

What did it mean to be a flapper?

The "Flapper"

The term "flapper" first appeared in Great Britain after World War I. It was there used to describe young girls, still somewhat awkward in movement who had not yet entered womanhood. Author F. Scott Fitzgerald described the ideal flapper as "lovely, expensive, and about nineteen."⁴

Many have tried to define flappers. In William and Mary Morris' *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, they state, "In America, a *flapper* has always been a giddy, attractive and slightly unconventional young thing who, in [H. L.] Mencken's words, 'was a somewhat foolish girl, full of wild surmises and inclined to revolt against the precepts and admonitions of her elders.'"⁶ Flappers had both an image and an attitude.

Flapper Image

The Flappers' image consisted of drastic - to some, shocking - changes in women's clothing and hair. Nearly every article of clothing was trimmed down and lightened in order to make movement easier. It is said that girls "parked" their corsets when they were to go dancing.⁷ The new, energetic dances of the Jazz Age, required women to be able to move freely, something the "ironsides" didn't allow. Replacing the pantaloons and corsets were underwear called "step-ins."

The outer clothing of flappers is even still extremely identifiable. To look more like a boy, women tightly wound their chest with strips of cloth in order to flatten it.⁹ The waists of flapper clothes were dropped to the hipline. She wore stockings - made of rayon ("artificial silk") starting in 1923 - which the flapper often wore rolled over a garter belt.¹⁰

The hem of the skirts also started to rise in the 1920s. At first the hem only rose a few inches, but from 1925 to 1927 a flapper's skirt fell just below the knee.

The skirt comes just an inch below her knees, overlapping by a faint fraction her rolled and twisted stockings. The idea is that when she walks in a bit of a breeze, you shall now and then observe the knee (which is not *rouged* - *that's just newspaper talk*) but always in an accidental, *Venus-surprised-at-the-bath sort of way*.¹¹

The Gibson Girl, who prided herself on her long, beautiful, lush hair, was shocked when the flapper cut her's off. The short haircut was called the "bob" which was later replaced by an even shorter haircut, the "shingle" or "Eton" cut. The shingle cut was slicked down and had a curl on each side of the face that covered the woman's ears. Flappers often finished the ensemble with a felt, bell-shaped hat called a cloche.

Flappers also started wearing make-up, something that had previously been only worn by loose women. Rouge, powder, eye-liner, and lipstick became extremely popular.

Flapper Attitude

The flapper attitude was characterized by stark truthfulness, fast living, and sexual behavior. Flappers seemed to cling to youth as if it were to leave them at any moment. They took risks and were reckless.

They wanted to be different, to announce their departure from the Gibson Girl's morals. So they smoked. Something only men had done previously. Their parents were shocked.

I was sure my girls had never experimented with a hip-pocket flask, flirted with other women's husbands, or smoked cigarettes. My wife entertained the same smug delusion, and was saying something like that out loud at the dinner table one day. And then she began to talk about other girls.

"They tell me that that Purvis girl has cigarette parties at her home," remarked my wife.

She was saying it for the benefit of Elizabeth, who runs somewhat with the Purvis girl. Elizabeth was regarding her mother with curious eyes. She made no reply to her mother, but turning to me, right there at the table, she said: "Dad, let's see your cigarettes."

Without the slightest suspicion of what was forthcoming, I threw Elizabeth my cigarettes. She withdrew a fag from the package, tapped it on the back of her left hand, inserted it between her lips, reached over and took my lighted cigarette from my mouth, lit her own cigarette and blew airy rings toward the ceiling.

My wife nearly fell out of her chair, and I might have fallen out of mine if I hadn't been momentarily stunned.¹³



Smoking wasn't the most outrageous of the flapper's rebellious actions. Flappers drank alcohol. At a time when the United States had outlawed alcohol (Prohibition), young women were starting the habit early. Some even carried hip-flasks full so as to have it on hand. More than a few adults didn't like to see tipsy young women. Flappers had a scandalous image as the "giddy flapper, rouged and clipped, careening in a drunken stupor to the lewd strains of a jazz quartet."¹⁴

The 1920s was the Jazz Age and one of the most popular past-times for flappers was dancing. Dances such as the Charleston, Black Bottom, and the Shimmy were considered "wild" by older generations. As described in the May 1920 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, flappers "trot like foxes, limp like lame ducks, one-step like cripples, and all to the barbaric yawp of strange instruments which transform the whole scene into a moving-picture of a fancy ball in bedlam."¹⁵ For the Younger Generation, the dances fit their fast-paced life-style.

For the first time since the train and the bicycle, a new form of faster transportation was becoming popular. Henry Ford's innovations were making the automobile an accessible commodity to the people. Cars were fast and risky - perfect for the flapper attitude. Flappers not only insisted on riding in them; they drove them.

Unfortunately for their parents, flappers didn't just use cars to ride in. The back seat became a popular location for the new popular sexual activity, petting. Others hosted petting parties. Though their attire was

modeled after little boys' outfits, flappers flaunted their sexuality. It was a radical change from their parents and grandparents' generations.

The End of Flapperhood

Though many were shocked by the flapper's skimpy attire and licentious behavior, a less extreme version of the flapper became respectable among the old and the young. Some women cut off their hair and stopped wearing their corsets, but didn't go to the extreme of flapperhood.

If one judges by appearances, I suppose I am a flapper. I am within the age limit. I wear bobbed hair, the badge of flapperhood. (And, oh, what a comfort it is!) I powder my nose. I wear fringed skirts and bright-colored sweaters, and scarfs, and waists with Peter Pan collars, and low-beeled "finale hopper" shoes. I adore to dance. I spend a large amount of time in automobiles. I attend hops, and proms, and ball-games, and crew races, and other affairs at men's colleges. But none the less some of the most thoroughbred superflappers might blush to claim sistership or even remote relationship with such as I. I don't use rouge, or lipstick, or pluck my eyebrows. I don't smoke (I've tried it, and don't like it), or drink, or tell "peppy stories." I don't pet.¹⁶

At the end of the 1920s, the stock market crashed and the world was plunged into the Great Depression. Frivolity and recklessness was forced to come to an end. However, much of the flapper's changes remained.

In the 1920s, flappers broke away from the Victorian image of womanhood. They dropped the corset, chopped their hair, dropped layers of clothing to increase ease of movement, wore make-up, created the concept of dating, and became a sexual person. They created what many consider the "new" or "modern" woman.

End Notes

1. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1931) 94.
2. Allen, 94-95.
3. G. Stanley Hall, "Flapper Americana Novissima," *Atlantic Monthly* 129 (June 1922): 771.
4. As quoted in Jackie Hatton, "Flappers," *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, 2000.
5. Hall, 772 and Ralph K. Andrist, ed., *The American Heritage: History of the 20's & 30's* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1970) 130.
6. As quoted in Andrist, 130.
7. Hall, 773.
8. Judith S. Baughman, ed., *American Decades: 1920-1929* (New York: Manly, Inc., 1996) 155.
9. Hatton, 112.
10. Baughman, 157.
11. Bruce Bliven, "Flapper Jane," *The New Republic* 44 (Sept. 9, 1925): 65.
12. Bliven, 65.
13. W. O. Saunders, "Me and My Flapper Daughters," *The American Magazine* 104 (Aug. 1927): 27.
14. Hatton, 112.
15. As quoted in Baughman, 269.
16. Ellen Welles Page, "A Flapper's Appeal to Parents," *Outlook* 132 (Dec. 6, 1922): 607.

Source: Jennifer Rosenberg, "Flappers in the Roaring Twenties," About.com, <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1920s/a/flappers.htm>, last visited January 8, 2009.