

Feminism and Flapperdom  
Sexual Liberation, Ownership of Body and Sexuality, & Constructions of  
Feminity in the Roaring 20's

Megan Brady, *SUNY Oneonta*

---



**Feminism and Flapperdom: Sexual Liberation, Ownership of Body and Sexuality, &  
Constructions of Femininity in the Roaring 20's  
(Winner of CSSR Student Paper Competition, Long Paper Category)**

Megan Brady, *SUNY Oneonta*

The 1920s were known as a decade of exponential social, political, and cultural transformation and growth. This was extremely evident in the fight for and eventual achievement of women's suffrage and the creation of the "flapper" image. These new instances of women demanding equal rights and opportunities led to shifts in cultural norms and expectations, including society's perceptions of femininity and sexuality. The flapper movement granted women of all status that may have been denied representation and rights elsewhere the freedom in expressing their sexuality, femininity, and presentation of their bodies how they pleased despite the pressures and expectations being exerted upon them by a patriarchal society. While the flapper was a result of the expanding consumer culture in America, this does not go to cheapen what the flapper stood for in the eyes of so many women: sexual liberation, ownership of one's body and sex, and the right to express the feminine self in ways unimaginable.

In order to accurately analyze the deeper importance behind the culture of short dresses, bobbed hair, sexual promiscuity, and liberation that have become synonymous with the flapper, it is imperative first to acknowledge the history of oppression against and dominance over women perpetuated by the white American patriarchy. The female body and the divine feminine are representative of the nations and cultures from which they hail. Underwood reiterates this notion, stating, "The study of women's culture begins with the assumption that the cultural subject dictates what is important in that culture's life" (Underwood, 2003). When moving west

MEGAN BRADY

or inhabiting colonies in other continents, women were expected to uphold the founding beliefs of American civilization and the preservation of culture. Therefore, women were more than just beings inferior to men. Rather, they were symbolic of the beliefs, moralities, and values of her culture. That being said, however, since women were vital to the construction of a state's national identity, they were subjected to regulation and control over their lives at the hands of men.

Female bodies have been regulated since the establishment of our patriarchal culture to preserve our societal values and maintain the power dynamics that existed between men and women. Consequently, women were never permitted to express their sexualities or even have sexual desires at all for the vast majority of American history due to their forced roles of subservience to men. The modernist and progressive cultural transformations of American society in the 1920s gave women a platform to change their identities. The flapper movement and women's participation in this rebellion against the traditional social norms that defined female as docile, pure, and innocent, and the backlash they received for doing such, represented a newfound sense of female identity and femininity. These women were not just objects of America's surge in consumerism, they were, "...crucial to the feminist ideology and agenda, as they finally had the opportunities to emerge out of the domestic sphere" (Chafe, 1991). Women were beginning to define themselves by their own terms and in their own ways (Weitz, 2010). This "trend" of the flapper was representative of the newfound ways that women could express themselves how they pleased, without the control of men.

In contrasting to the "New Woman" of the 1920s, there was the Victorian Era Gibson Girl. These women were known as "society ladies", often donning aristocratic lifestyles in which they paraded suffocating corsets topped with extravagant dresses around their mansions,

## FEMINISM AND FLAPPERDOM

either riding side-saddle on horseback or in a carriage. Gibson Girls were the epitome of the feminine and the polite, of the ladylike and the elite, and symbolic of the pressures women had to endure during this era in order to be considered worthy. Aside from the aesthetic appeal women were supposed to hold, the Gibson Girl was often restricted to those belonging to upper class or elite socioeconomic status. The value of a woman was based on the amount of attention she received from the male gaze, as they were “prepared to be looked at, waiting to be admired in their lacy dresses and feathery hats” (Gourley, 2008).

