

# Analyzing 1920s counterculture: flappers



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American culture has undergone great change throughout its history, specifically through challenges brought about by countercultures to the traditional values of the larger society. By definition, a counterculture is a group that rejects the major values, norms, and practices of the larger society, replacing them with a new set of cultural patterns (Thomas). During the 1920's, Americans saw the rise of one particular counterculture that would challenge the traditional values of women in a significantly modest society. Flappers, they were nicknamed, consisted of northern, urban, middle-class women who defied the traditional Victorian gender roles of the era wherein women were expected to act and behave in a modest, conservative way. The once feminine ideal of staying at home and out of the workforce would drastically change socially and politically as Flappers began a life of smoking, drinking, dancing, and voting. They defied traditionalist values by cutting their hair, wearing makeup, and taking risks (Rosenberg). In an attempt to liberate themselves and eliminate social double standards, the Flappers created a new role for women in society to play.

With World War I underway, young men were being sent off to fight for the ideals and mistakes of the older generation, while young women took over their jobs and entered the workforce (Rosenberg). During the war, nearly an entire generation of young men had died, leaving nearly an entire generation of young women who became significantly independent and steered away from the conventional marriage norms of finding a sufficient suitor and starting a family (Rosenberg). The return home from the war proved that settling back into normalcy would be difficult for the young men AND women

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after each had already broken out of the structure of society (Rosenberg). These liberated young women had emerged from the aftermath of World War I and jumped right into the Jazz Age and an era of Prohibition. They adopted their carefree attitudes specifically in this era of alcohol, jazz music, dancing, and, of course, rebellion. The Jazz Age inspired a change in style and dress that ultimately became the scandalous Flapper look, diverging greatly from the traditional style and dress of early American women. A key contributor to the Flapper culture was Clara Bow, the single most famous Flapper of the era, starring in films and inspiring the younger generations to adopt the carefree manner and style of the new women's era. Perhaps the most significant historical event that encouraged Flappers to promote their cause of eliminating social double standards was the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which ended women's suffrage and gave women the right to vote (Independence Hall Association in Philadelphia).

In order to develop a better understanding of the mentality of the Flappers, it is important to view the behavior of the group in a systematic way, or through a sociological perspective (Thomas 4). Specifically through the interactionist perspective, Max Weber asserts that individuals act according to their interpretations of the meaning of their world through symbolic interaction (Thomas 17). And then, using sociological imaginations, those individuals have the ability to see the connection between the larger world and their personal lives (Thomas 5). During World War I, young women began interpreting the world slightly different from before. Flappers basically realized that life was too short to live a confined life and wait for a husband who might never come home; flappers felt rightfully entitled to make their

own decisions regarding how to live their lives (Celania). Serving as a symbol of freedom, the invention of the automobile is an example of how Flappers were given the liberation to go and do anything they pleased (Rosenberg). However, automobiles were not only used for travel and escape, and the flapper was less hesitant to experiment sexually than previous generations. Flappers began to realize that the larger world was holding them back, so they rebelled and brought attention to themselves which helped bring about major cultural change. America underwent major cultural changes because of the Flappers attitudes and completely redefined the role of women in society at large.

In addition to their defiance of traditionalist values, Flappers also adopted a new sexual frankness that widened the eyes of the older generation. Many older generation traditionalists were the ones who developed ethnocentric views towards the shocking erotic and sexually alluring behavior of the Flappers (Kennedy and Cohen, Lizabeth). By definition, ethnocentrism is the tendency to view one's own culture and group as superior to all other cultures and groups (Thomas 35). The older generations considered themselves guardians of respectability and morality, thus they looked negatively on and were baffled by the dress and antics of the Flappers (Kennedy and Cohen, Lizabeth 710). In fact, traditional moralists were offended by their actions and attitudes. Their feelings of ethnocentrism came from the idea that a single kiss had once been the equivalent of a marriage proposal, and now Flappers were flaunting and exploiting their bodies like never before (Kennedy and Cohen, Lizabeth 709). Stuffy traditionalists continued to defend the modest and conventional way of life that they

believed women were supposed to lead. For example, the Flappers began sporting the one piece bathing suit on beaches during the summers; however, they were disrupted in their leisure and measured from the knee up to ensure that not too much leg was showing (Kennedy and Cohen, Lizabeth 710). Out of pure rebellion against stuffy moralists, flappers adopted the short hair style, leaving the long, curly, traditional locks on the floors of barber shops everywhere (Celania).

Just as women do today, women of the 1920's felt confined to act and behave a certain way. Their freedoms to express themselves had been diminished all of their lives by a traditional upbringing. Cultural relativism is the belief that cultures should be judged by their own standards, and not by the standards of others (Thomas 36). Through cultural relativism, the larger society can understand why flappers behaved in the manner in which they did. Sigmund Freud claims that the libido was one of the most natural of human needs that allowed Flappers to explore and experiment sexually (Independence Hall Association in Philadelphia). He believed that a variety of nervous and emotional ills came directly as a result of sexual repression, concluding that Flappers were not acting out of the norm for mere pleasure alone, but for health reasons as well. (Kennedy and Cohen, Lizabeth 708). By the Flappers standards, they had been denied sexual gratification and liberation all their lives. Once they received that small taste of individualism and excitement that came with the aftermath of World War I, these women could not undo themselves and decided to completely defy gender norms, thus creating the undeniably flamboyant Flapper culture.

Although I am not a hardcore feminist, I definitely agree with the Flapper philosophy of expressing individualism and putting an end to social double standards. Women deserve to express themselves, not only at home, but in the workforce as well. Flappers did not necessarily protest or actively participate in women's movements that gave rise to important milestones; however, the Flapper was a symbol of empowerment and liberation that changed the course of a woman's role in America. In fact, I might not have the freedoms I do today if flappers had decided to remain silent and stick to the status quo. I greatly admire them taking the first steps to break out of the mold that women had been shaped into. As a person who buries herself in schoolwork, I especially admire the carefree and fun attitude of the Flapper and I like to think of their motto as living life to the fullest which definitely makes life more exciting if followed as the flappers had. I also agree that repression causes rebellion, and, in this way, the Flapper had a right to experiment and find a life for herself, according to her own standards. Although women still have a long way to go, the Flapper culture most definitely inspired generations of women to come out of the wood work and express themselves as empowering individuals.

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