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FLAPPERS

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The flapper was an important figure in the popular culture of the 1920s and helped to define the new, modern woman of the twentieth century. She was the embodiment of the youthful exuberance of the jazz age. Although she defied many of society's taboos, she was also seen by many as the ideal young woman and was described by author F. Scott Fitzgerald as "lovely, expensive and about nineteen."

It is commonly assumed that the term "flapper" originated in the 1920s and refers to the fashion trend for unfastened rubber galoshes that "flapped" when walking, an attribution reinforced by the image of the free-wheeling flapper in popular culture. Despite this potent imagery, the word has its origins in sixteenth-century British slang. Deriving from the colloquial "flap," the word indicated a young female prostitute and likely referred to the awkward flapping of a young bird's wings when learning to fly. By the nineteenth century the term had lost most of its lewd connotations and instead was used to describe a flighty or hoydenish adolescent girl. In the years following World War I, the word was increasingly used to describe a fashionably dressed, impulsive young woman and by the 1920s, it was used to describe "modern" young women who broke traditional rules of both appearance and behavior.

The "fast living" ethos of the 1920s was widely perceived to be a direct consequence of World War I. During wartime, many young women experienced freedoms previously unheard of, such as taking jobs, shortening skirts, driving cars, and cutting their hair. Competition for male attention was paramount since the pool of eligible men had been depleted during the war, and this probably contributed to the flashier fashions and aggressive behavior of many young women. Outrageous behavior and dress was seen as an investment against spinsterhood or, at the very least, boredom.

The Flapper Image

The common perception of the flapper had as much to do with behavior as it did with appearance. Flappers displayed a carefree disregard for authority and morality. They drank heavily in defiance of Prohibition, smoked, embraced new shocking dances like the Charleston, the Shimmy, and the Black Bottom, used slang, drove fast, and freely took lovers and jobs. Posture and motion were important elements of the flapper persona. The fast, jerky motions characterized by these popular dances emphasized bare arms, backs, and legs. The posture of the flapper was an affected "debutante slouch," often with hand on hip. This limp, listless pose was not possible on a traditionally corseted body and was meant to imply the aftereffects of the previous night's debauchery.

Accordingly, flapper styles blatantly disregarded established fashions in exchange for the new and daring. Popular styles of the 1920s focused on the display of the slim, youthful body through the use of short skirts and dropped waists. Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel and Jean Patou were particularly known for this youthful, sporty style. The flapper took this fashionable ideal to the extreme and wore the shortest skirts possible, low clothes, and negligible underwear. Evening dresses were sleeveless, flashy, and frequently featured slit skirts meant to enable active dancing. She bobbed her hair, wore obvious makeup, and sunbathed in skimpy, one-piece bathing suits.

A common element of the flapper style was the tendency to misuse clothing and accessories—a way of thumbing noses at high fashion and polite society. Examples of this phenomenon were the rolling of stockings below the knees, the wearing of unhooked rubber galoshes that "flapped" when walking, evening shoes worn with daywear, and occasionally even the natural waist worn in defiance of the dictates of high fashion. Flappers were also rumored to rouge their knees, and this is a part of the greater emphasis on legs crucial to the flapper persona. Besides the previously mentioned galoshes and rolled stockings, flappers were associated with elaborate garters and anklets. A daring minority rejected stockings altogether when the weather was warm, but many opted for stockings in fashionable "suntan" shades. Accessories that flaunted outrageous behavior, like the jeweled cigarette holder and ornate compact, were also popular.

The Rise and Fall of the Flapper

The creation of the flapper image is largely credited to the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald and the drawings of John Held Jr., which frequently featured skinny, stylized flappers in comical situations. Fitzgerald's writings focused on the fast pace of modern life, but when he was given the credit for popularizing the movement, he responded, "I was the spark that lit up Flaming Youth and Colleen Moore was the torch. What little things we are to have caused that trouble."

Fitzgerald shrewdly understood the power of the motion picture to spread the flapper image to a mass audience. Colleen Moore, Joan Crawford, Anita Page, and Clara Bow were some of the many actresses who specialized in flapper roles during this period. The flapper had been a popular screen type since the 1910s, and by the mid-1920s, films featured titles like *Flapper Fever*, *The Painted Flapper*, *Flapper Wives*, *The Perfect Flapper*, and *The Flapper and the Cowboy*.

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From the 1920 film *Our Dancing Daughters*, which stars Jean Crawford and Anita Page, has particularly influenced the film has mentioned repeatedly in the Payne Fund Studies commissioned to determine the effects of film on the youth of the United States. One respondent claimed that after seeing *Our Dancing Daughters*, "I wanted a dress exactly like one she had worn in a certain scene. It was a very 'flapper' type of dress, and I don't usually go in for that sort of thing" (Massey, p. 30).

As early as 1922, it was suggested that the term "flapper" be divided into three levels: the semi-flapper, the flapper, the superflapper. By the end of the decade, most young women could easily be classed as a semi-flapper since flapper styles and behaviors were gradually being adopted into mainstream life. Bobbed hair, lipstick, and short skirts no longer were the sign of a flapper, just that of a modern fashionable woman.

With the stock market crash of 1929, the frivolity and excess characterized by the flapper and the jazz age were replaced with frugality and a return to a more traditional view of feminine behavior and dress. Although the stock market crash signaled the flapper's demise, she remains a potent symbol of flaming youth.

See also [Chanel, Gabrielle \(Coco\)](#); [Patou, Jean](#); [Subcultures](#).

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Encyclopedia entry

Daniel Delis Hill

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The 1920s in America was the era of America's first youth rebellion. This first post-Victorian generation came of age in the decade variously labeled the Roaring Twenties, the Great Euphoria, the Coolidge Prosperity, the Machine Age, and the Jazz Age. Flaming Youth, as novelist Samuel Hopkins Adams dubbed America's young, rebelled against the values and conventions of their parents, and sought their own distinct identity in attitude, behavior, and especially in dress. Young women had emerged in t

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