Additionally, though women were taught that their ultimate goal in life was to be courted by a man and have a family, it was extremely unpolite and discouraged that a woman ever openly talk about sex, sexuality, or her sexual desires. Sex was referred to as a “mating instinct”, rather than a participatory act based in leisure and pleasure (Perrett, 1982). This further illustrates how women were taught that they were objects or accessories of men; mechanisms to carry out male pleasure and dominance. The white, upper-middle class sexualities of women during the Victorian Era depicted the women as, “...objects of male desire, emphasized romance and downplayed female sexual desire, and reinforced a sexual double standard” (Weitz, 2010). Since their value lied in the male perception of her, there was also a sense of competition and hostility among women to earn this gaze. Women illustrated the stereotypical “catty girl” image where they constantly went after each other, using one another’s bodies and appearances as battlegrounds for their self-worth. This notion is supported by the following statement: “instead of joining together to fight for more (freedom), we quarrel between ourselves over men, instead of pursuing and using who we are and our strengths for lasting change...” (Lorde, 1984). The previous sentiment further reiterates how women are socially conditioned to see our female

counterparts not as potential fellow revolutionaries embarking on adventures of change, but rather as competition and threat to the very limited freedoms and worth had at the time.

Considering the conservatism and tradition that was synonymous with the pure, angelic image of the Gibson Girl, it is no wonder why the revolutionary cultural transformations of the 1920s served as a frightening shock to many. The anxiety that plagued American society during the transition between the Victorian Era and the Modernist 1920s further reiterated this, but when the Roaring Twenties actually arrived, those belonging to older generations were not prepared in any way for the sexual revolutions and rebellions of the youth (particularly women) that would carry on in the following decade.

The surge in consumer culture in America's economy post-World War I had significant responsibility in the formation of the "New Woman" image of the 1920s. During the war, women had a new sense of autonomy and assertiveness, as they contributed to the war efforts by selling bonds, handing out American flags and badges, practicing patriotism, and collecting money (Perrett, 1982). Women had a job and a duty, and due to the lack of presence of men they had a sense of control and autonomy. The propaganda posters and artwork used to persuade Americans in the war effort often portrayed women, as this reinforces the fact that women were representative of her culture. In one specific propaganda poster, a woman is depicted as angelic and beautiful, as if she is the spirit of America, telling the public to purchase war bonds and join the effort (Christy, 1999). Following the war, American society experienced an increase in the standard of living and economic prosperity. People were working fewer hours and receiving larger paychecks, giving them more time and freedom to spend their money. Therefore, leisure activities and industries such as film, theater, music, radio, and shopping were rapidly expanding (Parrish, 1992). The autonomous women of the war were also now generating their own money,

## FEMINISM AND FLAPPERDOM

and a result of their recent taste of individuality they used their earnings on whatever they liked and whatever would make them feel good. This freedom in consumerism and expression would give way for the “flapper” image to be born.

This does not go to say, however, that the flapper movement of the 1920s and all of the behaviors, tendencies, and expressions that existed within it were cheap products of an expanding consumer culture contingent on the greedy exchanging of American currency from market-to-market. Rather, the flapper movement was an embodiment of women’s newfound tastes of economic freedom, autonomy, self-expression and affirmation, and the ability to choose her own path in life rather than succumbing to the expectations of an outdated patriarchy. An early account of Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defined the term ‘flapper’ as, “...a young girl, especially one somewhat daring in conduct, speech and dress”. This definition speaks wonders about what the image of the flapper meant to so many; an opportunity to express ones’ self how they chose, a way to rebel against the very system holding them in roles of subordination and oppression for far too long, and ultimately a way for a woman to practice freedom of her own sexuality and body (Zeitz, 2006). “These women’s hedonism is highly marked by consumption: consumption of mass industrial products, consumption of mass culture and mass media, consumption of urban nightlife, consumption of sexuality” (Reinsch, 2013). The previous quotation further exemplifies the ownership that these women had in the sense that they possessed the opportunity to seek pleasure, indulgence, and happiness- in whatever individually constructed ideas women had about these fruits.

