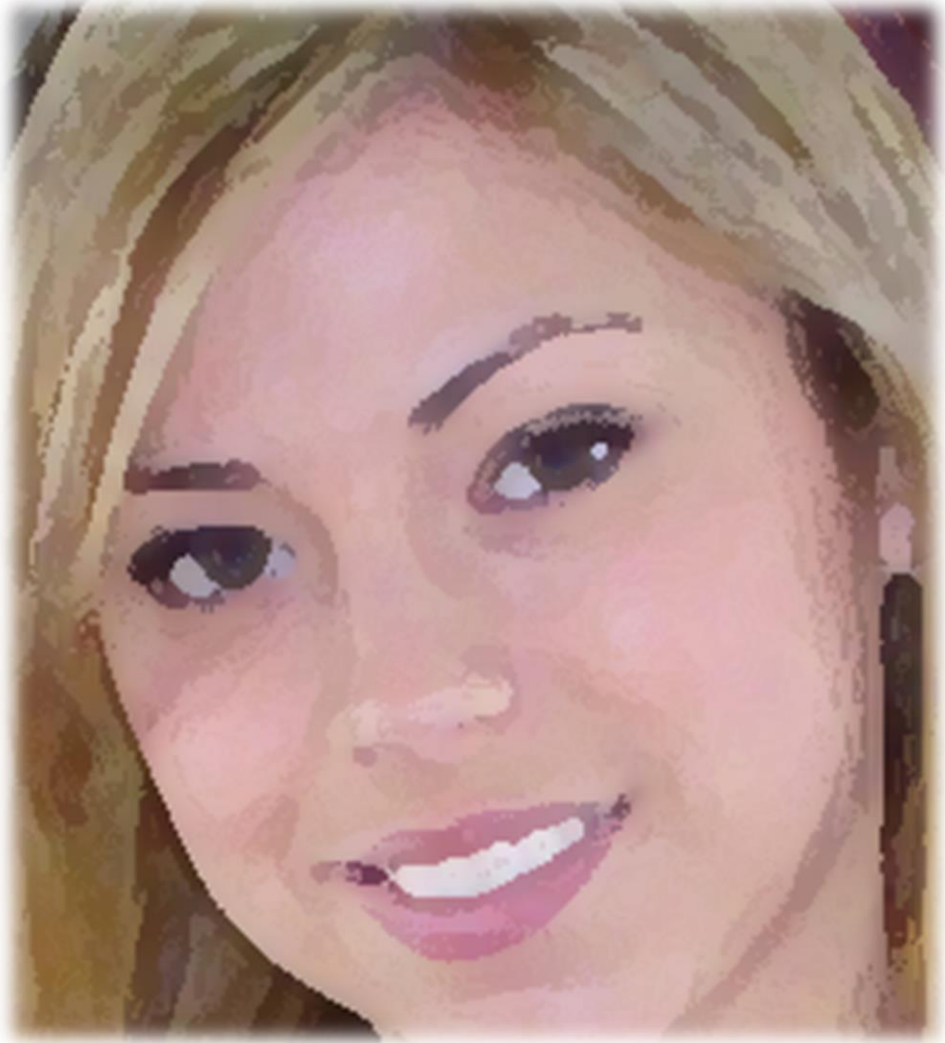
Later they went and had
malts at the Oriental
Drugs soda counter.

As they sipped their
malts, Helen began to
talk. "Beverly, have you
ever heard the words
'critical thinker?'"

Beverly shook her head.



"Well a critical thinker is someone that doesn't always believe everything, but tries to figure out what's behind the way things appear. I worry that you are becoming a young woman that is just believing everything you are being fed. And you are choosing to get these messages from people who don't love you and care about your future."



"To be a critical thinker, you have to ask two questions. First, *what is the message you are getting?* And second, *why are you getting the message?* Take the television, Beverly. Every day you see a commercial that says if you have this or that thing you'd really be hip. Mostly today you see these commercials aimed at teens. Why do you think you are getting these messages?"

Beverly was still sulking. "Well, I guess you want me to say that it's because they get money if we buy their stuff."

"Yes," answered Helen. "Years ago, teens didn't have money to spend. Now that they do, all these companies are figuring out ways to get it."



