

Aspects of the Roaring Twenties

The Flapper

In contrast to the poor country women who wrote to Sanger of their bondage to alcoholic husbands, young and fashionable city women expressed their freedom by drinking alcohol freely with men in speakeasies. These women, the "flappers," embodied the disregard for tradition that virtually defined being young and modern in the 1920s. No longer weighed down by long hair and long dresses, or constricted by corsets and rules of propriety, the flappers danced to jazz, drove cars, smoked in public, and appeared to be in no hurry to marry.

Symbol or Reality?

Gordon Conway, a Dallas debutante who, at 20, moved to New York and found work as a magazine illustrator, lived the life and promoted the image of the flapper. Her love of parties and fashionable clothes was matched by her drive to succeed in her career. Her later work in theater and film costume design earned her a large salary and an executive position that was unprecedented for women.

Though less educated than Gordon Conway, and pursuing no career, F. Scott Fitzgerald's young wife Zelda Fitzgerald became another much admired model for the flapper. Her dazzling dresses, some with hemlines shockingly above the knee, were often the talk of the town. Carefree and daring, she would throw all-night cocktail parties, ride on the hoods of taxis, swim in the public fountains of New York City, and sometimes wear men's knickers. An icon of "flaming youth," Zelda radiated modern beauty.

Scholars have recently shown that the political solidarity women experienced as they fought for the vote led to increased economic independence and educational achievement earlier in the century. However, because this solidarity splintered after women won suffrage in 1920, women suffered a cultural backlash during the 1920s. Moreover, the new freedom the flapper represented had actually first flourished during the war when the rules governing young women's behavior had been relaxed. As they volunteered for the Red Cross and socialized with soldiers more freely, traditional codes of class division and gender segregation were suspended. And though the liberation from cumbersome clothes and outdated rules was here to stay, the flapper's outrageousness was but an echo of the freedom of movement brought about by the special circumstances of the war.

While more women than ever before pursued careers and higher education throughout the 1920s, they received contradictory pressure to value marriage and domesticity. Some of this pressure came from advertisements that used the image of the flapper in ads proclaiming marriage as the highest possible achievement for women. The message indicated that it was what a woman bought that made her free and modern, not her ability to stand on her own. The truly freewheeling flapper that had first emerged during the war was by 1920 more of a symbol than a reality.

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Prohibited but Popular

As support for temperance swelled, conversely, so did women's public consumption of alcohol. As more women entered the traditionally male workplace—a result of the war—they also began to spend their leisure time drinking outside the home. As all-male saloons declined, dance halls and cabarets took their place. For young, unmarried women, consuming alcohol illicitly in speakeasies was fun and fashionable. For middle- and upper-class married women, alcohol became a part of home life, as their husbands now lacked public spaces for drinking.

Because alcohol was scarce, costly, and had a twinkle of glamour, it became a marker of hospitality and modernity and a staple of entertaining at home. Accordingly, the 1920s saw the rise of the cocktail party, at which women used added ingredients to make liquor go farther and to hide the rough taste of alcohol illegally distilled under Prohibition.

Prohibition occupied the American consciousness throughout the 1920s, as the contents of one's glass at any social event became a political statement. By the end of the decade, women were once again using their moral authority politically, but now to repeal Prohibition. Prohibition did not stop drinking, was impossible to enforce, and invited disregard of the law, they argued. Furthermore, it actually encouraged alcohol abuse among the young. Most vocal was the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR), formed in 1929. The WONPR supported Franklin Roosevelt for president in 1932 based on his promise to repeal Prohibition. The group disbanded in 1933 after the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment successfully did so.

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Where to Live in the 1920s?

After World War I, great shifts occurred in where Americans made their homes. With increasing industrialization, many people moved from rural areas into cities for employment opportunities, resulting in an urban housing shortage. By 1930, 56% of Americans lived in urban areas, whereas only 45% had been urban in 1910. Simultaneously, some residents moved beyond the increasingly overcrowded cities because newly paved roads and automobile ownership facilitated commutes to urban workplaces from suburban residential areas. Both the urban and suburban migrations spawned innovation by architects and city and regional planners.