Though the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment gave women political power and freedom, the flapper movement and liberation of the 1920s gave them cultural and societal power. More and more women were getting a college education, granting them a more comprehensive discernment of

the world outside the window panes of their childhood homes. Women also took up many of the same activities as men her age, such as drinking alcohol (during Prohibition, nonetheless), smoking cigarettes, driving automobiles, flirting, dancing, and being carefree. The ability of women to perform these male-coded activities proved their rejection of the subordinate status men had given to them. Similarly, it is the fact that women were breaking out of subordinate roles that scared those in the dominant group (men); as it posed a threat to the power dynamics of the time. Those of dominant standing in society force the subordinates to develop characteristics that are pleasing to them and their power; such as “submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependency, lack of initiative, inability to act, to decide, to think, and the like” (Miller, 2014). Women were actively rebelling all of the attributes she was expected to have in the eyes of society, thus posing a direct threat to the established power dynamics between men and women. Women had solidified the right to vote; but now, they had the right to exist in the light of the public in whatever ways they wanted the public to see them.

Furthermore, since women nationwide were now participating in this new wave of self-affirmation and ownership, divorce rates also increased. As previously stated, since the flappers and sexuality of women during the 1920s directly threatened men’s power over women, many husbands or partners did not approve of their wife’s behaviors. A *New York Times* cover-page from 1921 had the following headline: “Forbade His Wife to Become ‘Modern’...So Mrs. James C. Ellington Sues for Divorce from Her Chicago Husband” (NYT, 1923). Paired with this headline is a cartoon drawing by artist Bertram Prance from the mid-1920s in which a flapper woman slouches in a chair at her vanity, wearing a long slinky black dress, bobbed hair, jewelry, and rouging her cheeks while staring at her reflection. Behind her is what is presumed to be a husband, looking shockingly and disapprovingly at the woman in front of him (Gourley, 2008).

## FEMINISM AND FLAPPERDOM

Both the headline and the cartoon; especially when paired together; illustrate how women were taking control of their lives and refusing to live by the rules of the men around her.

The Roaring Twenties are also synonymous with Gatsby-esque parties and party culture. Bohemias- little cultural hotspots often located in cities, such as Greenwich Village- provided the young and rebellious with spaces where these cultural transformations could take place (Perrett, 1982). The streets of America were buzzing with hymns and rhythms of jazz, the clicking of high heels down a city pavement, and the chitter-chatter of young people galivanting and living life boisterously without limitation. These buzzing sounds aided in the construction of the societal and cultural images surrounding the Roaring Twenties; arguably the most influential of which was the flapper.

In these progressive bohemias, “Free Love” was preached among all who identified with this culture as it referred to “casual, recreational sex” (Perrett, 1982, p.150). As this completely opposed America’s traditional morals, older generations and those that found comfort in the conventionally stuffy Victorian Era were appalled at the behavior of the younger generations; though women were almost always the ones who carried the blame. Helen Bullit Lowry wrote in an article for the *New York Times* in 1921 describing the generational differences and criticism of the era, stating, “for whenever two or three elders were gathered together in the last year there was somebody to whisper about the outrageous new customs of the outrageous new generation” (Lowry, 1921). Similarly, returning back to Underwood’s notions that a woman is representative of the culture in which she comes from, they were the ones being blamed for the “moral decay” of society. As Perrett states in his work, *America in the Twenties: A History*, “they blamed the girls who dressed in provocative clothing, smoked cigarettes, swore as fluently as sailors, kissed promiscuously, and allowed boys to fondle their breasts” (Perrett, 1982, p.151). Sinclair Lewis

MEGAN BRADY

also wrote about these new norms amongst the youth, stating that girls were “‘parking’ their corsets in the dressing room, of ‘cuddling’ and ‘petting’ and a presumable increase in what was known as Immorality” (Perrett, 1982, p.151). It is crucial to note here how women were forced to brace the blunt of the blame for the alleged “immorality” of the generation, enduring backlash from their mothers, grandmothers, and elder members of society. Despite the backlash, reprimanding, criticism, and scorn that was thrust upon them, they never stopped. This illustrates how the flapper movement, while not entirely as political as the feminists before them, still challenged notions and norms of America’s patriarchy in whatever ways they knew how: through their appearance, behavior, and sexuality.

