

[Home](#)[About](#)[Past Articles](#)[Shop](#)[Weekly Photo Challenge](#)[History Stuff We Love](#)

NOT FOR OLD FOGIES: *THE FLAPPER* SUSAN FERENTINOS



Where There's Smoke, There's Fire, Russell Paterson, Library of Congress, 1920s

The flapper stands as one of the most enduring images of youth in the twentieth century. Even today, the flapper remains close to the hearts of many Americans who view her as something of a cultural heroine.

In the 1920s, however, many Americans found the flapper incredibly threatening. Flappers represented a new moral order. Although they were the daughters of the middle class, they flouted middle-class values. They shrugged off their chaperones. Worse still, they danced suggestively and openly flirted with boys. Flappers prized style over substance, novelty over tradition, and pleasure over virtue.

In other words, flappers embodied the triumphs – and the dangers – of the modern age.

During the late 1910s and 1920s, the flapper became a lightning rod for a cultural debate about the changes rocking the United States in the late 1910s and 1920s. For many, the flappers embodied these changes, which ranged from the rise of a mass consumer culture to the changing status of women, represented most dramatically by women's obtaining the vote in 1920.

THE FLAPPER EMERGES

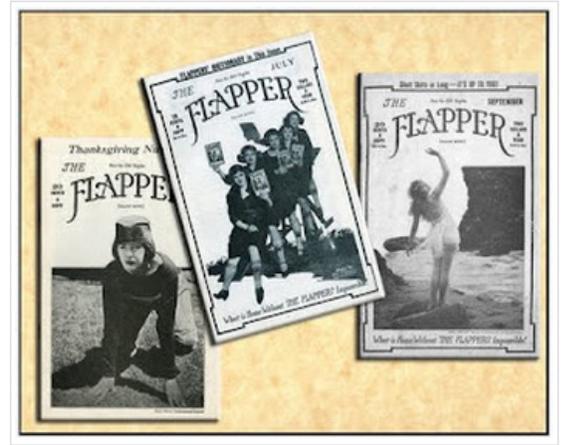
But, even as the flapper's embrace of fun, fashion, and sexual liberty raised the ire of many social commentators, many adolescent girls saw the flapper as a role model.

In 1922, a small-circulation magazine located in Chicago celebrated the flapper's appeal.

On the opening page of its first issue, *The Flapper* proudly declared its break with traditional values:

Greetings, flappers! All ye who have faith in this world and its people, who do not think we are going to the eternal bowwows, who love life and joy and

laughter and pretty clothes and good times, and who are not afraid of reformers, conformers, or chloroformers — greetings!...Thanks to the flappers the world is going round instead of crooked, and life is still bearable. Long may the tribe wave!



THE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE



Image Courtesy of OldMagazines.com

This introductory article set the tone for the publication. Humor and fun were central themes, and throughout its run the magazine adamantly refused to take itself — or flappers — too seriously.

Reflecting the magazine's tagline of "Not for Old Fogies," *The Flapper* depicted modern youth as the hope for the future. One issue featured a drawing of a flapper aiming a sling shot at an older gentleman, whose formal attire, gloves, and top hat clearly labeled him a Victorian fogey.

In another issue, a nineteen-year-old girl summed up the rebellion of her generation by declaring: "I am for rolled stockings, short skirts, knick[er]s and everything such, but down with the old-fashioned ideas."

And on more than one occasion, flappers defended themselves by contrasting themselves with earlier generations of women, whom they referred to as "clinging vines." They scoffed at the confining fashions and demure passivity of older women and reveled in their own freedom (while—it must be said—never acknowledging that the previous generation of female activists had made the flappers' freedom possible).

FLAPPER FLOCKS AND THEIR FLIPPERS



Crossdressing Flapper and Flipper,

In their own light-hearted, nonpolitical way, the contributors to *The Flapper* also turned many gender conventions on their heads. They encouraged female bonding and solidarity by advocating for (and reporting on) the formation of "flapper flocks" throughout the country.

They also mocked traditional female subordination by relegating boys, nicknamed "flippers," to the position of "male auxiliaries" to the flapper flocks.

"There is a place for you among the flappers, provided you don't get out of place," boys were told. And to underscore this gender inversion, females submitted pictures of themselves in male attire.

More importantly, the magazine protested the media's obsession with young girls' behavior, while ignoring the comparable behavior of young men:

It is the purpose of THE FLAPPER to find out whether or not there is room for improvement in the so-called lord of creation — whether all the blame for extremes in behavior deserves to be centered on the flapper, or whether it can be traced to the male of the species to whose whims she is supposed to constantly cater.

CONFESSING FLAPPERS



Heading Toward Regret?

Yet while many young women in the 1920s saw the flapper as the symbol of a brighter future, some also questioned the flappers' more extreme behavior. In 1923, the magazine began soliciting true stories from its readers for a new column called "Confessions of a Flapper."

Some of these contributions were lighthearted stories of girls getting the better of those who underestimated them but others described girls betraying their own standards of behavior in an effort to live up to the image of the flapper.

A newlywed confessed to having cheated on her husband; a college student described being told by a boyfriend that she wasn't "the marrying kind" because of the sexual liberties she had permitted him; and a minister's daughter recounted the humiliation of being caught in the lie of pretending she was older and more sophisticated than she was.

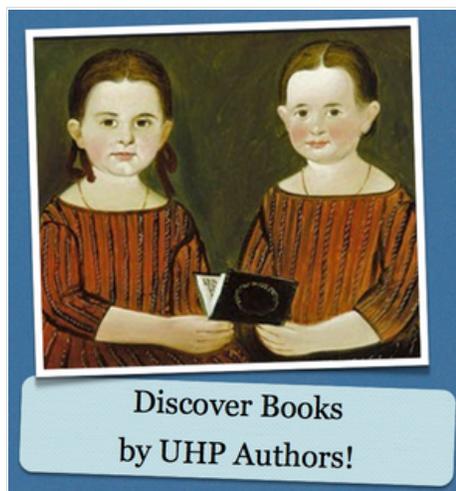
These mixed feelings could also be found in letters to the editor. A long-running reader discussion on discipline indicated that many readers believed flappers had gone too far in their quest for adventure. One twenty-three-year-old "ex-vamp" declared: "In my opinion the average flapper from 15 to 19 is brainless, inconsiderate of others, and very apt to get into serious trouble."

Among the young readers of *The Flapper*, the modern girl was celebrated for her spirit and her appropriation of male privilege. Yet even as young women embraced the flapper as a symbol of the modern era, many girls acknowledged the dangers of emulating the flapper too faithfully, with some even confessing to violating their own codes of ethics in an effort to live up to all the hype.

For Further Reading:

Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern*

Susan Ferentinos is an independent historian who received her PhD in history from Indiana University.



[About](#)
[Contact](#)
[Staff](#)
[Board of Directors](#)

[Past Articles](#)
[Shop](#)
[Weekly Photo Challenge](#)
[Email the Editors](#)

[Click to set custom HTML](#)

