

Fashionably early: the context and consequences of the flapper movement

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The 1920s were a remarkable decade for America – a time remembered as much for the promiscuous antics of its teens as for the exploitative antics of its well-to-do businessmen. It was the first decade in which men and women could date without parental supervision; the first time that Henry Ford's Model-T automobiles became a token of middle-class status, and long-distance travel – once an emblem of the elite – became accessible to all classes. It was also the first decade that government began to shed its trademark pattern of patriarchal oppression.

Voting rights inspired women to demand even more from their government: work, life, birth control. The Flapper Movement of the 1920s embodied these demands, transforming women's request for opportunities and liberties into a full-fledged livelihood, securing women's power to use fashion as form of personal expression, and abolishing fashion's historic use of corsets, headwear, and undergarments as the swords of sexism. Though the United States saw a much more prominent "Flapper Movement" than its English associates, the U. S. imported the actual term – "flapper" – from England in the 1910s. The word's first domestic, documented use is credited to journalist H.

L. Mencken: "The flapper of 1915 has forgotten how to simper; she seldom blushes; and it is impossible to shock her" (Mencken 2). The Flapper's Dictionary: As Compiled by One of Them came into circulation just seven years later, describing the "flapper" with the more favorable definition of an "ultra-modern, young girl, full of pep and life, fully beautiful (naturally or artificially), blase, imitative, and intelligent to a degree who is about to bloom into womanhood and believes that sex has been and will continue to

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be, emancipated to a higher level than most mortals have been able to attain.” However, the Flapper was much more than simple string of sentences – she was an inventive revolutionary, daring to challenge the boundaries of traditional female life. Modern fashion standards categorize flappers’ garments as tame.

Evaluation of radicalism, however, must be examined within the context of an individual time frame – not within that of aggregate progress itself. In this sense, both the “ flapper dress” and the females who adopted the “ flapper” life were pioneers of their conservative era. Though several of the United States’ most pervasive fashion trends – tanned skin, bobbed hair, and the declining albeit once-great glamour of the cigarette – can be tracked back to the flapper era, contemporary reception of flappers’ attire parallels our own, current reception of Snooki’s hair pouf, Ke\$ha’s glitter, or Gaga’s crablike heels: scorn, intrigue, and little authentic emulation. Like Ke\$ha or Snooki, flappers 1920s were also associated with lifestyles that the era’s social standards deemed improper. From smoking and casual drinking to promiscuous dancing and dating, these women were seen as the antitheses of the long-established feminine ideal.

The flapper movement found a particularly potent force of opposition in the concurrent fundamentalist movement, whose proponents preached Bible-based morals, standards, and ideals. In his Christian Workers Magazine article “ True Womanhood,” fundamentalist advocate Mr. William Parker observed, “ We find less...of that modest, retiring spirit [in women] that suffers long and is kind. We miss that incredible flush of the cheek...the

natural coquetry of the heart” (Parker 185). Harold and Presbyter’s “ The Protection of Girlhood” ostracized the flapper for her “...immodest dress, improper dancing, frequenting immoral plays, and indulging in smoking, gambling, swearing, and joyriding...a course, daring, vulgar young woman of questionable morals...cares nothing about modesty, or propriety, or virtue, or righteousness, or God” (2). By fundamentalist standards, the flapper was, indeed, a course and vulgar woman.

Her “ virtues” and “ morals,” while compatible with most modern definitions, did not fit well with fundamentalists’ emphasis on full-length dress, traditional gender roles, and humble female behavior. In comparison to the painfully tight corsets, elaborate patterns, and hulking garments European women had donned since the 500s, the flappers’ simple and functional clothes were nothing short of mini-revolutions. Between 1915 and 1925, fashion underwent a radical transformation: waistlines dropped, hemlines rose (giving the public a shameless glimpse at the wearer’s knees), sewing patters were simplified (allowing women to become more efficient in their garment-making), clothes were loosened (contributing to the rise of mass manufactured sizes), and stockings, once s vital to a female ensemble as the modern bra, became... optional. Makeup also underwent a transformation as haircuts became shorter, lipstick became a deeper red, and cheek rouge became a mainstream cosmetic. From the confines of the corset emerged an unprecedented freedom of movement, decision, and expression.

Though we might jump to credit feminist flappers with the cultural and cosmetic shifts of the 1920s, a number of collaborating circumstances led to

the change, making it difficult to isolate just one factor – such as the flappers – as their ‘ truest’ cause. These factors include the First Great War (World War I), the emergence of a middle class, the popularization of dances that demanded mobility, and the ratification of the 19th amendment. The United States took on mass weapons manufacture to help aid Europe during World War I. Though the decision demanded a large workforce, it coincided with an all-male draft that drained men from the workforce. Lacking other options, firms began to hire women.

Uncomfortable female garments like corsets and long gowns did not jive with the production of war equipment like guns, tanks, and ammunition – so, women turned to working clothes like shirts, sweaters, and pants.

Manufacture of steel corsets, meanwhile, was discontinued as a means of conserving metal for military manufacture. Though the war came and went, the trend stuck – and by the late 1910s, magazines like Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar stopped showing corsets on their covers. The financial consciousness of the middle class also had a hand in the decade’s pivotal shift for female life and fashion. The WWI-immersed federal government begged citizens to save money wherever was possible; in response, women of the middle class turned to the practice ease of sewing simple designs (such as the drop-waist flapper dress) instead of expensive and ornate patterns.

In combination with the popularization of mass-manufactured clothing, the shift also allowed women to acquire larger wardrobes. The growing popularity of social events like dances furthered the flapper success all the more. Energetic dances like the Charleston, Black Bottom, and Shimmy

made movement a factor that modern women must consider in the purchase of clothing. Stockings were shortened, rolled, or scrapped; hemlines were pulled, cut, and forgotten. The onset of both literal and economic female freedoms could not be ignored. In perhaps the most decisive move, ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment established women's voting rights.

Though sexism persisted well into the 1970s, women's pride in their newfound potential found physical expression in their new, simplified dress. In a word, women's embrace of male-inspired fashions paralleled their embrace of equality. Indeed, many of the most well-known "flapper" elements – short hair (the "bob"), small breasts, and slender physiques – found inspiration in the law's new, gender-oblivious mindset. Even the flappers' most 'radical' hobbies (such as smoking, drinking, and gambling) were mere imitations of men. The effects of the flapper movement can still be seen today. Because of the era's courageous, independent, and backlash-enduring Flappers, women of today's society are able to take part in the freedoms of drink, dance, and self-determination sans much criticism.

Fashions that were then "indecent" are now conservative. Though some historians now argue that the flapper movement contributed to an even greater exploit of women, today's sexual oppression is, first and foremost, a woman's own decision. Unlike the official female minion of the 1800s, the modern woman can choose whether or not to submit – her decision to take part in risque trends, garments, or activities is but a testament to her incredible self-determination. The ultimate cascades of the flapper movement thus lie not in the material gains of more comfortable clothes and

easier access to cigarettes, but in the achievement of a female's freedom to make her own decisions. In the 1920s, the flapper was a misfit; today, she is a muse.