Consequently, America’s ideas surrounding sex changed just as the time did. The sexual promiscuity of youth paired with scholarly work from academics such as Freud and Havelock Ellis led to sex being seen as a natural, biological, insouciant act rather than a social construct used to patrol and regulate women in a male-dominated sphere (Perrett, 1982, p.152). Women were taking action over sex in a world where they were defined by the pleasure they granted to men rather than on their own biology and sexuality. Present-day feminist scholars such as Anne Koedt preach that women must “redefine our sexuality,” by discarding the “‘normal’ concepts of sex and create new guidelines which take into account mutual sexual enjoyment” (Koedt, 1970). The flappers were doing just this.

Taking this notion of sex even further, many critics of the “New Woman” of the 1920s blamed her immorality on the clothing she wore- a ridiculous and misogynistic statement that still holds truth today. The flapper dress was described as being “hoydenish and naughty”, illustrating a high-spirited, youthful, boisterous woman. Despite the blame flappers received for their sexual outfits, the articles worn by these women often hung free from the body, giving her

## FEMINISM AND FLAPPERDOM

more ability to move and dance. Furthermore, flappers were fixated on the “boyish look”, donning bobbed hairstyles, hats, and binding corsets that would flatten their chests. They were striving for a more “masculine” look that was totally unprecedented at the time. Famed designers such as Coco Chanel made clothing “for women eager to do everything men could do” (Jailer-Chamberlain, 2003). Though the flapper look was extremely popular among young women, not everyone just followed the crowd. As flapper Ellen Page Wells writes in her newspaper article of 1922, “A Flapper’s Appeal to Parents”, she states: “I don’t use rouge, or lipstick or pluck my eyebrows. I don’t smoke, or drink, or tell ‘peppy stories’. I don’t pet. And, most unpardonable infringement of all the rules and regulations of Flapperdom, I haven’t a line” (Wells, 1922, p.607). Wells speaks on the true ideology of the flapper movement- individuality and femininity. The flapper movement was not solely a trend or fad; rather, it was a type of model that showed women they could dress however they wanted. There were different varieties and categories of flappers; including the “flapper”, the “semi-flapper”, and the “super-flapper” (Wells, 1922, p.607). Rather than classifying it as a fashion and cultural craze, it was a type of permission granted to women to express themselves. That being said, was it really the woman’s dress that people were so scared of, or was it the fact that she was now choosing to wear what *she* pleased instead of what pleased society?

Women in the public sphere such as actresses, designers, dancers, singers, etc. acted as role models and heroines for those who watched from below the stage. There was a sense of unity and admiration among women for one another, regardless of their status or fame, similar to that of the first wave of feminism. Women such as Zelda Fitzgerald, the wife and inspiration of stories by F. Scott Fitzgerald, came to personify the true flapper image. Fitzgerald was not only a public and press favorite, but she was an intellectual as well- even so to the point that “she could

talk circles around most people”. She was also a published writer, trained dancer, and artist (Jailer-Chamberlain, 2003). This proves many historian and critic’s interpretations of flappers as shallow and materialistic conformists wrong, as it reinforces the fact that a woman’s intelligence is not correlated to her appearance. Other women such as Olive Thomas, Louise Brookes, and Colleen Moore personified the image and notion of the flapper. Josephine Baker was another example of the flapper role model, especially as a Black woman. While some of her performances reinforced stereotypes about Blacks as savage, hypersexualized Jezebels, many of her performances did follow traditional African style. Baker was yet another woman who used her sex appeal in addition to her innumerable talents to gain a wide international audience (Norwood, 2017). Baker provided representation for women of color all over the world, as she actively rebelled social norms concerning beauty, femininity, and race during the 20s. The fact that she dawned a revealing banana skirt in one of her live appearances does not go to belittle the impact Baker had. In an America still fraught with racism and hostile race relations, Baker’s control and ownership over her body and sexuality provided inspiration for other women of color to recognize their sexuality and beauty as well. Though her performances were sex-driven, she provided representation- the ability for other women to see themselves in her. These women are only a few of the many examples of flappers as role models during the era and the ways in which they used their stages to express their authentic selves, creating a stronger sense of autonomy and individuality amongst the flapper movement as women at home resonated, connected, or aspired to them. The divine feminine, in whatever way one might see herself as, had representation in a modern consumer era; both on the stage and off.

