

Flappers were a "new breed" of young women in the 1920s who wore short skirts, bobbed (cut short) their hair, listened to jazz, and flaunted their disdain for what was then considered acceptable behavior. Flappers were seen as brash for wearing excessive makeup, drinking, treating sex in a casual manner, smoking, driving automobiles, and otherwise flouting social and sexual norms. They challenged the previously accepted mores of society in every regard. Flappers had their origins in the liberal period of the Roaring Twenties, and the social, political turbulence and increased transatlantic cultural exchange that followed the end of World War I.

### Name origins

The slang word *flapper*, describing a young woman, is sometimes supposed to refer to a young bird flapping its wings while learning to fly. By 1908, newspapers as serious as *The Times* used it, although with careful explanation: "A 'flapper', we may explain, is a young lady who has not yet been promoted to long frocks and the wearing of her hair 'up'". However, it may derive from an earlier use in northern England to mean *teenage girl*, referring to one whose hair is not yet put up and whose plaited pigtail *flapped* on her back; or from an older word meaning *prostitute*. (the slang word "flap" was used to mean prostitute as early as 1631; by the 1890s it references both a young prostitute and, in a more general and less derogatory sense, any lively mid-teenage girl.). By 1912, the London theatrical impresario John Tiller, defining the word in an interview he gave to the *New York Times*, described a "flapper" as belonging to a slightly older age group, a girl who has "just come out". Tiller's use of the phrase "come out" means "to make a formal entry into "society" on reaching womanhood". In polite society at the time, a teenage girl who had not "come out" would still be classed as a child. She would be expected to keep a low profile on social occasions and ought not to be the object of male attention.



Although the word was still largely understood as referring to high-spirited teenagers it was being extended to describe any impetuous immature woman. The use of the word increased during World War I, perhaps due to the visible emergence of young women into the workforce to supply the place of absent men; a *Times* article on the problem of finding jobs for women made unemployed by the return of the male workforce is headed "The Flapper's Future". Under this influence, the meaning of the term changed somewhat, to apply to "independent, pleasure-seeking, khaki-crazy young women".

By 1920, the term had taken on the full meaning of the flapper generation style and attitudes. In his lecture that year on Britain's surplus of young women caused by the loss of young men in war, Dr. R. Murray-Leslie criticized "the social butterfly type... the frivolous, scantily-clad, jazzing flapper, irresponsible and undisciplined, to whom a dance, a new hat, or a man with a car, were of more importance than the fate of nations".

Clearly the term was in widespread circulation by the end of the war years.

In the United States, popular contempt for Prohibition was a factor in the rise of the flapper. With legal saloons and nightclubs closed, back alley speakeasies became prolific and popular. This discrepancy between the law-abiding, religion-based temperance movement and the actual omnipresent consumption of alcohol led to widespread disdain for authority.

Writers in the United States such as F. Scott Fitzgerald popularized the flapper look and lifestyle through their works, and flappers came to be seen as attractive, reckless, and independent. Among those who criticized the flapper craze was writer-critic Dorothy Parker, who penned "Flappers: A Hate Song" to poke fun at the fad. The secretary of labor denounced the "flippancy of the cigarette smoking, cocktail-drinking flapper". A Harvard psychologist reported that flappers had "the lowest degree of intelligence" and constituted "a hopeless problem for educators".

### Behavior

Flappers' behavior was considered outlandish at the time and redefined women's roles. The evolving image of flappers was of independent young women who went by night to jazz clubs where they danced provocatively, smoked cigarettes and dated freely, perhaps indiscriminately. They were active, sporting, rode bicycles, drove cars, and openly drank alcohol, a defiant act in the American period of Prohibition. With time, came the development of dance styles then considered shocking, such as the Charleston, the Shimmy, the Bunny Hug, and the Black Bottom.

Flappers also began working outside the home and challenging women's traditional societal roles. They were considered a significant challenge to traditional Victorian gender roles, devotion to plain-living, hard work and religion. Increasingly, women discarded old, rigid ideas about roles and embraced consumerism and personal choice, and were often described in terms of representing a "culture war" of old versus new.