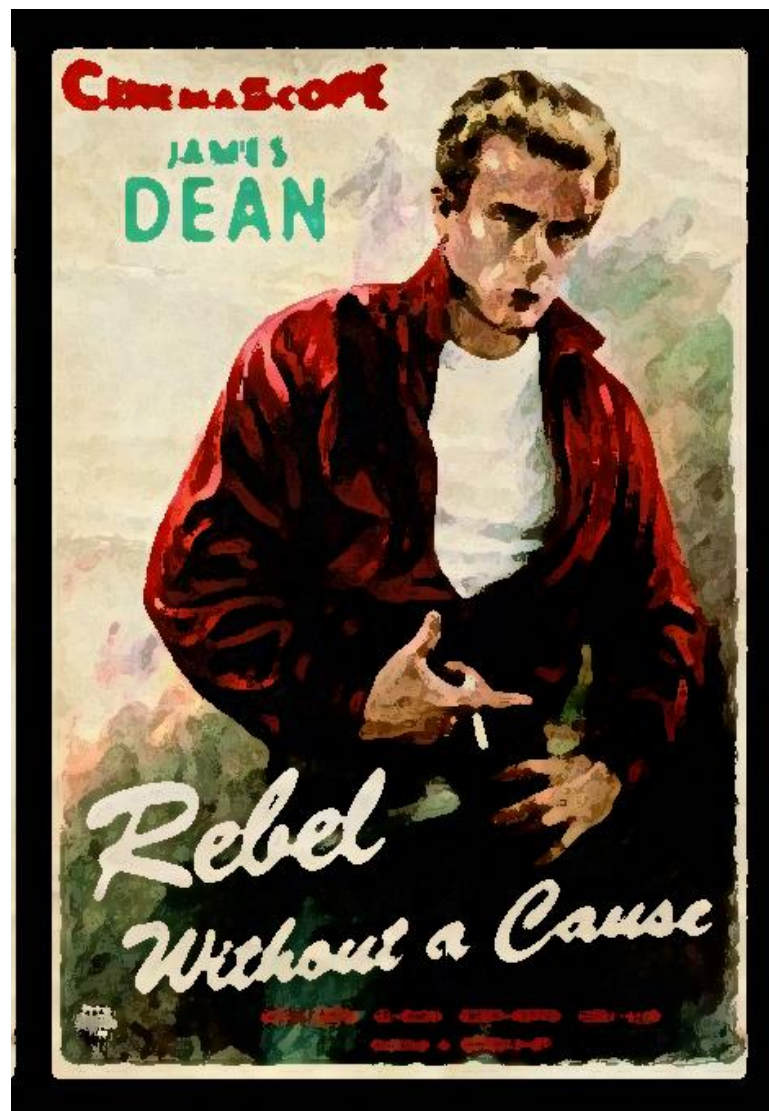
"Now let's talk about these teen movies. What message are you getting about the boys in these movies?"

"That they're hip," Beverly answered. "They aren't bossed around by parents or the cops or anyone."

"Okay, little sister. Now what message are you getting about the girls?"

Beverly grunted as she thought it over. "Well, it's that if the girls are to be hip, they would go with these boys."

"Yes," responded Helen. "That's the point. They don't have identities of their own. They just go with the boys—like something else the boys own."



But now Beverly had a rebuttal. "Ha! But you just took me to see *Gidget*. She was a girl and the star of the movie and she learned to surf."

Helen agreed. "But what really was the message about her role as a girl? Remember what her mother said to her when she was helping her learn to surf. She said, 'One of the advantages of being a young lady is it's not up to you; it's up to the young man.' This is not the message our own mother would give us"



Now Beverly was perplexed. "But why would the film makers do that? Why would they make the women inferior?"

"Now you are understanding critical thinking," Helen responded. "You are asking why. Let me put this question to you—when do teens usually go to teen movies?"

"On dates?"

"Yes. And who buys the tickets on dates?"



Beverly dropped her head. She got it. "Oh, the boys. So these film makers are making the interests of boys more important because the boys are buying the tickets."

"Yes," her sister answered. "These films do not present the world as it is or as it should be. It is about selling tickets to those who will buy them."



Beverly began to understand.

The next day, she took all of her new insights to The hip girls when they met in the bomb shelter. While not all the girls liked the new ideas, it opened the subject of what they really wanted to become.



From that day on, this became a daily discussion point with the girls. They began to consider their potentials and figure out ways to match their abilities and personalities with future goals.

A decade later, with encouragement from her mother and Helen, Beverly became a leader in the women's rights movement.



The end

Let's talk!!!