Many historical interpretations dismiss the flappers as mere trends or consumerist objects, using the opinions of first wave suffragists as justifications. Women of the first wave

## FEMINISM AND FLAPPERDOM

were discouraged by the actions of these young women and disapproved their irresponsibility and frivolousness; as they thought that they were using the hard work of first wave feminists to simply have a “good time” and act promiscuously. It is crucial to analyze the behavior of the flapper in a more societal sense. While she was having casual sex, attending dance clubs, hiking her skirt above the knee so she could successfully perform the Charleston, and drinking and smoking along with the boys, the flapper was actively breaking cultural taboos and social conventions (Rodnitzky, 1999). The women of the first wave fought politically for the right to vote. The flappers took this newfound right even further and continued to protrude society’s perceptions of her by partaking in “risky”, “promiscuous”, or “immoral” acts while simultaneously ignoring the backlash thrust upon her (Rodnitzky, 1999, p.20). The “New Women” of the 20s fought culturally and socially as opposed to politically. Perhaps then, the older suffragists denounced their younger sisters because they themselves had never been able to experience such joys. Or perhaps, this was due to a gap in age and time. As Linda M. Scott states, though the suffragist women considered themselves progressive, they “...were still so rooted in the values of social purity that they quickly condemned the behavior of the new generation, even though much of it posed a challenge to gender roles” (Scott, 2005, p.166). Women asserted themselves not by holding banners or picket signs outside of the White House, but through their dress, dancing, and romantic relationships. The suffragists fought in the political sphere, but since the right to vote was now solidified, the new generation carried on female rebellion and resistance in the cultural and social spheres; and the way they went about it reached many more women than the suffragist movement did. Women felt connected and related to one another in these areas whereas during the suffrage movement, women were hesitant about the idea because a woman had never belonged in the political world. The flappers took the

spheres in which American women had always existed and flipped every social convention on its head- gaining stronger following and reinforcement through the participation of their counterparts.

Taking this notion even further, Scott elaborates on ideologies from scholars such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who distinguished the differences between Human Feminism and Female Feminism. Human Feminism, according to Gilman, discredited those who demanded rights to sexual freedom and physical pleasure whereas Female Feminism focused on femininity and sexuality. Gilman's ideologies correlate directly to the differences between these two waves of women; with the suffragists taking on the roles of Human Feminists. Scott illustrates even further that the term 'flapper' was used to describe "young women of all classes who challenged traditional norms in distinctive ways" (Scott, 2005, p.166). Therefore, one might even make the conclusion that the suffragist women were also, in a way, flappers.

Feminism and femininity do not lie in the practices deemed appropriate by society or culture, but in the self-definitions of women and the individual construction of what it means to be a woman. That being said, just because flappers often flaunted their sex appeal and bodies in ways unheard of prior to the Roaring Twenties does not mean that those who fell into this social category were mere objectified products of a consumer culture. Women expressed themselves, sexualities, pleasures, romances, and personalities in whatever ways she wanted. Flappers did indeed still marry and have families, as did the original suffragists. Therefore, this does not go to erase the radicalism and rebellion both groups of women participated in.