Flappers also advocated voting and women's rights.

In this manner, flappers were a result of larger social changes – women were able to vote in the United States in 1920, culture was fixated on events like the Daddy and Peaches Trial and religious society had been rocked by the Scopes Monkey trial.

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.

For all the concern about women stepping out of their traditional roles, however, some say many flappers weren't engaged in politics. In fact, older suffragettes, who fought for the right for women to vote, viewed flappers as vapid and in some ways unworthy of the enfranchisement they had worked so hard to win. Others argued, though, that flappers' laissez-faire attitude was simply a natural progression of feminine liberation, the right having already been won. Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, a noted liberal writer at the time, summed up this dichotomy by describing flappers as "truly modern", "New Style" feminists who "admit that a full life calls for marriage and children" and also "are moved by an inescapable inner compulsion to be individuals in their own right".



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. Physical closeness became more common than in the Victorian era. "Petting parties", where "making out" was the main attraction, became popular, be it in buildings or in the back of an automobile. In youthful imagination, it gave the lie to the old clichés of "the only man" and "the only girl". This was typical on college campuses, where young people "spent a great deal of unsupervised time in mixed company." Flappers were associated with the use of a number of slang words, including "junk", "necker", and "necking parties", although these words existed before the 1920s. Flappers also used the word "jazz" in the sense of anything exciting or fun. Their language sometimes reflected their feelings about dating, marriage and drinking habits: "I have to see a man about a dog" at this period often meant going to buy whiskey; and a "handcuff" or "manacle" (shackle) was an engagement or wedding ring. Also reflective of their preoccupations were phrases to express approval, such as "That's so Jake", "That's the bee's knees", and the popular "the cat's meow" or "cat's pajamas".

### Appearance

In addition to their irreverent behavior, flappers were known for their style, which largely emerged as a result of French fashions, the effect on dress of the rapid spread of American jazz, and the popularization of dancing that accompanied it. Called *garçonne* in French ("boy" with a feminine suffix), flapper style made girls look young and boyish: short hair, flattened breasts, and straight waists accentuated it. By at least 1913, the association between slim adolescence and a certain characteristic look became fixed in the public's mind. At this early date, it seems that the style associated with a flapper already included the boyish physique and close-fitting hat, but a hobble skirt rather than one with a high hemline.

Although the appearance typically associated now with flappers (straight waists, short hair and a hemline above the knee) did not fully emerge until about 1926, there was an early association in the public mind between unconventional appearance, outrageous behavior, and the word "flapper". Despite the scandal flappers generated, their look became fashionable in a toned-down form among respectable older women. Significantly, the flappers removed the corset from female fashion, raised skirt and gown hemlines, and popularized short hair for women. Many actresses of the time became associated with this trend; furthermore, beginning in the early 1920s, flappers also began appearing in newspaper comic strips, most notably in *Blondie* and (in 1930) *Bettie Boop*.

Flapper dresses were straight and loose, leaving the arms bare (sometimes no straps at all) and dropping the waistline to the hips. Silk or rayon stockings were held up by garters. Skirts rose to just below the knee by 1927, allowing flashes of leg to be seen when a girl danced or walked through a breeze, although the way they danced made any long loose skirt flap up to show their legs. To enhance the view, some flappers applied rouge to their knees. Popular dress styles included the Robe de style. High heels also came into vogue at the time, reaching 3 inches high.