In large cities such as New York, construction of apartment buildings began to replace the huge townhouses inhabited by elite families in previous generations. City architects had varying ideas about how to position these apartment buildings. Some wished to see them tightly packed together; others thought they should be separated by large intervals of open space and parks. One New York designer went so far as to suggest that they should be built on bridges in the waterways surrounding Manhattan.

Few architectural dreams were fully realized, as the apartments were generally constructed to be most profitable instead of most visually pleasing or socially beneficial, but the aesthetically pleasing ideas influenced later urban construction and development.

With increased availability and use of the automobile for home-to-work commutes, suburbs as we know them today started becoming popular in the 1920s. Upper-middle-class suburbs at the time contained few businesses and served only as residential areas. Residents depended on their automobiles to take them to other locations for shopping and services. Styles of houses within these suburbs varied, though generally remained traditional, and the country club came to be the representative suburban landmark during the Twenties. The magazine *Architectural Forum* dedicated entire issues to the country club in 1925 and 1930.

Architectural historians have noted that smaller homes of the era were strongly regional in their design, such as the ranch-style houses in California. Though elements of homes and other buildings, such as windows and doors, began to be mass-produced around the Twenties, most ventures offering fully-manufactured houses did not meet with great success.

While many homes at the time were still built in traditional styles, designers were working on their plans for the future. For example, after collecting information and developing ideas, Norman Bel Geddes presented his designs for the "future home" in a 1931 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*.

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Babbitts and Bohemians

The 1920s, also known as the "Roaring Twenties" or the "Jazz Age," was a decade of stereotypes. In fiction and on the front page, writers used labels like "rumrunner," "flapper," "red," and "radical" to make sense (or nonsense) of the time. Two of the most significant of these types were the Babbitt and the Bohemian. The Babbitt (named for the title character in Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel) was a well-meaning but small-minded civic booster. The Bohemian was a glib and glitzy non-conformist. While Bohemians viewed Babbitts with disdain, Babbitts were sometimes intrigued but often repelled by the unconventional bohemian lifestyle. Throughout the decade, these curiously opposed types flourished and helped define society's extremes, one as the American businessman and the other as the American artist.

Changes in the American landscape reinforced these classifications. As writers and artists moved out of small towns to the rapidly expanding cities, they attacked the dullness and uniformity of the small towns they had found so confining. Their critiques became personified in the stereotype of the ever-conforming and materialistic Babbitt. Some of those who fled what they viewed as the limitations and repressions of "Main Street" inhabited the bohemian areas of the larger cities, particularly New York City's Greenwich Village. The free, wild, and colorful Village "idea" was modeled on the bohemian lifestyle of Paris at the turn of the century.

The Babbitt and the Bohemian emphasized and exaggerated the quickly changing mores and manners of American society. At one end of the spectrum was the stifling solidity of the small town, and at the other end was the wild and loose life of quite another Village. Both stereotypes resonated with Americans and were influential in literature and culture for several decades to come.

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Big City Bohemian

Throughout his largely autobiographical fiction, Fitzgerald presented characters that, like himself, swam against the currents of social convention and class structure. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby is a self-made gangster millionaire who has obscured his humble origins by anglicizing his original German-immigrant name, James Gatz, and has dedicated his life to persuading his former sweetheart Daisy Buchanan to leave her husband, Tom. To win her over, Gatsby makes an ostentatious show of his wealth, throwing lavish parties for crowds of outrageous strangers, dressing in expensive, garish clothes, and driving a flashy car. Temporarily wooed by Gatsby, Daisy loses her nerve to leave her marriage as she sees telltale signs of Gatsby's lower class origins.

At the heart of Fitzgerald's social critique is Gatsby's inability to understand that all of his efforts to gain entry into the upper class actually distinguish his newly-made money from the established wealth of Tom Buchanan. While Fitzgerald is critical of the modern tendency toward Gatsby's kind of conspicuous consumption, he is indignant at the perversion of Gatsby's pure-hearted desire for love; in the face of entrenched but invisible social barriers, Gatsby is unfairly driven to extremes of pointless waste and futile chivalry.

After writing *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald became increasingly critical of social inequality, even as his life of material excess and social tolerance was made possible by his newly-made wealth.