Why then, does so much criticism surround the flappers? Perhaps because so many were not used to women being assertive, sexually autonomous, or decisive. Or, perhaps it was because women recognized the appeal they had in society and used their sex to their advantage and their

## FEMINISM AND FLAPPERDOM

own fulfillment of pleasure and self-indulgence. Ultimately, the reason why the flapper receives overwhelmingly contradictory interpretations is due to the fact that so many dismiss it without looking at the image through a critical lens. Underneath the short-beaded dresses, bobbed hair, flattened chests, clattering jewelry, lipsticks rouged with eroticism, and sexualities as liberated as the rhythms of jazz that filled the club air, was a young woman dedicated to living her life to her own standards, pleasures, and expectations. “Flapperdom”, and the fashions, culture, behavior, and attitudes surrounding it, was not solely a political feminist movement, but it had all of the feminist potential and ideologies behind it.

### References

- Chafe, W. H. (1991). *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century*. New York, NY, United States: Oxford University Press.
- Christy, H.C. (1919). *Americans All! Victory Liberty Loan*. Color poster; Records of the Bureau of the Public Debt. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/americans-all-victory-liberty-loan-color-poster-by-howard-chandler-christy>, December 5, 2018]
- Gourley, C. (2008). *Flappers and the New American Woman: Perceptions of Women from 1918 Through the 1920s*. Minneapolis, MN, United States: Twenty-First Century Books.
- Gourley, C. (2008). *Gibson Girls and Suffragists: Perceptions of Women from 1900 to 1918*. Minneapolis, MN, United States: Lerner Publishing Group, Inc.
- Jailer-Chamberlain, M. (2003, September). Flappers in Fashion in the 1920s. *Antiques and Collecting Magazine*, 108(7), pp. 24-30.
- Koedt, A. (1970). *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*. Retrieved November 2018, from The CWLU Herstory Website: [https://blackboard.oneonta.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-555704-dt-content-rid-3656777\\_1/courses/WMST-212-1201-FALL2018/Myth\\_of\\_the\\_Vaginal\\_Orgasm.pdf](https://blackboard.oneonta.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-555704-dt-content-rid-3656777_1/courses/WMST-212-1201-FALL2018/Myth_of_the_Vaginal_Orgasm.pdf)
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving*. In A. Lord, *Sister Outsider* (pp. 51-52). New York: Freedom Crossing Press.
- Lowry, H. B. (1921, January 23). *Mrs. Grundy and Miss 1921*. *New York Times*.
- Miller, J. B. (2014). *Domination and Subordination*. In e. Paula Rothenberg, *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* (Vol. 9th ed., pp. 113-115). New York, NY, United States: Worth Press.

## FEMINISM AND FLAPPERDOM

- Norwood, A. R. (2017). Josephine Baker (1906-1975). Retrieved November 2018, from National Women's History Museum : <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/josephine-baker>
- NYT. (1923). *New York Times*, newspaper. August 18, 1923.
- Parrish, M. E. (1992). *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941*. New York, NY, United States: Norton .
- Perrett, G. (1982). *America in the Twenties: A History*. New York, NY, United States: Simon & Schuster.
- Reinsch, O. (2013, January 1). Flapper Girls- Feminism and Consumer Society in the 1920s. *Gender Forum*, 42, 1-6.
- Rodnitzky, J. L. (1999). *Feminist Phoenix: The Rise and Fall of a Feminist Counterculture*. Westport, Connecticut, United States: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Scott, L. M. (2005). *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*. New York, NY, United States: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Underwood, J. O. (1985, Spring). Western Women and True Womanhood: Culture and Symbol in History and Literature. *Great Plains Quarterly*, 93-100.
- Weitz, R. (2010). A History of Women's Bodies. In R. Weitz, *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior* (pp. 3-13). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wells, E. P. (1922, September-December). A Flapper's Appeal to Parents. *The Outlook*, 132, 607-608.
- Zeit, J. (2006). *Flapper: a Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern*. New York, NY, United States: Three Rivers Press.