Flappers did away with corsets and underwear in favor of "step-in" panties. Without the old restrictive corsets, flappers wore simple bust bodices to restrain their chest when dancing. They also wore new, softer and suppler corsets that reached to their hips, smoothing the whole frame, giving women a straight up and down appearance, as opposed to the old corsets which slenderized the waist and accented the hips and bust. The lack of curves of a corset promoted a boyish look. Adding an even more boyish look, the Symington Side Lacer was invented and became a popular essential as an every-day bra. This type of bra was made to pull in the back to flatten the chest. Other women envied flappers for their flat chests and bought the Symington Side Lacer to enhance the same look; large breasts were commonly regarded as a trait of unsophistication. Hence, flat chests became appealing to women, although flappers were the most common to wear such bras

Boyish haircuts were in vogue, especially the Bob cut, Eton crop, and Shingle bob. Finger waving was used as a means of styling. Hats were still required wear and popular styles included the Newsboy cap and Cloche hat. Jewelry usually consisted of art deco pieces, especially many layers of beaded necklaces. Pins, rings, and brooches came into style. Horn-rimmed glasses were also popular.

The evolving flapper look required "heavy makeup" in comparison to what had previously been acceptable outside of professional usage in the theatre. With the invention of the metal lipstick container as well as compact mirrors, bee stung lips came into vogue. Dark eyes, especially kohl-rimmed, were the style. Blush came into vogue now that it was no longer a messy application process. Originally, pale skin was considered most attractive. However, tanned skin became increasingly popular after Coco Chanel showed off a tan after a holiday – it suggested a life of leisure, without the onerous need to work. Women wanted to look fit, sporty, and, above all, healthy.

### **Semiotics of the flapper**

Being liberated from restrictive dress, from laces that interfered with breathing, and from hoops that needed managing suggested a freedom to breathe and walk, encouraging movement out of the house, and the flapper took full advantage. The flapper was an extreme manifestation of changes in the lifestyles of American women made visible through dress.

Changes in fashion were interpreted as signs of deeper changes in the American feminine ideal. The short skirt and bobbed hair were likely to be used as a symbol of emancipation. Signs of the moral revolution consisted of premarital sex, birth control, drinking, and contempt for older values. Before the War, a lady did not set foot in a saloon; after the War a woman, though no more "a lady", entered a speakeasy as casually as she would go into a railroad station. Women had started swearing and smoking publicly, using contraceptives, raising their skirts above the knee and rolling their hose below it. Women were now competing with men in the business world and obtaining financial independence and, therefore, other kinds of independence from men.



How a young teenager (aged 13) might style her hair as inspired by the Flapper movement, although she may not yet engage in the other characteristics of that movement yet

The New Woman was pushing the boundaries of gender identity, representing sexual and economic freedom. She cut her hair short and took to loose-fitting clothing and low cut dresses. No longer restrained by a tight waist and long trailing skirts, the modern woman of the 1920s was an independent thinker, who no longer followed the conventions of those before her. The flapper was an example of the prevailing conceptions of women and her role during the Roaring 1920s. The flappers' ideal was motion with characteristics of intensity, energy, and volatility. She refused the traditional moral code. Modesty, chastity, morality, and traditional concepts of male and female were seemingly ignored. The flapper was making an appeal to authority and was being attached to the impending "demoralization" of the country.

The Victorian American conception of sexuality and other roles of men and women in society and to one another were being challenged. Modern clothing was lighter and more flexible, better suiting the modern woman such as the flapper who wanted to engage in active sport. Women were now becoming more assertive and less willing to keep the home fires burning. The flappers' costume was seen as sexual and arose deeper questions of the behavior and values it symbolized

### **End of the Flapper era**

The flapper lifestyle and look disappeared in America after the Wall Street Crash and the following Great Depression. The high-spirited attitude and hedonism were less acceptable during the economic hardships of the 1930s.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Roaring 20s – Flapper’s

Complete the following chart

1. Offer a clear and concise definition of “Flapper”	2. Offer one detail of what a Flapper does or how she behaves
	3. Offer a second detail of what a Flapper does or how she behaves
	4. Offer a third detail of what a Flapper does or how she behaves
	5. Offer a fourth detail of what a Flapper does or how she behaves
	6. Offer a fifth detail of what a Flapper does or how she behaves

Answer the following question:

7. “Flappers were, to a certain extent, rebelling against the society.” In the early years of this movement, what were they reacting against? (In other words, what happened in American history which they were reacting in support of or against?)